MONTESSORI MOMENTS:

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

American Montessori Society

The "Montessori Moments" project was fueled by several facts. First, a number of researchers have reported positive results of Montessori classroom experiences (Gross, Green & Clapp, 1970; Karnes, Shwedel & Williams, 1983; Miller & Dyer, 1975; Miller & Bizzell, 1983, 1984). Second, while we heard about these results from researchers as well as from anecdotal accounts shared in schools and at conventions, there has been less formal research documenting what teachers themselves report. And what teachers themselves report is important and should be sought (Daloz (1987); Ely et al (1991, 1997); Herr and Anderson (1993); Lofland and Lofland (1984); Spradley (1979); Wolcott (1992)). The present research project aimed to address this situation and to give voices to teachers by asking them to write vignettes about "Montessori Moments" as they experienced them: moments that crystallized for them some crucial issues about Montessori philosophy as it was actualized in classroom and school life.

The research objectives were to examine the character of these vignettes. Who produced them? What Montessori tenets did they illuminate? What teacher strategies did they describe? Overall, what was the fit between the content of these memorable moments and what is considered important to Montessori education?

A national outreach for Montessori teacher vignettes resulted in responses from 91 people. The analysis of submissions resulted in 101 separate narratives. The greatest bulk, 71%, came from teachers. This was abetted by smaller responses from assistant teachers, directors, parents, student teachers and "observers." The key factor to a response seemed to be the directors.

Almost all respondents had earned Montessori credentials. Forty-one people were credentialed by AMS. The majority of respondents (59%) taught in suburban settings. This was followed by a distant 18% who were teachers in urban settings.

Respondents had been Montessori teachers from 1 to 37 years. They had been teachers from 1 to 42 years. Of those who provided information on highest earned degree, 36 had received BA's, 25 had earned MA's, three were Ph.D's. One person had an Associate's Degree.

In addition to the vignettes, we amalgamated the narratives of a group of parents and students offered to us by Rosann Larrow who had collected them for another project.

In all, then, the "Montessori Moments" report is based on 165 contributions from people in 23 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, British Virgin Islands and Grand Cayman Islands.

Vignette Analysis

The vignettes described life in classrooms of the following age groups:

Ages	Number
birth-3	8
3-6	43
6-9	21
9-12	12

For close analysis of the focus of each vignette we applied the following major category frames:

1. Children as Moral Beings
2. Confident, Competent Learners
3. Independent/Interdependent Learners
4. Comfortable with External Authority
5. Citizens of the World
6. Stewards of the Planet
7. Socially Responsible Learners
8. Free within Limits
9. Spiritually Aware Children
10. Autonomous Learners
11. Intrinsically Motivated Learners
12. Academically Prepared Students
13. Metacognition
14. Critical Montessori Incidents

Second, after ascribing a major category to a vignette, we designated "supporting categories" for that same vignette to highlight those aspects of Montessori it exemplified in addition to the major category. We used the same list of categories described above.

Third, we focused on analyzing teacher roles and interactions that were characteristic of the same vignette. The following categories emerged from our analysis of the teacher's role in the data:

TO = Teacher as observer.
TF = Teacher follows child's (children's) needs.
TR = Teacher respectful of child's (children's) learning style and needs.
TW = Teacher uses wait time.
TL = Teacher learns a lesson from child (children). Direct example.
TC = Teacher works to counter "problems" in humane, professional ways.
TH = Teacher works with humor.

Vignettes were classified by these teacher roles and interactions only when they were judged outstanding. Ninty-five percent were so classified.

Last, we wrote comments about how we viewed each vignette and how it might be presented in this report. Throughout the analysis process there was 95% inter–rater agreement. All contributors gave permission that their vignettes be edited for form and length while maintaining their essence.

In the report, schools were described but never named. We asked if respondents wished us to give them pseudonyms:

54 or 59% asked that their actual names be used

27 or 30% asked for pseudonyms

10 people provided no response; they were given pseudonyms

Toward meeting a criterion for trustworthy qualitative research, for the vignette presentations we gave pseudonyms to all students and adults who were mentioned except in the case of one vignette. Here the author, mother of the child described, requested that we use his real name.

The following example is a road map for reading the analytical results for a vignette:

Janet is working with three-year-old Sergio on a math material presentation. Three-year-old Pedro hovers nearby, seemingly attending to the other events in this multi-age classroom. Sergio finishes his work and Janet turns to Pedro, "Let's do it, Pedro! It's your turn now." Pedro replies with great indignation, "I know it already! I learned when you were with Sergio. What do you think!!!"

Major Category 13 Janet Santos, Puerto Rico

Supporting Category: 2, 3, 4, 11 Teacher Category: TO, TL

This vignette exemplifies aspects of Major Category 13, Metacognition. In a less, but still telling way, it supports Category 2: Confident, Competent Learners, Category 3: Independent/Interdependent Learners, Category 4: Comfortable with External Authority, and Category 11: Intrinsically Motivated Learners. When considering teacher role, it highlights TO: Teacher as Observer, and TL: Teacher Learns a Lesson from Child (Children). Direct Example.

The research report is laid out in five parts. The first and major section presents the vignettes as analyzed. This is followed by two sections, provided in the main by Rosann Larrow: Voices–Students and Graduates, Voices–Parents. The fourth section contains seven longer narratives about a Montessori Alternative Public School and a Montessori Foreign Language Immersion School. Because of their nature, those were collated separately. The fifth section is Appendix A, Comments. This is a collection of statements volunteered about the "Voice" project itself as well as some longer comments related to Montessori but not in vignette form.

Vignette Analysis Results

In summary, the classification totals for each Montessori category fell in the following way:

Total Assigned

Category	Major	Supporting	Top Ranks
1) Children as Moral Beings	9	8	
2) Confident, Competent Learners	17	26	1
3) Independent/Interdependent Learners	2	30	2
4) Comfortable with External Authority	6	21	3
5) Citizens of the World	2	2	
6) Stewards of the Planet	0	1	
7) Socially Responsible Learners	5	14	
8) Free Within Limits	0	4	
9) Spiritually Aware Children	2	6	
10) Autonomous Learners	2	13	
11) Intrinsically Motivated Learners	6	18	4
12) Academically Prepared Students	0	0	
13) Metacognition	8	1	
14) Critical Montessori Incidents	22	0	5

If our classification system was sound, then the weights of the top four ranked categories are indeed a strong–even dramatic–support for some of Maria Montessori's major dictums. In addition, the fifth ranked "Critical Montessori Incidents" combines many of the facets of the four top ranked categories.

All in all, given the responses, these can be viewed as heartening results that are made stronger by two facts. First, the moments that stood out for respondents–those that constituted the vignettes–were clearly in line with Montessori philosophy. Second, a check on this is that the request for vignettes was purposely written to provide no direction or leads to any specific areas about which people might write.

The following table summarizes results of the analysis of teacher roles and interactions in the vignettes:

	Total	Top Ranks
TO = Teacher as observer.	58	1
TF = Teacher follows child's (children's) needs.	35	4
TR = Teacher respectful of child's (children's) learning style and needs.	39	3
TW = Teacher uses wait time.	15	
TL = Teacher learns a lesson from child (children). Direct example.	51	2
TC = Teacher works to counter "problems" in humane, professional ways.	10	
TH = Teacher works with humor.	10	

Similar to the major category results, these ratings of teacher roles and interactions are sturdily in line with Montessori philosophy. This finding is bolstered by the fact that the analysis was inferential. Contributors were not cued to describe their teaching.

Discussion

The data resulting from this study paint a robust picture of Montessori influence on what contributors considered outstanding in classroom life as well as how they chose to actualize it. Several questions and possibilities arise.

Are the vignettes characteristic of those that other Montessorians "carry in their heads" but have not submitted? Only a more intensive outreach might provide some answers. Are the classroom lives of contributors actually in line with what they described? Observational studies might speak to this.

Most provocative, however, is the issue of the staying power of teacher education. Many contributors were veterans in Montessori classrooms. If the results described here are indications of what actually occurs in and around those classrooms, then, indeed, Montessori teacher education has far ranging positive impact. This would be a crucial finding for a wider profession plagued with teacher drop-out and diminished quality of classroom life.

If the staying power of Montessori teacher education is greater than that of a number of other teacher education programs, and this needs further study, then it may be the result of a variety of factors: the people who choose to become Montessorians, the Montessori teacher education program itself, the demographics of Montessori schools and, very important, the ongoing teacher education support and activities in and near Montessori schools themselves. Toward the latter, when we shared some vignettes in faculty development venues, we were impressed by their promise and power to spur faculty engagement, planning and professional talk.

References

Daloz, L.A. Effective Teaching and Mentoring: Realizing the Transformational Power of Adult Learning Experiences. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1887.

Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D. and Steinmentz, A. Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles. London: Falmer Press, 1991.

Ely, M., Vinz R., Downing, M. and Anzul, M. On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words. London: Falmer Press, 1997.

Gross, R.B., Green, B.L., & Clapp, D.F. The Sands School project: Third year results. University of Cincinnati, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, 1970.

Karnes, M., Shwedel, A., & Williams, M. "A comparison of five approaches for educating young children from low-income homes." As the twig is bent: Lasting effects of preschool programs. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1983.

Lofland, J., and Lofland, L.H. Analyzing Social Settings: A guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1984.

Miller, L. & Bizzell, R. "Long-term effect of four preschool programs: Sixth, seventh, and eight grades." Child Development 54 (1983): 727-741.

Miller, L. and R. Bizell. "Long-term effect of four preschool programs: Sixth, seventh and eighth grades." Child Development 55 (1983): 724-741.

Miller, L. & Dyer J. "Four preschool programs: Their dimensions and effects." Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development 40(5-6) (1975): 1-170.

Spadley, J. The Ethnographic Interview. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.

Wolcott, H. F. "Posturing in Qualitative Inquiry." The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education. Ed. LeCompte, Millroy and Preisle. New York: Academic Press, 1992. 3-52.

This research was supported by a grant from the American Montessori Society (AMS) and the West Side Montessori School (WSMS). The research was carried out by Margot Ely, Ph.D. and Belen Matias, Ph.D. of New York University (NYU).

American Montessori Society
281 Park Avenue South, NY, NY 10010
212.358.1250 p 212.358.1256 f
www.amshq.org