Why Montessori Matters

Since the age of 2 (with a brief hiatus), our son has attended a Montessori school. He is now 14 and attends St. Ann’s School in Brooklyn Heights, NY, and I am certain his Montessori education provided the strong foundation that allowed for a smooth transition to high school. Living in New York City, a highly competitive educational environment, one might consider a Montessori education past kindergarten a risky proposition. However, I know Montessori was the right choice for our family.

My husband and I are both products of public schools (his in France and mine in the United States), and because of this, when our son turned 4, we took him out of Montessori and enrolled him in public school. However, we began to notice that education, both in New York and across the country, was moving away from opening doors to the world and toward quantifying learning through testing. In my mind, learning is an organic process in which each child develops differently. This new way of educating seemed to leave no room for children to explore their interests through classwork. Furthermore, grace and courtesy, community service, mentoring, and the use of reading buddies, among others, had been disregarded to make room for more teaching to standardized exams. So, after first grade, we returned to the Montessori approach.

The quest to find the perfect educational setting brought us to a Montessori school in Brooklyn. My husband and I value a learning environment in which children are encouraged to be critical thinkers, and we were thrilled that Montessori met that need. We also appreciated the inquisitive-based curriculum that builds upon itself in 3-year cycles; we felt our son would benefit through a strong relationship with his facilitator and peers. At this particular Montessori school, Shakespeare was the signature program for Upper and Middle School students. Each year, the classes selected a different play to put on. Through the process of rehearsing and performing the play (in addition to their regular classes), students developed various academic and life skills: language arts by understanding the story and character development; public speaking through performance; art and math by designing and building sets; history through discussion of Shakespeare’s time; and teamwork and collaboration.

Most important, the Montessori environment encourages students to be who they are and to resist being labeled by others. Our son saw himself as an academic, an athlete, and an artist and felt pride and support from his peers as well as his teachers. Montessori gave him a strong base to build upon, and that has been key to helping him navigate the challenges and social pressures that come in high school and beyond.

Montessori encourages students to feel comfortable in their own skin. This level of confidence is especially important as our son, a child of color, increasingly seeks independence. Furthermore, he now feels comfortable challenging the status quo as well as going out on his own to research and find solutions to problems. The Montessori curriculum is constructed in such a way that it fosters leadership, whether it is leading from the front or leading from behind. Our son and his peers are aware of obligations to themselves, each other, and the environment and understand the importance of giving back through volunteerism.

The values and academic abilities instilled in Montessori students, especially those who are able to continue through Middle School, are what my husband and I deem as quality education. The methodology continues to feed our son’s curiosity. Our child has become a lifelong learner, and he is moving into manhood with confidence and the tools he needs to be competitive in the 21st century.

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