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Montessori Programs in Public Schools. ERIC Digest.

Maria Montessori founded the first Montessori school in Rome in 1907. It served 4- to 7-year-olds from low-income families in a full-day program. Montessori schools grew in number in Europe and India, and there was a great deal of U.S. interest in Montessori's methods from 1910 to 1920. After this time, Montessori methods were all but forgotten in the U.S. until the late 1950s. Then, a second Montessori movement began in the U.S., with a set of private schools serving an almost entirely middle-class population. A teacher shortage resulted in the opening of private Montessori teacher training centers that were typically free-standing, that is, not associated with a college or university. In the late 1960s, parents in several school districts began to agitate for public schools to offer the Montessori model for their elementary school children who had graduated from private Montessori preschools. This push was given a boost by the availability of federal funds for magnet programs. Today, more than 100 U.S. school districts have some type of Montessori program (Kahn, 1991).

From the beginning, the name "Montessori" has been in the public domain in the U.S. As a consequence, both schools and teacher education programs have proliferated without regulations or restrictions. Fortunately, many Montessori teacher education courses have some community college, college, or university affiliation, and some offer Master of Education degrees with the Montessori Program.

Some elementary schools have used the name "Montessori" to refer to programs that have little relation to the schools Montessori described. Many people rely on a school's affiliation with the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) or the American Montessori Society (AMS) to determine whether the school's program actually uses Montessori methods. But the majority of the public schools have not chosen to affiliate with either organization, usually citing financial restrictions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ELEMENTARY MONTESSORI CLASSES

Montessori classes are made up of children in a three-year age range: preschools have 3- and 4-year-olds and kindergartners; elementary classes have first, second, and third graders, and so on.
Montessori materials are designed for use by individual students or small groups, rather than as teacher presentation aids. In math, materials represent math concepts, such as fractions and decimals. In geography, students work with puzzle maps, in which each continent has been made into a puzzle, the pieces of which are countries.

The most important criterion for an elementary Montessori class is student activity. For 3-4 hours a day, students engage in individual and small group work of their choice. These choices are, of course, guided by the teacher. Students also receive instruction individually or in small groups. Classes that spend over an hour a day in whole group instruction are departing from the Montessori model.

Another important aspect of Montessori classes is an attitude of cooperation rather than competition. It is common for students to ask other students for help. In keeping with a reduced emphasis on conventional testing, answers to problems are made available to students. Although public Montessori schools comply with requirements for achievement tests, many Montessorians see these tests as being irrelevant to much of what students learn.

Finally, the development of individual responsibility is emphasized. The children maintain the classroom and materials, and participate in developing class rules.

MONTESSORI PROGRAMS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A survey conducted by the author in 1981 collected data from 25 of the approximately 50 school districts known to have Montessori programs at the time (Chattin-McNichols, 1981). The only other study of public Montessori programs is much more recent. During school year 1990-91, this study received responses from 63 of the 120 school districts or schools to whom surveys were sent (Michlesen and Cummings, 1991). Results from this study indicate that the number of students in the schools or school districts averaged 233, with an average of 10 teachers per program. A total of 32, or 58%, of the schools surveyed reported that they were magnet schools. A total of 69% of the Montessori programs shared a building with other programs. District funding for the training of Montessori teachers was provided in 66% of the districts. Only 42% of the programs provided the three-year age span of three-, four-, and five-year-olds. This is indicative of the fact that the degree to which particular districts implement the Montessori model varies.

A total of 16 of the 57 schools charged tuition for some part of the program. About two thirds of the programs provided free transportation. In addition, two thirds of the districts reported that additional staff were used in the Montessori magnet schools. These factors can add to the overall costs of the program.

ADMISSION CRITERIA

One problem relating to public schools' implementation of Montessori programs is admission criteria. Should children be admitted to elementary Montessori classes based on whether they have had Montessori preschool experience? Montessori classes work very differently depending on the percentage of children with Montessori experience. Some children without Montessori preschool experience adapt easily to expectations in the Montessori elementary class and some do not. When children who cannot work independently are in the minority, the teacher can focus attention, use older children as tutors, and so on. When this group makes up the majority of the class, Montessori practices involving free choice for major portions of the day are hard to implement, at least early in the school year.

But public school programs' restriction of enrollment to those whose families were able to afford private Montessori preschool poses an equity problem. District-sponsored or

reduced-tuition preschool classes solve the problem, but such classes are not part of all public Montessori programs. School districts use many admission criteria; it's not clear that any of them are entirely satisfactory. In 1991, admissions processes were divided almost evenly between lottery, first come-first served, and other processes, such as geographic location and screening. About two thirds of the districts in the 1991 survey gave enrollment priority to a student if a sibling was already enrolled.

SCARCITY OF TEACHERS

The biggest problem in starting and maintaining a public school Montessori program may be the lack of qualified Montessori elementary teachers. Teachers in public programs must have both state teacher certification and Montessori elementary school teacher training. This means that a state-certified teacher takes a year, or at least a summer, to study Montessori, or that a Montessori elementary teacher takes a year off to go to a university to become a state-certified teacher. In either case, the teacher pays twice, and sits through at least some content a second time. Thus, even with higher salaries and more benefits than private schools, it is often difficult for public school programs to fill positions. As a result, some teachers work in Montessori programs without the combination of elementary Montessori certification and state credentials.

MONTESSORI: A POPULAR AND SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE

In spite of these difficulties with implementation, research indicates that Montessori is a popular alternative to traditional public school education and is successful in terms of achievement. Many successful magnet programs in the public schools have been able to integrate state education requirements and Montessori requirements. By and large, Montessori programs are successful magnets in attracting and educating students, as shown by achievement test data (Duax, 1989).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

One source of up-to-date information on public school Montessori programs is the "Montessori Public School Handbook 1991," which comes from a new resource group called the Montessori Public Schools Consortium. It can be reached at the NAMTA address given below. A second source is the "Public School Montessorian" newsletter, which is published by Jola Publications, Box 8354, Minneapolis, MN 55408.

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ADDRESSES

American Montessori Society, 150 5th Ave, New York, NY 10011.

Association Montessori Internationale, Koninginnewe 161, 0175 CN, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

NAMTA, 11424 Bellflower Rd. NE, Cleveland, OH 44106.

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