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ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori's child-centered teaching method came to the United States in 1913 and became linked with an approach to progressive education and child rearing which many Americans considered permissive. During the post-World War II years, advocates of Montessori's method combined this permissive mode with elements of an authoritarian mode to produce an authoritative approach to teaching young children. Following this approach, educators at the Princeton Montessori School have developed and implemented a firm yet empathic teaching model for their classes. The social system which the teachers have developed in their classes respects children's intrinsic motivation in the form of a benign token economy, called a credit-debit system. In this system the rules of the classroom, and the rewards and sanctions attending the rules, are developed cooperatively between teacher and children. Teachers consider the small group as the basic unit of social organization for the presentation of lessons. Teachers present curricular subject areas in a sequence of steps which are numbered and which correspond to a set of materials preassembled by the teacher and directly accessible to the children. For each subject, students keep personal interactive journals which contain written and illustrated work for the whole year. Through these methods, teachers at the Princeton Montessori School demonstrate that they have understood the basic message of Montessori and imbedded that message in a culturally sensitive and appropriate form of schooling. (MM)

Indigenous American Montessori Models

An American Montessori Elementary Teacher

Nancy McCormick Rambusch

Maria Montessori's "method" came to the United States the first time in 1913, brought by Montessori herself and a few important disciples, Anne George, translator of *The Montessori Method*, and Helen Parkhurst, the founder of the Dalton Method. The "child-centeredness" of the method placed Montessori's thought in the company of those Americans who, in 1919, established the Progressive Education Association and were dubbed "progressive" educators. Anne George, then Head of the Washington Montessori School, was at this association's organizational meeting (Graham, 1967). George, Parkhurst and Margaret Naumberg, the founder of the Walden School in New York City, all active in the progressive education movement, were graduates of Montessori's first International Training Course.

Many Americans linked "progressive" educators with an approach to child-rearing described as "permissive." This approach invested far more respect and power in the child than had traditional authoritarian child-rearing practices. In the 1920's, progressive educators actively advocated for more permissive child-rearing. The reaction of the first American Montessorians was against the non-empathic child-rearing firmly rooted in a European past. Their revulsion at excesses of parental authority directed at children was identical to Montessori's. The grim economic realities of the 1930's called into question the adequacy of the progressive philosophy based, as it was, on "unleashing the child's creativity" (Graham, 1967, p. 59).

In the second coming of Montessori's "method" to America, in the years following the Second World War, the child-rearing attitudes of Montessori advocates were very different from those of the previous generation. Many, like myself, had been reared by educated parents who were in partial rather than in complete revolt against authoritarianism. Young, college educated Catholic mothers who were unwilling to settle for child-rearing practices that inevitably exalted patriarchy, putting "Pop at the top," and who had themselves been reared in authoritarian families, were, nonetheless, concerned about establishing sensible limits for their children, something the progressive/permissive group had trouble doing. Thus did a synthesis of the authoritarian and the permissive modes of child-rearing develop among the American movers and shakers of Montessori education's "second wave." Diana Baumrind (1966) characterized this middle position on child-rearing as "authoritative," in contrast to "authoritarian" on the right and "permissive" on the left. Drawing on my articulation of it in *Learning How to Learn: An American Approach to Montessori* (1962), she thus described it:

> *The authoritative parent attempts to direct the child's activities in a rational, issue oriented manner. She encourages verbal give and take, shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy, and solicits his objections when he refuses to conform. Both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity are valued by the authoritative parent. Therefore, she exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. She enforces her own perspective as an adult, but recognizes the child's individual interests and special ways. (She) affirms the child's present qualities, but also sets standards for future conduct. She uses reason, power and shaping by regime and reinforcement to achieve her objectives and does not base her decisions on group consensus or the individual child's desires (Baumrind, 1966, p. 891).*

When Montessori articulated her educational philosophy, she left the contextual details of its implementation to those living in the particular culture where her schools were established.

I now characterize this adult as both "firmly empathic" and "empathically firm." At its extreme, authoritarian child-rearing is strong on boundaries and weak on empathy toward children. Permissive child-rearing, on the other hand, is strong on empathy toward children and weak on boundaries. The authoritative or firm/empathic synthesis is both strong on boundaries and strong on empathy toward children. It is a hybrid, highly intentional way of child-rearing and was one enthusiastically endorsed by many of the "second wave" American Montessorians who understood it.

The first thirty years of the American Montessori movement focused far more on preschool versions of Montessori's thought than on those of elementary schooling. This was partially due to the organic manner in which the first American interpreters of Montessori began "at the beginning" with their own preschool youngsters. For them, children bounded by loving caregivers, whether parent or teacher, found in those caregivers a living example of how to "be" with other children and with adults. The world these preschoolers inhabited was attentive to their natural learning and to their emergent development in a holistic manner. Adults in the preschool child's world both provided and acted as boundaries for children's behaviors.

However, once children in any culture reach legal school age, the expectations of their particular culture intrude on the private agendas of earlier caregivers. School age children are held to a more complex stan-

dard of conduct and performance than their younger siblings. In the United States "real" school begins at six years of age or first grade. Whereas the American preschool Montessorians addressed, over time, many of the concerns posed by their professional non-Montessori colleagues, the American elementary Montessorians initially were farther removed from the public arena. In the mid-1970's, with the advent of magnet or alternative public schools, devoted primarily to the maintenance of racial balance and secondarily to the Montessori philosophy, Montessori elementary programs gained the public attention earlier enjoyed by preschools. In any American Montessori elementary class, children are simultaneously supported in their intrinsic motivation by their teacher, and together with her, are "pressed" extrinsically by the expectations of American schooling.

When Montessori articulated her educational philosophy, she left the contextual details of its implementation to those living in the particular culture where her schools were established. Paradoxically, although Montessori conceived school context as variable, her immediate disciples were less flexible. Many among them failed to understand how deeply implicated a particular culture is in the content of its formal schooling. The elementary school content upon which Montessori's disciples focused reflected the western European schooling expectations of Montessori's lifetime. The rich course of study proposed to elementary teachers was a version of what European schools of that time were providing in a far less compelling format. What Elementary teacher training did not represent, nor did Montessori intend it to represent, was a culture specific way of incarnating her vision.

Teachers of preschool children can decide how to spend the school day, based on their particular understanding of children's developmental needs and on what they as teachers believe children should be doing. From first grade on, however, the game changes. Montessori elementary teachers, as all others, are expected to provide experiences reflective of the culture's curricular expectations for the particular age children comprising their classes. Teachers committed to a three year age span commit themselves to a three grade curricular spread. They must meet three sets of minimum grade level expectations before moving beyond such expectations toward the optimal development of each child in their charge.

What must American Montessori elementary teachers *do* to create the classroom environment responsive both to the Montessori notions of child-centeredness, multiage grouping and community building and yet meet minimum performance expectations of American schooling? They must develop, in their classes, both a social system and a curricular path faithful to Montessori insights, yet related to American expectations. Their social system will offer children a way of life; their curricular path a course of study.

Think of the Montessori elementary curriculum and its attendant elementary "materials" as an impressive array of unset jewels, spread out before those taking the Montessori elementary training. In order for these jewels to be fully appreciated they need to be set and to be worn. The provision of the settings and the fingers upon which the jewels will sparkle belong to the culture specific context and the culture specific children of the elementary classroom, wherever found. The task of setting the jewels is a shared one between teachers and those supporting their work, the administrators of a particular school or program.

The belief that Montessori's "method" resides in her materials rather than in her insights operationalized, through the creation of culture specific and culture sensitive environments, dies hard in Elementary teacher training programs. These programs frequently appear unconcerned with embedding Montessori insights in cultural contextuality. A presumption persists that the array and arrangement of the Montessori elementary materials, and the provision of an "open" environment mediated by a caring adult, will automatically "kick in" the child's intrinsic motivation and create the kind of community in which positive experience will breed further positive experience. The rhetoric surrounding limit setting for the elementary age Montessori child often proceeds from notions more appropriate to the social control of preschoolers. It may also come from a view of child nature proceeding directly from the progressive education and permissive child-rearing rhetoric of its 1920's American iteration.

A contemporary American Montessori elementary teacher might be better advised to become both empathic and firm. In empathy, one experiences for brief periods the feelings of the other — that is, one feels the same way he or she does (Bettelheim, 1974). The empathy the teacher exhibits comes from an understanding of the way that each child views the world and from a knowledge of what that child needs at any particular moment. This teacher's firmness comes from a willingness to establish boundary conditions for all the children. These boundaries reflect the constraints of social expectation and age appropriate behavior. Within these boundaries, intrinsic motivation, so central to Montessori's thought, can find a home.

A cultural press which American Montessori teachers and their children *do* experience after first grade is for performance. There *is* an American course of study to be considered; there *is* an American Montessori way of life to be promoted.

Over the past thirteen years, Evelyn Kalpin, Judy Townsend and others at the Princeton Montessori School have developed and implemented a firm yet empathic teaching model for their six to nine and nine to twelve classes. The Princeton Montessori School, an independent country day school, utilizes Montessori pedagogy to ensure outcomes congruent with Montessori philosophy and with the expectations of American independent schooling.

A useful typology in describing the kind of teacher the Princeton folks endorse is that of a six to nine teacher "who is a good sort but means business." This differentiates her from the preschool Montessori teacher who is "a good sort" and the nine to twelve teacher who is "a person who means business and is a good sort." As children mature both socially and intellectually, increasing importance is assigned to their ability to become the intentional authors of themselves and contributors to the class community. Where a six to nine teacher spends time modeling appropriate social interactions, a nine to twelve teacher spends time modeling diverse ways to approach the study of a particular topic. Everything starts with the teacher, the kind of person she is and her ability to understand children, as and wherever they are. For preschoolers, the teacher models and "bounds" the children. The six to nine teacher models, while establishing

boundaries for children that exist independent of her necessary presence to enforce them. For nine to twelve year old youngsters, the teacher supports the emergent social efficacy and cognitive competence of the children and provides opportunities for the exercise of their internalized boundaries.

The social system which the Princeton elementary teachers have developed, respects children's intrinsic motivation while establishing extrinsic motivation in the form of a benign token economy, reminiscent of B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*, (1964). In this token economy, called a credit/debit system, the rules of the classroom are developed cooperatively between teacher and children, along with the rewards and sanctions attending them. Parents are familiarized with the rewards and sanctions at the beginning of each school year.

Children collect credits for good things they do for each other, and then turn their accumulated credits to social purpose. Children earn the right to take out the garbage, help the teacher or become teacher for a day. (These credits are awarded as little colored plastic leaves of no real value, and are kept in a cabinet, where each child has his or her own drawer, inaccessible to other children.) By focusing on positive reinforcement, but not in the form of stickers, smiles, sweets or tangible rewards, the teachers establish social environments of intentional civility. Debits are rarely and very seriously given. When they accumulate, the kinds of experiences of limit setting the child undergoes are seen by the target child, teacher and other children, as a consequence of temporally irreversible behavior. If a class field trip is planned, the debited child goes on the trip, has lunch with the group, but does not participate fully, staying aside with a teacher. This kind of draconian scenario happens rarely, but it does happen. It is the "meaning business" aspect of the firm empathic teacher which forestalls repetitions of unacceptable behavior. Firm empathic parents and teachers are accustomed to discussing with children the children's feelings about what is happening. At the same time, they are willing to maintain the limits firmly in place. Six to nine year old children seem relieved that teachers are custodians of limits, developing an appropriate respect for the authority the teacher represents. Nine to twelve year old children take for granted the teacher's role and count on it. William Damon (1990), a researcher in children's social development, maintains that firm empathic parents and teachers produce the most socially responsible children. The Princeton Montessori School parents and teachers seem to agree.

How do the Princeton Montessori School teachers "deliver" the jewel-like Montessori elementary curriculum in an American context? They consider as the basic unit of social organization for the presentation of lessons, not the individual child, but the small group. Every day a teacher can be sure that all the children, in small groups, will assemble by propinquity, affinity or ability. Daily all children in the class are "touched" by her. Children work organically, alone, and in pairs and trios on the same lessons.

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These teachers have devised two strategies that merit close attention. The first is a sequential path through any curricular area, in which each step is numbered and corresponds to a set of materials preassembled by the teacher, also numbered and directly accessible to the children. The second is the use, in every subject matter area, of a personal interactive student journal, which the child keeps for the whole school year and contains the written and illustrated work for the year.

The way in which the teachers have conceptualized the delivery of the curriculum is reminiscent of an experience that once transformed a number of my students in a graduate Montessori course. I proposed that if, in inviting children to cook, the real definition of cooking were used, the children could become adept at a very much earlier age than is usually assumed. Cooking is essentially combinatorial and transformational. Elements are combined and then, through heat or cold, transformed. When the teacher prepares the cooking environment, by premeasuring the ingredients, the children can get about their business of stirring, folding, boiling, poaching and baking. The Princeton Montessori School teachers have taken to heart this kind of model, by assembling and coding the materials and activities, rather than having the children wander around the room in search of them. They see their pathways as mechanisms for scaffolding children's learning.

When children use the pathway approach, the teacher's impact is multiplied. While teachers are working with individuals or small groups, the other children are "gainfully" employed. This "employment" involves children in making their own interactive journals. They tape "strips" on which each of the numbered curricular path steps is printed at the top of a page of their spiral binders, and take as much time and space as they need to respond to each thoughtfully developed lesson, including drawings, maps and diagrams where appropriate. These journals, one per subject matter area, are periodically collected by the teachers, who then write comments on each lesson and return the journals to the students. The students then go over the lessons and respond to teacher comments before moving on. The entire child/teacher written dialogue is included in the journal. Thus teachers are kept continually aware of the ways in which children are thinking about and responding to the questions posed them. A set of journals represents a child's year's work. No two journals are alike. Each contains a unique statement of the curricular path trodden by the particular child and supported by the particular teacher. The issue of accountability is built in through this strategy. (The Princeton Center for Teacher Education is making the steps of the curricular path, the "strips", available to Montessori teachers through computer disk, and offering training on establishing both the aforementioned classroom social system and curricular path to those interested).

The genial work done by the Princeton Montessori School teachers follows the scientific tradition of improving on basic technique by constant incremental modification. As experienced teachers who have understood the basic message of Montessori, they are challenged constantly to imbed that message in a culturally sensitive and appropriate form of schooling. This they have done with the constant and enthusiastic support of their head of school, Marsha Stencel, who I describe as "a good sort who means the teachers' business." ❖

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Nancy McCormick Rambusch

Nancy McCormick Rambusch is credited with the reintroduction of Montessori education into the United States, after the Second World War. Dr. Rambusch founded the American Montessori Society in 1960. During her tenure as President of the fledging group, she was involved in the establishment of more than 400 American Montessori schools. She is credited with the reformulation of the Montessori method for the American audience.

Under grants from the Jergens and Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, Rambusch was instrumental in developing the first American public Montessori school, Children's House, in Cincinnati, OH in 1975. At that time, Dr. Rambusch, a visiting professor of Education at Xavier University, also developed an Elementary Montessori teacher training program, accredited by the State of Ohio.

Dr. Rambusch is currently a professor of Early Childhood Education at the State University of New York/College at New Paltz. She also serves as Director of Staff Development of Princeton Center for Teacher Education, Princeton, NJ.

Princeton Center for Teacher Education

PCTE, established in 1989, is a program of the Princeton Montessori Society, a not-for-profit educational organization. Its purpose is twofold. First, the center provides education for adults who are pursuing careers as Montessori teachers on both the Infant and Toddler level and the Preprimary level. PCTE does this by integrating quality academic and practical instruction through the experience and observation of an on-site laboratory school, the Princeton Montessori School. This model school educates children ages birth through adolescent.

In addition to this "first level" training, PCTE recognizes that Montessori training on all levels, Infant and Toddler, Preprimary, and Elementary, is only the first step in the teacher's professional growth process. Therefore, PCTE's second purpose is to bring together experienced teachers who want to develop and expand their understanding of Montessori philosophy as a result of years in the classroom. PCTE has begun this teacher education on the elementary level by conducting seminars for experienced elementary teachers who learn how to construct their own culturally relevant curricular path, and to develop strategies for implementation. Teachers discuss obstacles preventing them from optimizing their classroom environments, and receive help in a more effective facilitation of children's learning. The emphasis of these seminars is on the exploration of each teacher's environment in its own cultural setting, through participation and involvement in an elementary teacher network.

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PCTE welcomes your comments on this paper or thoughts regarding the American Montessori education. For further information about seminars amd publications contact:

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