

MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION IN AN URBAN SETTING

by Martha Urioste

Martha Urioste tells a compelling history of public sector Montessori in Denver, from its socially charged beginnings in the 1960s to 2009. She played a huge role in creating the first public Montessori school in Colorado that was launched as an integration model with bilingual classes and staff. This inspirational story begins with her early bilingual educational assignments in public schools, her exposure to Montessori teaching, and continues through a nine-year process called Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation where her mission for integrated, bilingual, public Montessori was supported with unparalleled parent enthusiasm.

Multiple challenges arose during the *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation* in a public school, and I will share three stories within this one story: 1) Mitchell School, as a Northeast Denver public school, was out of compliance with the Denver Public School desegregation court order; 2) Mitchell School was located across the street from a nine-plex apartment building that became a crack house; and 3) Mitchell Montessori School program relocated to Southwest Denver when the court order ended.

INTRODUCTION

As I reflect on the most challenging yet rewarding educational experience of my life, I think it is very important to begin by giving you the context by which I was assigned to Mitchell School in Northeast Denver in the late 1980s.

Martha Urioste serves as a consultant to numerous educational projects. She holds an AMI 0-3 diploma, an MA in Spanish literature, and a PhD from the University of Colorado. Dr. Urioste was principal of Mitchell Elementary School in the late 1980s where she implemented a citywide Montessori magnet school. Dr. Urioste was also the administrator of Denison Montessori and a founder of Family Star, a national model for Montessori education for infants, toddlers, and primary children. This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Building the Inclusive Montessori Community, Phoenix, AZ, January 16-19, 2014.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, the Denver Public Schools (DPS) experienced simultaneous racial and ethnic events that disrupted the status quo and every school in the Denver educational system. In May 1968, The African-American community, community activists, and leaders as well as a DPS board member initiated the Noel Resolution instructing the superintendent to submit an integration plan using cross-town busing. For years, African Americans and others had been segregated in Northeast Denver. In North and West Denver, Corky Gonzales, a Chicano leader, was responsible for the Chicano walkouts that closed down West High School and brought about numerous demands and changes for Hispanic students primarily in North and West Denver.

I was shocked by the DPS Chicano riots in the 1960s and the social and racial injustice of those days, and I became a member of the Congress of Hispanic Educators who would, in the 1970s, be involved in the addendum to the DPS desegregation court order. The court order addendum demanded equal educational opportunity for Hispanic students with a court mandate for bilingual education.

From 1958, and until I was assigned to Mitchell Elementary School in Northeast Denver, because of my Hispanic bilingual



English/Spanish heritage and the Chicano riots pressures, I had been appointed to numerous political school district assignments, mainly on behalf of the educational needs of Hispanic students. I was assigned as:

- Cole Junior High School Spanish teacher
- Writer of a Spanish elementary teaching guide for elementary classrooms
- Producer of thirty-two Hispanic culture television lessons
- Bilingual education coordinator for secondary schools in North and West Denver
- Holding power supervisor/dropout prevention program in ten high schools
- Hispanic lay advisory coordinator
- North High School assistant principal: Assigned to focus on Hispanic dropout rates.

Though I was immersed with a bilingual education specific mission, I had always been partial to the belief that all children in the Denver Public Schools would benefit greatly by socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural integration. These were very trying days as neighborhoods that had once been economically, ethnically, and racially segregated were now in varied stages of upheaval. Some parents were relocating to the suburbs and others were enrolling their children in private or religious schools.

Little did I know that my entire educational career in the service of Hispanic children would soon change! I was oblivious to all of the citywide integration requirements. In the 1980s, I was concentrating on North High School and the Hispanic dropout situation there. In 1984-85, the court accepted an agreement between the district and the Congress of Hispanic Educators regarding a program for bilingual students. Judge Matsch refused to release the district from court supervision and ordered the DPS board to desegregate three

Northeast Denver elementary schools that were out of compliance with the court: Barrett Elementary, Harrington Elementary, and Mitchell Elementary.

During my North High School assistant principal assignment, I met a former superintendent from the Colorado Department of Education, representing the Colorado School Climate Office who explained that he had written a theory called “The Schools Are Rigged” to create winners and losers. The information he shared with me was compelling and convincing and it seemed that he might have the answer to the North High School dropout rate. I invited him to give his shocking presentation at North High School.

The presentation began with a description of “Proctor’s Spiral of Futility” (Proctor) that included the following:

- Awareness of rejection
- Isolation
- Insularity
- Hostility
- Withdrawal from success symbols
- Acceptance of failure
- Crime and violence

He ended his presentation by saying that “the spiral can be reversed with one major intervention.” He then declared that the “rigged school is a cause of discipline problems” because of the rigging practices that were as follows, and I quote:

- The graded school: assigning students to a class by age
- Standardized testing programs designed to create “winners and losers”
- Strong emphasis on competition “screening out students”

- the use of artificial rewards, including stars, tokens, letter grades, school letters, honor society memberships, honor rolls, award pins given at assemblies –all depriving students from learning for the right reasons
- The letter grading system “forcing teachers to communicate messages of unworthiness and failure”
- Grouping and ranking practices reminding students of their worth or lack of worth
- The social system among pupils “consisting of a highly structured rigid hierarchy of cliques”

I was shocked at the realization that North High School was locked into a systemic method of education that was at the least outdated and at most impossible to change immediately. After hearing about “school rigging at the high school level” that created “winners and losers,” I realized I had to leave the high school dropout dilemma and focus instead on a change as an elementary school principal. Little did I know that I was about to experience a different methodology of education that would transform my life and which I called *The Dream: Denver’s Montessori Vision*.

It was April 1985 that I attended mass at Holy Ghost Catholic Church in downtown Denver and a friend of mine tapped me on the shoulder and told me that an international Montessori primary teacher trainer, who had studied in India with Dr. Maria Montessori during World War II, was now training teachers at Colorado Women’s College. I agreed to attend a Montessori primary teacher training session that week with Madame Elizabeth Caspari. Once there, I observed a Montessori trained teacher illustrate the Montessori bell presentation. As each bell was struck with the mallet, I could feel that I was no longer feel-

The entire Montessori teaching and staff members were dedicated to all of our desegregation efforts; they respected and nourished the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic realities of our changing school climate from year to year.

ing tired and impatient; I was beginning to feel calm and rested. I eventually came to a complete stillness that I had never felt before. It was the silence.

I thought to myself that if this Montessori lesson could give me such an experience in twenty minutes, imagine what it could do



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for young Hispanic children in a Montessori classroom. During the break, I introduced myself to the international Montessori primary teacher trainer who told me how she had met Dr. Maria Montessori in India during World War II and had trained under Dr. Montessori. I was gifted with a Montessori book and I vowed that I would return to North High School to inform my principal that it would be important to write a proposal for funding to have the international Montessori primary teacher trainer to instruct us on the Montessori philosophy and methodology of education.

I was very impressed with the focus of the Montessori bell lesson and also the respectful attitude of the adult when presenting the lesson. What I was told was that Dr. Maria Montessori had launched the *Casa de Bambini* in an impoverished slum of Rome and with remarkable results for the children there.

I shared with my principal that it was crucial for children to begin their education at age three, four, and five! No wonder we had a dropout rate at North High School: Our school district and the state of Colorado failed to educate our children at the appropriate age and time. During those years, the state of Colorado allocated monies for half-day kindergarten while there were children beginning their educational experience at ages three, four, and five in private Montessori schools.

After applying for an elementary principal position in May, I was assigned to Mitchell Elementary School in Northeast Denver two weeks before school began. I had been assigned to a neighborhood school enrollment of children who were African American, Hispanic, and Spanish-speaking, with 18% of the Anglo children from Southwest Denver's Force Elementary School who were being bused to Northeast Denver's Mitchell School. I learned that more than half of the housing in the Mitchell neighborhood were in projects run by the Denver Housing Authority and 99% of the families in those projects were minority students. Of all of the more than six-hundred project families, only nine were Anglo.

When I walked into the Mitchell Elementary School building, I passed weeds in the front yard and graffiti on the school wall. It was obvious that Mitchell Elementary School was in decline. It was then that I realized that I had been assigned to a very challenging situa-

tion. I was greeted with respect by the office staff and the Mitchell Elementary School teachers who were capable and experienced.

In October of that year, I and two other principals from Northeast Denver were called by DPS central administration to inform us that our schools were out of compliance with the DPS desegregation court order. I was told by the DPS central administration that parents from Force Elementary School in Denver were reluctant to send their children to our Northeast Denver Mitchell School on a bus. I knew we had qualified, newly assigned teachers and bilingual and African American seasoned faculty members at Mitchell School, and yet we did not seem to have the ability to compel parents to comply or the persuasive holding power we needed to be in compliance. We had 18% Anglo population in our court-ordered school and the district compliance requirement was 23%. I knew that Montessori education had a very strong parental endorsement in the private school sector and was well-established internationally.

When asked how I would bring the school into compliance, I recommended that our school district support me in the implementation of a Montessori program at Mitchell Elementary School. To my surprise, I was asked how much money I needed; I said I wanted \$150,000; then asked, "What else do you want?" I told them I wanted Mitchell Elementary School to be renovated and wanted a new playground and a multicultural program after school. DPS central administration agreed and also decided to install a computer lab at Mitchell Elementary School.

With and because of the endorsement of our superintendent, and the Department of Elementary Education, Montessori education became a reality as the Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School.

With Montessori education as our methodology and curriculum, new parents had a unique educational opportunity to send their children to Northeast Denver. News of this first public Montessori elementary school was advertised locally, regionally, and nationally and before long, experienced Montessori teachers who had taught in the private sector applied for a Montessori teaching position at the Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School.

Montessori organizations such as NAMTA, AMI, AMS, and individuals such as David Kahn, supported our local efforts, and our citywide parent and Northeast parent community participated actively with extra-curricular activities that enriched our social and academic outcomes.

CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS

Yes, there were challenges during the nine years of the implementation, which we called *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation*, however, the DPS school district successfully supported Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School in the following ways:

- The district-wide, court-ordered bilingual requirements were waived in order to focus on the desegregation mandate.
- Montessori teachers were hired with a Montessori diploma and had three years to obtain their Colorado license.
- Parents, many of whom were Anglo who chose to enroll their children were provided with door-to-door transportation from the entire city.
- Parents who chose to have their three-, four-, and five-year-old children enrolled at Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School were enrolled with a tuition waiver.
- Children who enrolled as three-, four-, and five-year-old children were automatically provided with Suzuki violin lessons, which continued for years and included band and orchestra.
- The DPS board and school district approved a Montessori policy with enrollment requirements for children with previous Montessori experience.

Because of my first year as an elementary school principal with a lack of knowledge and experience with Montessori education, I

was assigned an experienced national Montessori coordinator to assist me with the nine-year process of change with the *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation*.

All current Mitchell teachers and Mitchell students were transferred yearly to Force Elementary School as three-, four-, and five-year-old children were enrolling into the Montessori primary classrooms from Northeast Denver and citywide. During the nine-year Montessori implementation, Montessori teachers, some of whom were bilingual, were hired to staff the eighteen Montessori classrooms.

It was very important for me to hire one bilingual secretary and one Anglo secretary in the main office and bilingual Montessori paraprofessionals from the Northeast Denver community. My ability to speak, read, and write Spanish fluently was also beneficial. Every effort was made to hire an integrated staff of bilingual, Anglo, and African-American adults, not only because of the compliance regulation but also because it was the best way to serve our incoming Montessori parent/child community.

Additional administration support was given for planning time, and the assistant superintendent and elementary school director were given time to visit national Montessori public schools in Dallas, Houston, and Milwaukee. The assistant superintendent decided to replicate the Houston Suzuki violin program at Mitchell Montessori School. The assistant superintendent also decided to hire the Milwaukee Montessori coordinator to assist me with planning for a second year as well as hiring the Milwaukee Montessori coordinator to be my assistant during the nine-year transition.

The school district provided financial support in the following ways:

- financial support to renovate a parking lot that would be safe for all Montessori teachers and guests as well as school building and playground renovation
- financial assistance to enroll Mitchell paraprofessionals in a Montessori primary training program during the summer before the first year of Montessori primary classroom implementation

- financial assistance for a Mitchell Montessori state of the art library designed by Montessori teachers

Because the DPS district also decided to focus on integration rather than bilingual education, Montessori bilingual classrooms at each level were integrated with Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children. There would be no tracking at Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School.

The thoughtful staffing decisions were responsible for the creation of a successful school environment that respected and supported socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic differences of all parents and their children and the Denver community. There were so many benefits during the *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation*: a one-year-at-a-time, step-by-step process was necessary for success.

What I learned during this experience was that there were Anglo parents who were willing to integrate their children in a blighted Northeast neighborhood because they believed in quality Montessori education and cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic opportunities. Likewise, the Northeast Denver parents from the Mitchell community were delighted to have an opportunity for their children to begin their education at ages three, four, and five at the Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School.

During these years, Denver's Montessori citywide magnet school was the first public Montessori school in Colorado and was also among the other Montessori public schools in the country launched as integration models. During our nine years of Montessori implementation, our Montessori bilingual teachers laboriously and very capably assisted the Spanish-speaking children to transition from their native language to the English language. This was a nine-year language transition that sometimes included tutorial classes after school.

Spanish-speaking parents were graciously greeted morning after morning and afternoon as they arrived and left the school with their children, obviously very satisfied with Mitchell Montessori. The entire Montessori teaching and staff members were dedicated to all of our desegregation efforts; they respected and nourished the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic realities of our changing school climate from year to year.



It was also obvious that all of our parents from across the city were also participating actively with the overall success of our school. During the nine years that our Mitchell Montessori faculty and staff implemented the Montessori philosophy, methodology, and program, there were many wonderful reasons why I fell in love with Montessori.

I observed that children at the age of three, four, and five years of age would be arriving from all areas of the city on a school bus, and that caring professional Montessori teachers knew how to nurture, care for, and guide the young children with a Montessori prepared classroom environment of scientifically based Montessori materials. It was apparent that our Montessori teachers wanted to be in a public school setting; it reminded them of Dr. Maria Montessori's vision and mission as with her *Casa de Bambini* in Rome, Italy.

Parents were intrigued with the fact that the children were learning independence, movement, concentration, and self-discipline, along with academic achievement in language, math, science, and social studies. Grace and courtesy in each Montessori classroom and sending five-year-old children to do research in the Montessori library also intrigued our parents and community members.

Montessori teachers expected all parents to observe in classrooms and they also expected them to come to evening parent meetings on a regular basis. Montessori teachers wanted a school garden and they did not want their children out of the classrooms for extra-curricular activities. All children there were learning with an internal locus of control. There were not to be numerous tests, and pencil and paper seat work was out of the question! Yes, it happened! Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School had one of the highest IOWA scores in the district!

In 1987, a new challenge became apparent when a nine-plex row of apartments across the street from Mitchell were closed down as a HUD property. At that time, an alarmed parent came in to my office to tell me that her daughter had picked up a syringe from the ground and what was I going to do about it?

The HUD property had become a crack house and a haven for crack users. This became an opportunity for parents, educators, and the entire Northeast Denver community to come together to launch a 501c3 nonprofit organization called The Friends of Maria Mitchell dba Family Star.

During the late 1980s, while Mitchell School was being converted as a Montessori Citywide magnet school, parents, educators, and community members renovated the crack house located across the street and opened its doors on January 14, 1991 as Family Star Montessori for 0-3 children. The crack house was “converted” into a place blessed by learning.

Every day the Family Star Montessori 0-3 trained teachers would walk their toddlers across the street to Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School to visit the library, the playground, and the auditorium or to simply walk the halls. Mitchell Montessori students would regularly volunteer to do community service at Family Star.

Family Star, as the center was named, became a living example of a vision of urban education ahead of its time, and in 1997 was selected as one of seventeen national Early Head Start models to be researched for its positive results with the child, the family, and the community.

Meanwhile, after nine years of the *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation*, the Mitchell Montessori school enrollment was at 50% Anglo and 50% African American, Hispanic, and Spanish speaking. During these days, community members and educators developed a Northeast Denver Montessori neighborhood vision to create an educational plaza that could extend from Montessori 0-3 and Montessori 3-12 and into the Montessori middle school years. But this vision would soon change as the next challenge became a reality.

District Politics

By November 1995, the elected DPS board officials who represented the various quadrants of the city had decided that it was time to return the bused children to their own neighborhood schools. This time, unlike twelve years before, there was no media conversation about segregation or socioeconomic and cultural isolation.

Citywide power brokers had prepared the city for poverty issues by creating enterprise zones that would allocate substantial dollars to rebuild and sustain impoverished neighborhoods. National court-ordered mandates for integration purposes were cited in *Time Magazine* as a “dismal failure” over the twenty-five years of implementation. The skewed *Time Magazine* article certainly did not mention any “islands of success” such as the Montessori implementation in a public school sector (i.e., Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Houston, Dallas, and Denver among others).

In Denver, it was understandable for parents to want their children to return to their neighborhood schools to a continuous, neighborhood, K-5 school environment. Now, Judge Matsch had decided that Denver had done as much as possible to integrate neighborhoods through busing and also through real estate ventures due to the exodus of many middle-class citizens who relocated in the suburbs. The end of the DPS court order was a well-orchestrated local event that was part of a national movement to end court-ordered regulations.

Well before November 1995, Denver’s mayor had visited Mitchell Montessori School with the DPS superintendent at his side. National press coverage focused on the end of the court orders nationally and its future implications for Denver and other locations in the country.



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In November 1995, the DPS board of education, after a work session, announced to the public via newspaper coverage, that Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School, Garden Place International Baccalaureate School, and Gilpin Extended Day School would all be moved out of the Northeast predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhood to other less populated locations of the city, in order to return the children from the neighborhood back to their neighborhood schools. Here would be a third challenge for Mitchell Montessori parents and their children as well as the Montessori staff and Northeast Denver community!

The Northeast Denver residents perceived these decisions as taking “crown jewels out of the Northeast area” to the less-populated middle-class areas in Southeast Denver. These DPS board decisions came on the heels of the changing power structures yet to be defined and clarified with collaboration of local parent-teacher, business community, and collaborative decision-making committees.

Tax Base

It had also been made clear by the voting public that there would be no more money for public education that year; the bond election was soundly defeated. Curiously, Northeast Denver had been the

only quadrant of the city voting “yes” for the bond election. Burdened by defeat and lack of trust by the public, the DPS board of education forged ahead with its unpopular decision to move three magnet schools out of Northeast Denver. Many will remember that this decision was made and publicized in the newspapers in November 1995.

This decision was made known to me during the NAMTA conference in Columbus, OH where I was giving a presentation on Montessori implementation in the public sector. Upon returning to Denver, I held a meeting with the collaborative decision-making chairperson, the post-*Keyes* Committee¹, and parents to discuss the next steps regarding the recent board decision. One by one, all parents and members present at the meeting made a unanimous decision to “Save Mitchell, Gilpin, and Garden Place Schools and programs.”

DPS board members quickly realized after vocal community criticism that they needed public forums to allow the Northeast Denver citizens to share their concerns and values about the future of their schools and programs. For Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School, a consensus building process and total community empowerment began to develop and strengthen as DPS board members, the superintendent, and the mayor were all lobbied to keep the Montessori program at Mitchell.

Opposition to renewed segregation in Northeast Denver quickly increased and African American and Hispanic leadership surfaced with support from all of the parents whose children had been bused in from the entire city. Soon thereafter, Northeast community meet-

¹*Post Keyes* refers to the end of the Denver Public Schools Desegregation Court Order. In *Keyes v. School District No. 1*, Denver, Colorado, 413 U.S. 189 (1973) the parents of Latino and African American students who attended schools in Denver’s Park Hill area sued the school board, alleging that officials acted intentionally to create a racially segregated system. The plaintiffs provided extensive evidence that officials in the Park Hill area segregated minority students from Anglo peers for the previous ten years based on an intentional policy to do so. Many years later, with Montessori as our educational model, Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School implemented the *Ten Steps to Montessori Implementation* and enrolled approximately 50% white children (over a nine-year implementation) and achieved compliance. Soon thereafter, the Denver Public Schools were released from the *Keyes* court order.

ings were held at Manual High School and other locations. The DPS board of education quickly relented and decided that Gilpin and Garden Place magnet schools would not be relocated. By December, it was evident that only the Montessori program would be relocated to another quadrant of the city in Southeast Denver: Bradley Elementary School.

Changing Sociological Issues

Simultaneously, the Million Man March leaders had decided that if integration was not to be a viable alternative in Northeast Denver, then an Afro-centric model would have to be implemented in the Park Hill neighborhood in Northeast Denver.

By January, 1996, the Montessori faculty had united in principle and shared their vision, values, and stand for wanting to remain at Mitchell Montessori School. Tensions by then had increased and parent factions within the community became fearful that the DPS board would eliminate the Montessori program. By then, the Mitchell Collaborative Decision-Making Committee, the Mitchell Post-Keyes Committee, the Northeast Neighborhood Committee, the Denver Press, and the city had mobilized to “Save Mitchell.”

On January 20, 1996, at a DPS board meeting discussing the Mitchell Montessori fate, it was obvious that the DPS board would not bend to any of the recommendations being made by the Mitchell constituency. The Mitchell parent community walked out on the DPS board of education when it was evident that there was no intention by the DPS board in the “Saving Mitchell” plan.

By February, 1996, The Northeast Neighborhood Committee decided to convince the mayor that his intervention was necessary and at the ninth hour, on February 9, at the East High School board meeting, as the DPS board was about to make its final decision, the mayor walked in and gave an outstanding presentation on behalf of community presence and recommendations. As a result, the DPS board reluctantly gave the Northeast group more time for more planning.

By February 20, the final decision was made to move the Montessori program, intact, to a district school that was currently empty: Denison School, Southwest Denver. The Mitchell Montessori teachers,

parents, and community members realized that they had given up a very beautiful school on behalf of allowing Montessori principles to remain intact. Denison School was much smaller, had a less than desirable playground, and no library.

What was most amazing about this very challenging emotional experience was that the entire Mitchell Montessori parent, staff, student, and community were united as one; transcending any linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic difference there may have been.

SHIFTING TRENDS AND FORMATS

It became obvious that the most important task ahead of the Mitchell Montessori community would be to focus on the Mitchell Montessori community “holding power”. No child would be left behind. The Collaborative Decision-Making Committee, Post-Keyes Committee, and Northeast Neighborhood Committee worked together to meet with the entire parent body who would endorse the long-term Mitchell Montessori vision, values, and “Move to Denison” activities. Family attendance was at 85% for the parent meetings and they gave their endorsements. Of a total student population of five-hundred children, only twenty neighborhood children signed off on “neighborhood choice.”

I was the principal at this time, and I had shared with parents that Northeast Denver student enrollment was vital to the Montessori program and the number of Montessori teachers retained would depend on current school enrollment. As it was, Denison School in Southwest Denver was smaller than the Mitchell School location, and the school librarian and two Montessori primary teachers were no longer able to transfer to the new site for lack of classroom and library space.

Every family and child counted and, in the name of every family and child, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity and integration mattered.

On May 1, 1996, The DPS board of education announced major budget cuts that would have a financial impact on the Montessori program. Now, it was time to prepare for the move to Denison School. By the end of the second week of June, 1996, Mitchell Montessori

staff members had packed all of the materials from every classroom as well as other important packing from the library, and the Mitchell state of the art library was dismantled.

Everything would be stored with the AAA Storage Company over the summer while Denison School was being renovated. Upon leaving the Mitchell neighborhood, the separation from the Family Star 0-3 Montessori program across from Mitchell School was obvious as well as the hopes, dreams, and visions of the Mitchell Montessori Educational Plaza.

Over the summer, the “Move to Denison” Committee resumed their activity and organized parents and teachers to paint eighteen classrooms and the main office. By July 17, 1996, the chief operating officer informed the Montessori principal and parent community that children would no longer receive door-to-door or daycare bus stops.

On August 8, the Montessori librarian position and dollars were allocated to hire Montessori paraprofessionals. On August 11, the Mitchell staff and parent community began to unpack and relocate at Denison Montessori Citywide Magnet School. The state of the art library had disappeared to memory as the library books were placed on shelves in the all purpose room/lunchroom, which also became the new library. The stage adjoining the lunchroom was used as a Suzuki violin classroom.

The Montessori materials, furniture, and equipment were unloaded into seventeen classrooms, a science lab, and a computer room. The two left over spaces became the special education room and the teacher’s lounge. The basement became storage for Montessori materials and a work area for the Montessori paraprofessionals.

The move to Denison was a significant unifying experience for everyone and there were testimonials from each of the parents, staff members, children, and community. The children most definitely were very sad that they did not have a playground with grass. However, what they most treasured was to be together with their teachers, their friends, and the Montessori program.

During this time, one of the DPS board members informed the local Collaborative Decision-Making Committee that they devel-

oped a plan of action demonstrating that the Denison community should be willing to fund the three- and four -year-old children. Immediately, the parents and stakeholders, parental fundraisers, and others came together to recommend options and alternatives that would be presented to the citywide advisory committee and the DPS board of education.

The options were:

- tuition for the three- and four-year-old children with a free, partial, and full sliding fee scale
- scholarships, fair share giving, grant writing, and a tuition lottery inclusive of parents who would apply for the free, partial, and full-pay fee
- district commitment over a five year span to launch and perfect the new approach

Due to strong parental and community participation and action, and a testimonial that the great majority of children would remain in the Montessori program at Denison, the DPS board accepted the plan of action. For the Mitchell Montessori/Denison Montessori community, there was no turning back. Now the question would be: How would the Montessori program remain intact?

During this time, it was important to reflect on the Montessori experience as a part of a larger national Montessori experience in public education and, perhaps, within the total Montessori community. From the local experience, it was important to learn to take a stand to preserve Montessori education regardless of the location and outcome. Also learned was that every family and child counted and that, in the name of every family and child, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity and integration mattered.

It was also clear that the entire Montessori faculty had a very deep commitment to Montessori principles and academic excellence as demonstrated by the significantly successful Iowa test scores in April 1996, regardless of the strenuous year that was experienced. The Montessori faculty was also committed to the nine-year opportunity to prepare children to reach their human potential during that

time. Parents, teachers, children, and the community were unified together with a significant emotional experience never to be forgotten and a strong bond that would serve to provide stability in the new setting at Denison Montessori Citywide Magnet School.

As a result of the common experience, and the realization that there had been an exodus from neighborhoods to the suburbs as well as to private schools, it would be individuals who believed in the integration of children who would continue to pursue Montessori education in the public sector. The February 27, 1996, Montessori parent survey revealed that because of visions, hopes, and dreams by the year 2000, Montessori programs would be launched for children ages birth through grade eight. There were 372 parents surveyed, and 318 parent surveys were returned.

Eventually, the Denison Montessori parents from North Denver organized to launch the second Montessori school called Ann Marie Sandoval Dual Language Montessori School. Ironically, Ann Marie Sandoval had long been a Northeast Denver community activist and had championed for Montessori education during all of those long years of change!

Yet another Montessori program was later launched at Lincoln Elementary in Southeast Denver. Valdez Elementary School then also decided to implement a dual language Montessori program for children ages 3-6. As of 2008-2009, in Northeast Denver, Gilpin Elementary initiated a Montessori program by implementing the *Ten Steps to Montessori Education* beginning with Montessori primary classrooms of children ages 3-6.

CONCLUSION

I am firmly convinced that the three Mitchell Montessori challenges, with committed and caring community members, parents, staff members, and children, unified everyone beyond any linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers; truly a Maria Montessori vision and mission with all children having an opportunity to reach their human potential after continuous Montessori 3-6, 6-9, and 9-12.

As for the Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School experience, let us recall that Margaret Mead's famous quote had been

followed successfully during these challenging times! “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has (Sommers 158).” Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School became a successful reality because of all of the local, regional, and national Montessori advocacy and support!

Dr. John Fowler, a Denison Montessori Citywide Magnet School teacher shared with me:

Denver is not a city of minorities, it is and needs to be more of a collaborative community. The ethnic referent ultimately will become a very obvious block to effect action and reduce the human potential to a collection of groups rather than a communion of people.

To bring Denver into the 21st century and be in alignment with a greater beyond, we must continually raise the banner of global culture. We already see some signs of this but too often it is only in terms of a global economy rather than shared global values.

I am firmly convinced that parents who know about Montessori have been, and will continue to advocate for and enroll their children into a quality Montessori private or public setting. And, I know that Montessori children will have the blessing of knowing that it is not about grading, attendance taking, and other “rigging practices that create winners or losers.” This means that not only is the future now, but that Montessori education ensures that each child will have a future: a real, full, and bright future.

I understand why Dr. Maria Montessori once declared that her vision and mission would be to focus on all of humanity and that eventually Montessori education would be a worldwide reality toward education and peace. The ultimate change agent, Dr. Maria Montessori, once declared,

My vision of the future is no longer of people taking exams and proceeding on that certificate from the secondary school to the university, but of individuals passing from one stage of independence to a higher, by means of their own activity, through their own effort of will, which constitutes the inner evolution of the individual. (*From Childhood to Adolescence*, epigraph)

In conclusion, I also share with you a Montessori article summary written by Dr. Maria Montessori in 1938-1939 called “The Three Levels of Ascent.”

The First Level: “In our approach to the questions concerning the child we can consider three levels. The first is of a pedagogical level.”

The Second Level: “On the second level, our work revealed to us the suffering of the child in our world.”

The Third Level: “On this level we are not concerned with the child alone. We are concerned with mankind, with the human species which is made up of individuals and groups which are the outcome of a childhood not understood and tormented.”

I leave you with a poem from Christopher Fry:

A Sleep of Prisoners

The human heart can go to the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is no winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move,
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul folk ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God
Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity's sake?

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