

# The value of self-directed learning

Developed in the early 1900s, Montessori schools still flourish.

Two decades ago, Stacey Constantian discovered the value of a Montessori education.

Back then, Constantian was the mother of a bright 4-year-old girl who had taught herself to read. Her daughter didn't fit in at the parent-participation preschool she attended, nor did the program provide enough educational challenge.

"The teacher couldn't believe she was going to have to find special work for her," recalls Constantian. "They asked us not to come back."

Constantian began to research other options, and she soon found what she called a "perfect fit" — the educational approach created in the early 1900s by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician. Montessori's methodology stems from the belief that children learn best at their own pace while learning independently through sensorial materials in mixed-age classrooms.

Programs are available from infant to high school level, although the highest level offered in Orange County is eighth grade at LePort Schools in Fountain Valley and Irvine.

"I chose Montessori

because I read a lot about brain development. There are sensitive periods in a child's life, times when the child's brain is growing quickly, and the brain is interested in learning something right then," Constantian says.

Today, Constantian is such a believer in the value of Montessori education that — after becoming a Montessori educator — she recently founded her own preschool, Kensington Montessori in Laguna Niguel.

A growing number of schools in Orange County and across the United States are turning to Montessori teaching programs, but many parents still are not familiar with the "Montessori way" and what it looks like in a classroom.

To understand Montessori's approach to learning, it helps to get some background.

Maria Montessori was the first woman to receive a medical degree in Italy. She believed that all human beings have unique potential that needs to be discovered, developed and applied at an early age. She put those progressive theories into practice in Rome in 1907, when she opened a school for impoverished children.



Students learn at LePort Schools.

Within two years, the children who had been written off as mentally deficient were passing Italy's public school exams.

Montessori designed her classroom to center on the children, not the adult teacher. Everything in a Montessori room is child-sized, from tables and chairs to sinks and toilets. She also grouped her students in mixed-age classes, so that older children could act as role models and teachers to younger children.

Unlike traditional classrooms, students did not

sit through group lessons in Maria Montessori's classes. Instead, they taught themselves by working independently with instructional materials she personally designed, such as wooden letters and numbers, puzzles, beads and household items.

During preschool and early elementary, students are free to move around the room and choose their own "work" from shelves at their level, and they are not under deadlines to complete certain tasks.

"Every material is designed to step-by-step teach a new concept or skill," says Lindsay Journo, vice president of academics at LePort Montessori. The Montessori system emphasizes using natural materials, not plastic, including breakable materials such as glass pitchers or porcelain cups.

"We believe children can learn how to handle these materials. There is a real level of trust when they are allowed to," Journo says.

In upper-elementary

through high school, Montessori teachers act as guides to their students, working with each child at a time or presenting cultural lessons to the class. Rather than sitting through lectures, students are encouraged to pursue their interests. Some students may be placed in small reading groups while others work independently on math skills in class.

"One of the biggest misconceptions about Montessori is that it is very strict," says Carla Hofland, director of member services

"The child is allowed to do that work again and again until they are finished with it," says Constantian. "A 3-year-old might enjoy pouring water from a pitcher to glass repeatedly. Then, one day, she's done."

Montessori boasts some very famous alumni who credit this self-directed learning approach to their successes. Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, chef Julia Child, video game pioneer Will Wright, author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, actor George Clooney, rap star and music mogul Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales all attended Montessori schools as children.

In 2004, Larry Page was quoted as telling ABC's Barbara Walters that a Montessori education was the key to his and Sergey Brin's success with Google.

"I think it was part of that training of not following rules and orders, and being self-motivated, questioning what's going on in the world and doing things a little bit differently," Page told Walters.

Some research suggests that children who attend Montessori schools reap benefits in academic and social development.

Dr. Angeline Lillard, author of "Montessori: The Science behind the Genius," cites a 2006 study which found that Montessori students leaving kindergarten scored higher than their peers in public and private schools in standardized math and reading tests.

According the study, Montessori students also wrote essays with more imagination and depth

than their peers did after elementary school.

But not all the research supports Montessori's superiority. A 2005 study found that although Montessori may provide unique benefits that extend beyond academics, the program is not associated with higher academic achievement. The study published in the *Journal of Childhood Education* compared the academic achievement of urban fourth- and eighth-graders in Montessori programs with students in traditional education programs including magnet and non-magnet public schools.

Additionally, some parents question whether Montessori provides enough opportunities for group socialization and imaginative play, or worry that it is too academic of an approach for small children.

Shelling out the extra cash needed to support a private education can also have a huge effect on a family's decision to forgo free public education.

The U.S. Department of Education reported in 2012 that the average private school tuition for elementary school was \$7,700. Because schools are operated independently, full-time Montessori tuition can range anywhere from \$999 to \$14,000 per year.

There are two reasons Montessori programs can cost more than traditional programs, according to Constantian. She says that the materials alone for a preschool class cost about \$11,000, versus just several thousand for a traditional preschool. Also, the training to become a Montessori teacher is more extensive, which means qualified Montessori educators can command higher salaries.



*The Montessori system emphasizes using natural materials.*

Although the initial cost may be high, most Montessori schools do offer financial aid and scholarship programs. Moreover, more than 400 public schools offer Montessori programs according to The American Montessori Society. Springbook and Santiago Hills Elementary Schools in Irvine both offer Montessori programs.

Despite cost and a questioned methodology, Montessori reports that increasing numbers of parents and students are choosing their program.

"We are seeing growth, particularly in public and charter schools," says Hofland, of the American Montessori Society. The AMS was formed in 1960 by Nancy Rambusch to bring the Montessori approach to the American school system. It has 1,400 member schools

today, and certifies more than 2,000 new teachers every year.

Finding the exact number of Montessori schools in the United States is difficult because the name and method were never formally licensed or trademarked. (Maria Montessori reportedly wanted to make sure her methods were widely available to anyone.) That means anyone can open a Montessori-based school without having to follow specific standards.


That Montessori schools are all independently run can make it difficult for parents trying to determine which Montessori school is right for their family. About 60 schools in the Orange County identify as Montessori.

"Go on a tour and see the school," advises Journo. "It should be clean, beautiful and warm. It should have a

productive hum of activity in a peaceful atmosphere."

Journo also recommends parents ask where its teachers received their credentials. LePort, for example, hires teachers credentialed by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), which was founded by Maria Montessori herself.

Other marks of a quality Montessori program can include affiliation with the American Montessori Society and accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which both require advanced teaching qualifications and higher program standards than state licensing.

"To some families, Montessori is still a bit of a secret," says Journo. "We want to change that." 

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