

FOUR

An Unexpected Option

So traditional schooling stinks. Now, what to do about it? We thought the only option left was homeschooling—a choice that filled my wife and me with elation and dread. “Wow, we could spend all day, every day, with our three wonderful children,” we beamed happily. “Wow, we would be spending all day, every day, with three boisterous children,” we gulped. The work of our particular careers did not lend itself to spending long stretches of the day working side by side with small children. My wife must spend her office hours in front of a computer screen with a phone to her ear, and my workday is spent 40,000 feet up in the sky. It would be impossible for us to simultaneously be successful at work and at home. We debated whether one of us should quit and one of us should teach.

Regardless of how convincing the arguments for homeschooling are, there is one small problem, one teeny-tiny fly in the Kool-Aid: you have to be really, really good parents. We are simply not that good. Yes, I think I can be interesting, exciting, and inspiring. Plus, I am interested in learning and relearning things myself. I like to read and add and subtract and experiment, but I have grown-up interests

too. I just did not see how I could carve out time for activities that were important to me as well as be a good parent, while at the same time assuming academic teaching duties. If I continued to work, I would be out of town half the year flying airplanes. Something had to give.

We love our children dearly, but it takes a special parent to be able to spend an entire day with several rambunctious children and still be a pleasant person to be around. We felt we were frequently just surviving the day instead of actually accomplishing anything. How could we add a major undertaking to the mix without declaring martial law and losing the fun of spending time with each other? So even though I felt I *could* teach better than professional teachers, I feared over the long run it would make me a worse father.

Maybe these are lousy excuses. But the trepidation we felt was sincere, as was the belief that home school really would be better for our children than the local public school. We were confused.

And then...a miracle!

It just so happened that during the several months that my wife and I were discussing options, a new friend of ours asked my wife if we had considered the Montessori school her daughter attended. We had not. Did we know anything about Montessori, she asked? We did not. Had we heard of Montessori? Nope. She suggested we set up an appointment to observe a classroom in action. My wife later filled me in on our friend's short list of a few of the differences between Montessori schools and traditional schools.

"There's no grading, no homework, and they teach cursive first before print," she said.

“Teach cursive first?” were the first words I blurted out. “That’s crazy. Why would they do that?” It sounded New Age. The no-grading part piqued my interest however, as it was precisely one of our main arguments against schooling. The no-homework part was icing on the cake. (There’s important stuff I want to do with my kids after school: biking, playing catch, wrestling, taking trips! I don’t want to sit around arguing with them to finish their homework.) I urged her to set up an observation session for us.

A few days later we arrived at the school and met the director. She escorted my wife to one classroom and me to another, two of the possible classes that our kids would attend if we decided in favor of this school. I opened the door. My idea of what education should look like has never been the same since.

FIVE

A Home. A School.

I remember setting foot in that Montessori classroom. I sat down on a chair—a very, very small chair—near the door. I had just stepped into someone’s living room. Or was it a science laboratory? Or maybe an office building? I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what was different at first, but this was unlike any classroom I had ever seen. It felt different too. Peaceful. Purposeful.

What there was *not* struck me as much as what there *was*. There were no rows of desks lined up. There was no wall-to-wall chalkboard at the front of the room. There was no teacher’s desk at the front of the room. There was no teacher’s desk at all. There was no *teacher*!

Then I found the teacher. She was sitting on a very small chair to one side of the classroom, whispering with two students. She hadn’t interrupted her conversation with them when I walked in, so I settled into my chair the best I could and began to notice what *was* there. Low bookshelves wended their way around the classroom, hinting at a partial partition of several areas. The shelves were not all stacked with books. A few were, but the rest held an astonishing assortment of blocks, pitchers, beads, pencils, paper, sandpaper letters, cloth, paints, wooden numbers, maps, globes, flags, bug jars, fish tanks, plants,

bells, chalk, flower arrangements, and various objects that I could not identify. It was all in perfect order! Everything was small. The chairs were child-sized. The desks were child-sized. A few low tables graced the open areas. Hand towels, light switches, window shades, door knobs—all were within reach of the youngest child, as was the highest bookshelf.

The room was square, with large picture windows along three sides, allowing in a flood of natural light. A door in the rear wall opened onto a flower garden, a vegetable garden, and a small grassy area surrounded by several trees. The side of the room without windows had a door for each of two restrooms and a third door connected to a kitchen area shared with the adjoining classroom. Three faucets with large basins and tiny footstools stood in a corner. Three faucets! (I recalled a videotaped interview from the 1980s of my late father, who at the time was the architect for the Memphis City Schools. He described a major renovation project he was attempting to spearhead throughout the city's schools, tearing out walls and putting in a faucet and sink in each of the classrooms of these ancient, neglected buildings. His face had lit up at the prospect of inner-city kids being able to mix sand and water, splash, fill containers, pour, watercolor, and do all the "wet things" young kids need to learn how to do. This had not been possible with the existing faucets sequestered in the community bathroom down the hall, and a hall pass needed to leave the room. His jaw would have hit the floor to see *three* faucets.)

Thirty children were in this class, but I counted no more than ten desks. I was reminded of the outraged pleas of teachers and parents in "under-funded" schools, begging for more money because some students did not even have a

desk at which to sit. Here, there weren't enough desks *by design*. I looked to my left. There a child lay, stretched out on the floor, reading a book. (When I was a child, you got sent to the principal's office for this sort of thing. Here, it was *encouraged*.) In front of me two children crouched on the floor arranging cut-out letters to form words on a board. Other students would remove objects from the shelves for use, or return them after use. One or two were at the sinks or in the bathrooms. I even saw one child stand up, walk to the back door, open it, and go outside into the garden! The teacher never batted an eye. In various places around the room groups of two or three children huddled, discussing this or that or working on something of interest.

I gasped. To my right a child of no more than four sat at a chair, alone, brandishing a needle! Actually, it became apparent she wasn't brandishing it all. She was sewing. And she was entranced by her solitary work.

Across the room I spied two children with a knife! I soon realized these two little children, surely no older than three, were taking turns using a rounded butter-knife. They were slicing carrots and celery, which they would later serve to the class as a snack.

Everything here was real. The flower vases were not plastic, they were glass. Even the glasses were glass! The pitchers were ceramic, as were the plates.

The comings and goings of the children were remarkable. They seemed so assured and confident and decisive. No one was telling them where to go or what to do. It was hard to believe that I was observing a room of children ages three through six. If a child chose to do his "work" on the floor, he would first get a rolled up mat the size of a doormat from a bin of several, bring it to his chosen location on the floor, and meticulously unroll it.

Then he would go get the work (or the “material” as the various pieces of work from which to choose are called) he had chosen and bring it back to the mat on the floor. Whenever he decided he was done, he’d put the work back where it came from and then re-roll the mat, placing it back in its bin. When something spilled, or it was noticed that a spot on the floor was dirty, a random child would choose to get the broom and dustpan out, or maybe hand towel, and simply clean it up without waiting to be told. I almost had to pinch myself.

The noise level was also notable. I remember two noise levels in elementary school: very loud and very quiet. When the teacher’s back was turned, or she was out of the room, pandemonium broke out. As soon as she turned around or came back in the room and shouted, “Quiet, NOW!” there was a terrified hush. The noise bounced from one to the other: loud, quiet, loud, quiet, loud, quiet—punctuated by the teacher’s occasional shout. In this class there was a hum. It was neither loud nor quiet. I think this is why “living room” and “laboratory” and “office building” initially came to mind. They are all places where there can be activity and communication without necessarily having distraction. There certainly was activity, as I’ve described. Communication was actually encouraged, not discouraged. It was expected that children work with a friend or ask for help, or give help, or talk with the teacher, or read aloud, or daydream aloud. Yet at the same time, many of the students were working quietly by themselves without seeming to be distracted by the hum of activity flowing around them. Whispered strains of classical music floated across the room from a CD player. As I sat there, I saw a child walk over to a set of bells and play a few notes before moving on to something else.

The teacher was like a chess grand master. A grand master is one of only a handful of elite chess players so accomplished they can play five, even ten chess matches simultaneously. They stroll around a room of tables, each with a chess board and a determined challenger, glance at each board in turn, make a move, and stroll to the next board. This teacher reminded me of that type of demonstration. She had keen skills of observation and quick analysis. She glided about the room giving a nod here, a whisper there, a glance, a suggestion. Then she would sit on a chair and observe the room, taking notes. In the thirty minutes I was in the room for that initial parent observation, the teacher may have actually “taught” (in the traditional sense) for ten minutes. These were seemingly spontaneous lessons, given to only a child or two at a time: help for an older child spelling a few words, demonstrating the whisk broom and dustpan to a younger child.

Five or six of the children came up to me at different times; some peered at me briefly and then went back to their work. One child asked my name. Another asked why I had come to her classroom. A boy brought something he was working on over to show me. Another girl asked me to watch while she accomplished some sort of task folding a stack of napkins in a basket. However, for the most part I was left alone, a mild curiosity. These kids were seriously intent on what they were doing.

When the thirty minutes were up, I inconspicuously rose and slipped out of the room, feeling relaxed and refreshed. I met my wife back at the school office and asked, flabbergasted, “What just happened?”

THE ROOTS OF MONTESSORI'S METHOD

We had each just experienced a classroom dynamic designed a hundred years ago. This model has been repeated all over the world to great effect in decade after decade, in various cultures, religions, economic systems, and political systems. It is successful with children who are wealthy or poor, energetic or lethargic, of high intelligence or of low intelligence, extroverted or introverted. It is a class, a community of children, designed by Dr. Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori grew up in Italy in the late 1800s. She was the first female in Italy to graduate from medical school. She shifted her focus from becoming a medical doctor to becoming an educator after working with children in the insane asylums of Rome. She had stumbled upon some interesting techniques for teaching these mentally deficient children and realized the positive impact possible on the general population. Her breakthrough came when she was selected to run a school for children in one of the slums in Rome. These children were housed in a tenement with their families. When the adults left for work during the day, the children stayed behind and got into mischief. The owners of the building wanted to reduce the amount of vandalism and graffiti by somehow controlling the loitering children. Creating a school for them so they could be watched all day seemed an easy and cheap solution.

Montessori created her first *Casa dei Bambini*, or Children's Home, in the early 1900s. It was soon successful and warmly received by the struggling parents in this tenement. They began to take a bit of pride in their new school as their children became more accomplished. Montessori built on this early success by opening other

schools, refining her teaching methods, and eventually expanding her method worldwide, becoming a sought after speaker in the process. She traveled abroad, lived in several countries during her later years, and incessantly worked to establish Montessori schools in dozens of countries from India to the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States. Though she was a fascinating lady and led an extraordinary life, her work is really not about her. She was the first to acknowledge that she was not the author of her method so much as the children she observed were. That's what she did: observe children.

A fundamental truth permeates Montessori's work: children are desperate to learn. This is the beating heart of Montessori schools. But this fundamental truth is not universally recognized. In fact, our traditional schools are built upon just the opposite assumption: children avoid learning. (Thus, they must be taught. They must be motivated by offers of rewards and threats of punishment. They require great teachers with charisma and pizzazz to inspire them and to create interest in learning the material.) It is essential to recognize this split in philosophy at the most fundamental level in order to appreciate the differences in teaching and in classroom style that emanate from this initial difference. Why? Because the Montessori classroom can appear downright wacky to those of us accustomed to traditional schools. However, keeping in mind that children are naturally desperate to learn—and to learn on their own—we can begin to appreciate this unfamiliar method. Indeed, eventually we can recognize that it has been a part of us all along, since it is based on the way we naturally learn. We are actually all familiar with Montessori teaching, whether we know it or not.

The years from birth until kindergarten are everyone's experience with Montessori-style education. Take bike-riding for example. Let's look at snapshots of the process of learning to ride. A child may receive a tricycle by the age of two or three. The parent will help him sit on it, place his hands on the handlebars, and show him how to step on the pedals. The child will lurch a little forward or backward, but the parent now steps back and watches. Over the next year or two the child becomes better and better at riding the tricycle. He becomes more daring. He can ride down slopes at breakneck speed, feet pumping so fast they're a blur. He can ride uphill, putting a lot of effort into each stroke. He can ride backwards and turn, even at the same time. He can put objects on the tricycle and carry them from place to place. Through all this he rides when he wants to, and for as long as he wants to. However, there are restrictions such as not riding in the busy street. Wide latitude for exploration is bounded by firm safety limitations. At some point over the years, he'll get a bicycle with training wheels and lose interest in the tricycle. Then he'll notice that the older children don't have training wheels and he'll start asking his parents to take them off. Once the wheels are off, he'll need a few pushes, he'll fall down a few times, and he'll get a bloody lip and a bloody nose, but he'll soon ride effortlessly. There is no syllabus and no schedule, just the external input of providing a tricycle, a bicycle, some other kids to observe, a couple of pushes, and the safety rules of wearing a helmet and not riding in the street. The parent gets out of the way so the child can do it by himself. Children need no urging from parents to want to ride a bicycle. They are eager to do so, and to be able to do so without help.

Toddlers similarly learn to walk and talk solely when they decide to do so. Preschoolers confound us with their individualized timetables for developing verbal, social, and physical skills. We are amazed and surprised by each new “trick” they learn. Even twins follow their own schedules, as I have learned with our own kids. Children are genetically programmed to be masters of their own development. However, we make sure they don’t practice walking beside a road; we have them wear helmets when they ride a bike; and we establish a bedtime routine. It is a freedom with limits. Instead of limits with some freedom tacked on, it is first and foremost freedom, with limits to protect kids’ well-being, not stifle them. When this freedom bumps up against someone else’s rights, or a social custom, or the safety of the child, there is a limit.

This “system of education” for babies and young children is simply daily life. It is in many ways much like a Montessori classroom. It is largely self-directed, and its success is astonishing. Prior to laying eyes on his first teacher, a young child has learned a couple thousand words of a new language, along with proper grammar; the social customs of his time and place; and the ability to lie, cheat, steal, comfort others, bike and swim if he has had access to bicycles and water, feed and dress himself, count, tell stories, throw a ball, play games, and sometimes even to read and write.

Now, fast-forward twenty years and take a look at graduate school, where we are also familiar with Montessori’s style of education. We have world-renowned graduate schools here in the United States where students go to earn their doctorates. There is broad consensus that we are doing something right when it comes to education in graduate schools. Graduate students are expected to

literally further human knowledge through the submission of a doctoral thesis. This thesis—the topic of which is self-chosen—should contribute in a tangible way to the academic area of their choice. They are able to work on this thesis for many years. It may take a decade for some to finish. A professor or adviser is available to help out with suggestions or advice, but usually does not teach from a syllabus or lecture or have any of those duties we regularly assign to teachers. Comparing the bookends of our education system, the similarities are evident. Both have a Montessori feel to them: self-direction, self-motivation. The nearby parents and professors are helpful observers, but tend not to equate learning with lecturing or following lesson plans.

The Montessori-style process of learning that is so successful for young children and graduate students alike can be equally successful for those in between. The roots of Montessori's method are in the natural way children learn. The entire middle section of traditional education, from kindergarten through college, would benefit tremendously from this method. The gaping hole in the middle part of our education system—the part with the desks, chalkboards, tests, and report cards—continues to vex educators and reformers. We continue to dig the hole deeper by arguing for more money, better textbooks, better qualified or paid teachers, smaller student/teacher ratios, or even busing, race, and cultural fixes. We even argue for longer schooldays as if *more* time in the traditional system will somehow counter its ill-effects! This is futile. It is the fundamental nature of the classroom that needs to be changed. Luckily, we have hundreds of examples of successful and effective Montessori schools around the country. These schools are bridging the gap and bringing

this revolutionary method to more and more children. The method began as a Children's Home, designed by Maria Montessori over one hundred years ago in a tenement building in the slums. It is now a model for educational success.

