

# Montessori inspired?

Reaching back to the original inspiration



BY DAVID AYER

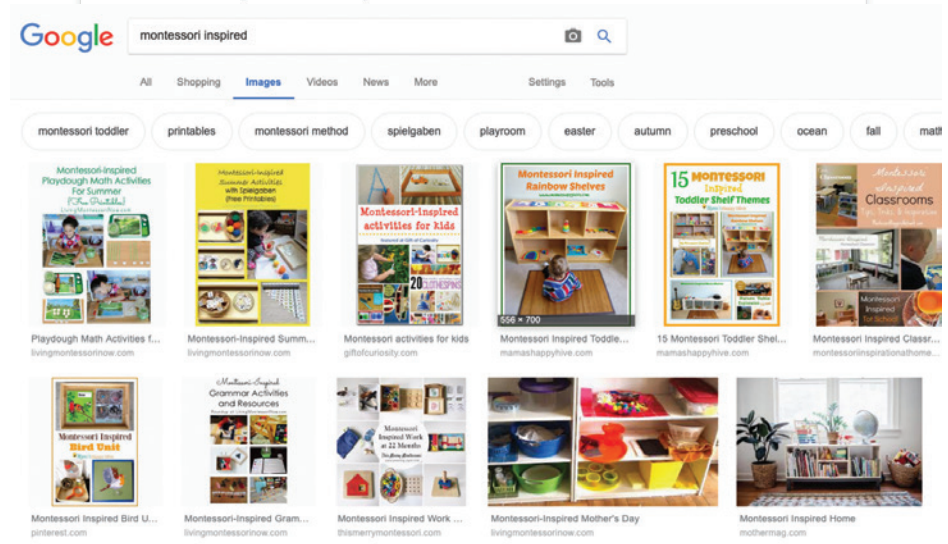
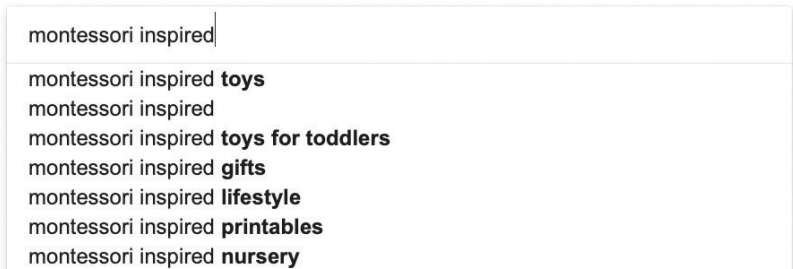
“Montessori inspired.”

It’s a widely used term that still raises some hackles.

“True-blue” Montessorians turn up their noses at the phrase a bit, probably because it’s often found attached to things that don’t seem to have much to do with what Montessori is really all about.

But it’s actually a good measure for what Montessori means to the wider world: toddlers, activities, classrooms, and printables; definitely primary colors, shelves, baskets, and trays. Digging a little into the links, you’ll find some deeper connections: beauty, harmony, simplicity, and even independence and self-guided learning.

On a grander scale, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos recently announced a \$2B Day One Fund calling for “a network of high-quality, full-scholarship, Montessori-inspired preschools.” Bezos himself could be considered “Montessori-inspired,” as he attended a Montessori school as a young child. Still, the Montessori world lit up with curiosity and, it must be admitted, some consternation and concern about what exactly he meant by the term. As we know, the name isn’t trademarked and anyone can use it, and Montessorians have experienced the full range of schools and programs that are “Montessori in name only” (MINO?), disparaged as “Monte-something”, or fully implemented down to the last golden



*Montessori inspired, according to the hive mind*

bead. Can “Montessori-inspired” go deeper than the visual appeal and help children even if it stops short of full implementation? This is a challenging question with no pat answer.

In the public Montessori world, we sometimes see the term adopted by programs that are interested in the model but just getting started (“Montessori-curious?”), or are moving towards full implementation but aren’t there yet (“Montessori-aspiring?”), or are using some Montessori elements and don’t plan to do any more. These are important distinctions. Montessori is inspiring, and to the extent educators are drawn into its fundamental

principles, they should be helped along the way. Some elements of Montessori *can* be implemented without adopting the entire structure. Not so much the trays and materials—Montessori is much more than a clever way to teach math, and many elements just don’t work out of context. But modern research suggests that children anywhere are better off in mixed-age groups, with choice and agency, in a beautiful prepared environment working with adults who understand and respect development. It may be Montessori heresy, but it doesn’t matter quite so much

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what color the materials are or what name is over the door.

When I think about Montessori-inspired, I try to think back to what in-

For me, learning more meant taking a Montessori training course (at Montessori Northwest in Portland, Oregon in 1994). That's where the inspiration

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## The real inspiration came before that, the way it did for many of us—in a classroom observation.

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spired me about Montessori in the first place—where did I first “breathe it in.” Of course I inhaled it deeply during my training, but that's not an experience most people get to have. When I really consider it, the real inspiration came before that, the way it did for many of us—in a classroom observation.

What was it about that classroom visit? The tiny chairs and tables, to be sure. The beauty, harmony, and simplicity of the environment, caught my eye, no doubt; the baskets and trays enticed, and the mysterious charm of the materials captivated. But of course what really took my breath away was the children. A room full of young children—who we've been conditioned to expect as loud, unregulated, and rambunctious—moving about the room with quiet purpose, intense concentration, and even exuberant joy. Like so many of us at our first exposure, I thought, “There's something going on here—I want to know more.”

deepened and grew. There, I was able to see past the furniture and the aprons, to discover that Montessori was based on decades of scientific observations of children, and to learn how those observations led Maria Montessori to develop a comprehensive, deeply integrated model founded on a profound respect for children and human development. Montessori herself was ultimately inspired by the children, of course—she famously said,

*“It is not true that I invented what is called the Montessori Method. I have studied the child, I have taken what the child has given me and expressed it, and that is what is called the Montessori Method.”*

Now, most people won't even see a Montessori classroom, in name only or otherwise, let alone take a training course. They will encounter Montessori at the periphery, at the level of

trays and colored beads, and we need to meet them there without judgment and help them further into what's truly inspiring. For Jeff Bezos, and for the schools that are drawn to the peaceful, engaged children, and the seemingly effortless learning that takes place, let's welcome them in, and help them see past the sandpaper letters and golden beads (as miraculous as those materials are) and look to the children—the true source of inspiration.

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