

Angeline Lillard calls for radical reform

Revolution is not too strong a word



BY **DAVID AYER**

Prominent Montessori researcher Dr. Angeline Lillard has a powerful new piece in the journal *Educational Psychology Review*: “Shunned and Admired: Montessori, Self-Determination, and a Case for Radical School Reform.”

Educational Psychology Review is one of the “big five” educational psychology and often the top ranked. It publishes “integrative review articles, special thematic issues, reflections or comments on previous research or new research directions, interviews, and research-based advice for practitioners” and it provides “breadth of coverage appropriate to a wide readership in educational psychology and sufficient depth to inform the most learned specialists in the discipline.”

So it’s a place where well-established scholars pull together their knowledge on a topic and offer a broad view including directions for research.

Lillard’s question is an exceptionally well-framed version of one the Montessori world has struggled with over the decades: Montessori is a century-old, deeply-rooted, developmentally sound, sought-after, profoundly inspiring educational approach—why isn’t it better known?

The answer is 15,000 words of Lillard’s dense yet readable, restrained yet inexorable explication of Montessori she pioneered in her book,

Montessori—the Science Behind the Genius, and some of the arguments here are extended to chapter length in the book. For the full treatment, the book is the best source, but I will try to outline the case, and the call for radical reform, here.

The first question is one you might not expect: Montessori has been “on the margins” for over one hundred years. It hasn’t caught on. So why is it still around? Lillard identifies extrinsic reasons, such as outcomes for children, teacher satisfaction, and parent demand, as well as intrinsic factors, such as the model’s coherence with developmental theory, and its breadth of scope.

Outcomes

When people asked us, “OK—where’s the research?”, we used to have to hem and haw and mumble some explanations about scale, selection bias, and alternate measures, to explain away the absence of “a stack of papers.” With the work of Lillard, Else-Quest, Culclasure, and others, and two multi-million dollar studies underway, we don’t have to do that any more. While recognizing the need for more and better research, Lillard says straight out that “evidence suggests that properly implemented Montessori education is very effective.” This is not the kind of thing one says lightly in peer-reviewed journal such as this one. (You can find more research at NCMPS.org.)

Teacher and parent satisfaction

Once teachers start with Montessori, they don’t want to stop. In the Culclasure study of 45 South Carolina public Montessori schools, teacher satisfaction rated 98%. Lillard suggests that the positive social climate, the three-year age groups, and student

self-determination might drive this satisfaction (although there could of course be selection bias).

Since Montessori schools, private or public, are almost exclusively “choice” programs, they must be doing something that keeps families coming back. Lillard doesn’t quite come right out and say it, but of course it is families with privilege that are doing most of the choosing. If there’s something privileged families want for their children, you can bet that it’s something worth having, and worth distributing more equitably.

“Convergence with Developmental Science”

This is Lillard’s gracious way of saying that everything we know about how children learn, grow, and develop supports Montessori, even if she got there by observation, insight, and experimentation rather than double-blind randomized controlled trials.

First, she notes that Montessori’s work was based on observation of a wide range of children (with typical and atypical development; low-income and affluent) across a wide range of cultures, and arrived at the premise that education should be a help to independence.

Independence in the ed psych world is termed self-determination, and, as Lillard dryly suggests: “Abundant theory and empirical evidence suggest the benefits of self-determination to the human psyche.” According to that theory and evidence, self-determination depends on choice and interesting, embodied, and interconnected activities to choose from. Such activities inspire deep interest which focuses attention and helps develop executive function.

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Organized, orderly environments support self-determination, which fosters good peer and adult relationships, and self-determination in social groupings allows for peer learning and collaboration.

All of the above is richly expanded upon and footnoted in the article, and in even greater detail in Lillard’s book. It’s enough to say that if Montessori didn’t exist, developmental psychology would probably have to invent it.

Scope

Finally, Lillard offers one more reason for Montessori’s surprising persistence: its remarkably broad scope. Unlike alternatives such as Waldorf or Reggio-Emilia, Montessori is a comprehensive, coherent approach applying the same principles of self-determination and independence from birth to adulthood. Montessori’s scope is as broad in geography and culture as it is in time, having been developed and practiced across more than 100 countries and diverse cultures. And within the scope of a single classroom in a single age range, Montessori addresses all aspects of development—physical, sensorial, practical, intellectual, social, and more. No other model casts as wide a net.

Challenges

So why is such a well-established, deeply theorized, scientifically convergent pedagogy not more widely adopted? (And what should be done about it?)

Lillard describes Montessori as “incommensurable” with conventional

schooling. By this she means that Montessori is so different, in its aims, practices, and underlying philosophy, from conventional education, that its elements can’t be successfully incorporated without wholesale adoption. Drawing an analogy with cultural psychology, which views culture as a holistic system which can’t be separated from the individuals embedded in it, she suggests that bringing Montessori elements into conventional education and expecting Montessori-like results would be no more successful than bringing Western child-rearing and sleeping arrangements into Asian culture and expecting people in that culture to become more “Western”. Culture, in both Montessori and conventional models, runs deeper than that. Instead, what we often find when Montessori is incompletely applied is weak implementation which achieves the goals of neither model.

Revolution

It’s in the second-to-last paragraph of this dense, comprehensive, and thoroughly referenced essay that we find the call to action. Other alternative pedagogies have come and gone, yet Montessori has persisted, and remained largely unchanged. There must be something to the idea! But Montessori’s own strength and internal consistency (among other things) has kept it from changing the dominant educational paradigm, which is so uninterested or even opposed to Montessori’s core principle of self-determination.

Yet conventional education has persisted as well, perhaps in spite of itself.

A nagging sense of dissatisfaction with the model’s inadequacies is revealed in the decades of tinkering and adjustments we’ve done, but the fundamental premises of the factory model, content delivery, and behaviorism remain the same. It has a consistent logic and culture of its own. It would take a wholesale dismantling and rebuilding, a revolutionary change, for Montessori to prevail in the education world.

But as Lillard suggests in the most powerful line in the piece, “Real school reform may require radical change.”

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