

Say yes: opening doors to Montessori

The time is right for a dramatic expansion



BY **ANNIE FRAZER**

This article is adapted from a keynote presentation given at the Southeast Montessori Collective's August conference.

I've been thinking and talking a lot lately about Montessori outcomes. Recent research, most notably from Dr. Angeline Lillard, suggests that Montessori education can interrupt the tight coupling between family income and a child's success.

This research has already helped our work in Georgia to strengthen and expand public Montessori so every family can access it. When I talk about outcomes, I can speak about our work in a shared language with educators across the state and nationwide.

But am I missing something when I seek to describe the outcomes of a Montessori education as though our work were the cause and the children's success, its effect?

Dr. Montessori called into question the idea, pervasive in her time and still at the foundation of our educational system, that the teacher is the cause of the child's learning. Montessori education is built on a different view of how a child grows to be an adult, and at its heart is the understanding that we, the teachers, are not the cause of the child's development. The child is guided by an inner teacher toward a goal mysterious to us, a fulfillment of her ultimate and unknowable potential. Our role is to remove the obstacles

to that development, preparing an environment where the child's energy can flow freely and joyously toward its goal.

Late in her life, around the time when her decades of observations were coalescing into a theory of human development, Dr. Montessori became friends with a mathematician named Luigi Fantappiè. Fantappiè was exploring solutions to the more nuanced version of Einstein's equation, simplified as $E=MC^2$, and he came up with a whole range of solutions that interested Dr. Montessori greatly. These solutions implied that phenomena in the present could have a cause in the future rather than in the past! In addition to viewing everything rippling out from some past event, we could see disparate events in the present converging toward some unknown future event or state of being—a pull from the future, to complement the push from the past.

Montessori was intrigued by this idea, which resonated with her lifelong observations of children. Her word for this kind of backwards causality was

on a child, what deeper futures might be drawing us forward? We now feel ourselves in a chaotic present, roiled by uncertainties in every direction. Conversations devolve into shouting matches; job loss and addiction paralyze whole communities; racist invective claims the mantle of respectability; and the sea creeps further up the shore.

Montessori education is designed for this. When we do our work well, our children grow up resilient, awake to the guidance of their inner teacher, and ready to engage with the endless work of repairing the world.

Dr. Montessori saw the great potential in children as the answer to the dangers facing humanity. In her view, children hold the key to a future in which humans support each other and play a positive role in the unfolding Universe.

And so I ask: isn't it possible that the work we are doing now to bring Montessori to more children is being called forth by the future possibility of a world where joyous and supportive

And if the future individual, the man or woman to come, can exert a pull on a child, what deeper futures might be drawing us forward?

“finality”—the idea that the child is drawn toward the adult she will become. The spontaneous manifestations we see in children—the things they suddenly start doing with no teaching or instruction—she saw as a result of that pull from the future.

And if the future individual, the man or woman to come, can exert a pull

human communities exist on a flourishing planet?

Various writers have sought to describe such a future. Mohammad Yunus, who invented the concept of microloans for the very poor, calls it “A World of Three Zeros: zero poverty,

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zero unemployment, zero carbon emissions.” Thomas Berry calls it the Ecozoic Era: the time when humans will be present with the Earth in a mutually enhancing way.

But this future, though it may be calling to us and aiding our work, is by no means certain. Dr. Montessori said this: “The crisis we are experiencing is not the sort of upheaval that marks the passage from one historical period to another. It can be compared only to one of those biological or geological epochs in which new, higher, more perfect forms of life appeared, as totally new conditions of existence on Earth came about.

“If we do not appreciate this situation for what it is, we shall find ourselves confronting a universal cataclysm, mindful of the prophesy of the Apocalypse. If man remains earth-bound and unconscious of the new realities, if he uses the energies of space for the purpose of destroying himself, he will soon attain that goal, for the energies now at his disposal are immeasurable and accessible to everyone, at all times and in every corner of the Earth.

“And if man, who is privy to the secret of plagues and can control their causes and breed countless disease germs in his laboratories at will, uses



Spontaneous manifestations

To move into such a future, every person’s help will be needed. We need the child whose mother never learned to read; the child whose family can’t afford tuition; the child who doesn’t yet know how to use words instead of pushing. We need them to grow to adulthood with the full force of their will and intellect intact; with their desire for knowledge burning, able to listen to their inner guide and act from their authentic core.

I believe that our shared work is part of the emergence of a new pattern

consensus, transcending political divisions, that support for young children grows a strong society.

- I see an insistence that decisions be driven by data, and that we not continue to go down paths that aren’t working.
- I see a focus on communication and collaboration among organizations working to better the world—from the Montessori Leaders Collaborative in our own community to the Collective Impact model and other forms of collaboration now in use by diverse organizations worldwide.
- I see a global commitment to eradicating poverty and healing the planet’s wounds, exemplified by the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations.

In line with this greater movement, the time is right for a dramatic expansion of Montessori schools and ideas. It’s time for our model to serve many more children, especially those whose families have limited financial means. It’s time for us to engage with the broader education community, generously sharing what we have learned

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Dr. Montessori called into question the idea that the teacher is the cause of the child’s learning

this means of saving lives to spread devastating epidemics that will poison the earth, he will accomplish his purpose with the greatest of ease.”

If a positive future is indeed calling to us, the same way we see the future adult calling forth the child’s development, there’s no guarantee we will get there.

in the world, something much bigger than Montessori education but that we can make a contribution to. These are some of the things I see that I believe are connected to our work and to each other:

- I see a new awareness of the awesome power of children in their first six years of life, and a growing

about children over the last 100 years and also learning from the knowledge and observations others have gathered.

And we do have a lot to learn, as well as a lot to share. To serve every child, we need to learn from those who have studied adverse childhood experiences—the damage done to children by economic stress; hunger; the loss or incarceration of a parent. We need to learn from those who have studied ways to create trauma-aware classrooms, where children affected by these experiences can find support and safety rather than suspension and expulsion. We need to learn from those who have studied ways to dismantle racism and build truly equitable organizations.

The time is right, and the environment has already been prepared for us by the Montessori educators of the older generation. Everywhere I go in education circles, I meet someone who was a Montessori parent, or a Montessori child, or whose niece or nephew went to Montessori school. Each of these people has seen a child blossom in a Montessori environment. Now they are ready to help make Montessori accessible to all.

Even so, there are days when our work to strengthen and expand public Montessori feels too big, too fraught, impossible to move even an inch forward. But viewing this big work as undertaken in alignment with the call from a positive future helps me stay focused on the path and discern its evolving direction.

Of course I will continue to talk about outcomes, and to appreciate the cause-and-effect of Montessori opening doors for children. At the same time, I want to humbly acknowledge that the doors that open for our work are not just a result of what we've done or even of all the amazing work that came before us, but are also invitations from a future we don't yet see and can only barely imagine.

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