

A changing education mindset in Utah

Personalized Competency-Based Learning and Montessori



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“Forget everything you learned at the University about how children learn and the best ways to teach them—this is the *REAL WORLD* and we have a test to take at the end of the year.”

Those were the very first words that were said to me seventeen years ago, on the first day of my student teaching experience in a full-day, traditional kindergarten classroom; with an award-winning teacher, in the district’s top-performing school—and it still feels like a punch in the gut when I think about it.

During undergrad at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, where I completed a dual bachelor degrees in Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education, I learned to observe and use children’s interests to build engaging, hands-on, learning experiences. I looked forward to intentionally planning for collaboration and problem-solving among students along with engaging and working with parents to create prepared and inspiring spaces for learning.

At the time, the term Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) was the only acronym I knew and it was embedded in every interaction as we studied pedagogical methods founded on brain science by education researchers past and present. We learned about Vygotsky’s *Zone of Proximal De-*

velopment, Erikson’s *8 Stages*, Maslow’s *Hierarchy*, and it’s where I twice heard Dr. Montessori’s name.

But, in the “real world”, I watched as these 5 and 6-year-olds spent the majority of their day sitting at desks, looking at the teacher, waiting to be told what to do and how to do it. If they complained of conflict while at recess (or the few times they were allowed to interact with one another) they were removed from the group and given a consequence.

Of course, children are adaptable, so they sat still and learned what they were supposed to learn and many performed well on the end of year exams. Year after year, grade-level after grade-level, these children sat and learned what they were told to learn. This continued even as the data began to show that their initial academic gains in kindergarten were not an indication of long-term academic advantage past 3rd grade and that such rigorous academic focus actually produced long-term harm, especially in the realms of social and emotional development.

It was also no surprise when these children from my 2006 student teaching experience graduated high school, moved into college and careers, and their professors and supervisors complained that they didn’t have the necessary “21st century skills”.

As we know, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, emotional regulation, time management, and perseverance don’t just appear upon completion of traditional schooling or as a result of learning at home. Not only that but, pre-pandemic ACT scores indicate that only 42% of graduates were proficient in reading and 37% in math. Scores on this summative test continue to be stagnant today.

When Montessori found me in 2010 I discovered a community that valued children and the learning process the same way I did. After Montessori training, a M.Ed. from St. Catherine in Advanced Montessori Studies, working in Montessori charter and private schools, presenting at Montessori conferences, and serving on Montessori boards, I have returned to the district where I completed my student teaching and excitingly I can say the traditional education mindset is changing!

In Utah in 2019 the state board of education adopted Portrait of a Graduate as a holistic view of state education outcomes, “identifying the ideal characteristics of a Utah graduate after going through the K-12 system.” Portrait of a Graduate identifies *mastery*, *autonomy*, and *purpose* as the essential outcomes of a Utah public school graduate, aligning beautifully with Montessori’s model of education nurturing independence as an aid to life.

Promising new legislation, *Personalized Competency Based Learning (PCBL)* (R277), prioritizes ideals that mirror Dr. Montessori’s, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson (and others’) pedagogy:

- **Students are empowered daily to make important decisions** about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
- **Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience** for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.

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- Students receive **timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.**
- **Students progress based on evidence of mastery**, not seat time.
- **Students learn actively** using **different pathways and varied pacing.**
- Strategies to ensure **equity for all students** are **embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy** of schools and education systems.
- Rigorous, common **expectations for learning** (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) **are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.**

And finally we have legislation and funding that prioritizes the foundation of Montessori pedagogy and a return to DAP. Which is why I feel like this is a very exciting and important time to be part of public education!

Aurora Institute, Knowledge Works, Marzano Research, Modern Classrooms Project, and Education Reimagined are some of the organizations attempting to transform the traditional “sit and get” mindsets through their resources and consulting. I doubt any could be as comprehensive as Montessori training, but because of their work, I am able to refer to these like-minded schools of thought to bring my own Montessori training to my traditional kindergarten classroom.

We use the Hierarchy of Numbers to discover the immensity of one million. My students’ favorite works are the cosmic nesting boxes and the one hundred board. Our science shelf is most beloved and the work rugs need to be replaced. I strive every day to bring nature, humanity, and independence into our classroom. District grant monies have purchased the Waseca Reading program and a bead cabinet. We were just given materials to incorporate a sand tray and we’ve been given *The End of Average* by

Todd Rose and *Personal and Authentic* by Thomas Murray, as resources. These texts inspire individualized instruction through concrete experiences that connect children to the actual REAL WORLD through investigation and collaboration with peers and most importantly, instruction founded in brain science.

Horacio Sanchez, author of *The Education Revolution: How to Apply Brain Science to Improve Instruction and School Climate* spoke at this year’s districtwide in-service, imploring us to focus on consistency, connection, and positive discipline. Additionally, education guru John Hattie, cites Jean Piaget’s constructivist programs as highly effective in improving academic outcomes.

I’ve been asked to share the Peace Table practice with my colleagues, and our state will be adding a “promising practices” report to the ULEAD (Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic education) repository about using the Peace Table as conflict resolution in a restorative justice practice. I also recently spoke at the UCET (Utah Coalition for Educational Technology) conference about DAP, the prepared environment, the prepared adult and personalized learning experiences.

I don’t have enough uninterrupted time or mixed age levels, and there’s still an over-prioritization of the test at the end, but I have been repeatedly encouraged to “do what is best for kids” by district administration. While Utah still doesn’t recognize Montessori training toward state licensure, I am thrilled to see the elements of *wellness, communication, creativity and problem solving, service, honesty and integrity*, and most importantly, *lifelong learning and personal growth* as priorities of our public education system. As researchers continue to “discover” the science of learning is as relevant now as it was when Dr. Montessori ob-

served it and people are listening.

A recent article in *Education Week* by Libby Stanford (*Every State Now Lets Schools Measure Students’ Success Based on Mastery, Not Seat Time*, 5/31/23) celebrates the nation’s movement toward PCBL and this is as encouraging for the public Montessori sector as it is the traditional one. These slow and small steps empower public Montessori programs to maintain authenticity by providing current research and best practices to legitimize the Montessori method. Now is the time to contact your school boards and legislators to share the incredible ways a Montessori education meets the individual needs of every child and creates competent and collaborative communities.

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