

What Montessori meant to me

**A journey
 through the
 education
 system**



CHEYENNE KIPPENBERGER

I remember when I was little I loved school. Like, I loved school.

I started off at the Head Start pre-school on my reservation, in trailers lined up in this huge field next to our rodeo arena. That was my whole world when I was a little girl and I loved it. We had the generic educational curriculum of ABCs, but also the cultural element because it was on the Res. So the whole time I was doing reading and writing, and colors and shapes and all that, we were also learning language, our stories, and our cultural teachings.

For kindergarten and first grade, I distinctly remember my Montessori school—Summit-Questa Montessori School, which is still right there. I'm still friends with people from there, which is amazing because I wasn't there very long. But even in that short time, it was very impactful.

I remember the actual learning environment—it was so different from any other school I've been in. It was an environment that made me want to learn. I looked forward to school. We didn't have to sit at desks, which was great for kids like me who couldn't sit down in one place for very long, and wanted to move around. Maybe I wanted to lay down during math, but I would be sitting up crisscross applesauce during reading. And that was OK.

I also loved that we weren't con-



The joyful Montessori child as a thriving adult

fined to a specific grade level. You can have a child who excels in mathematics, but is at a more typical level in reading or writing. Although, I loved reading and writing. We did these awesome reports and I was so joyful about them and getting to choose my topics. I always choose animals. We had these animal encyclopedias, and I used to just flip through them, flip through them, flip through them, and I loved it. Then you could pick an animal and write a report. I remember I did one on the Blue-Footed Booby.

We didn't just read about them, either. We had multiple class pets—we had finches, and then we had a turtle, and we had fish. We had a chores chart, and everybody had a chore for the week. I always wanted anything to do with the animals, and I would fight to clean the bird cage, or turtle counter.

There's also the nurturing aspect from my teachers. I never forgot this

awesome coach at Montessori, Miss Sylvia. We had this huge banyan tree on our little campus, and she used to talk to us about the tree. Coming from a community that has very close relations with the land, I was already raised to love and appreciate the land—like we shouldn't carve our name into the tree, and I remember Sylvia used to talk about that. I remember feeling really empowered. I was really happy. We were celebrated and praised, for not just our abilities, but our differences as well.

I look back now at my journey and the transition of going from my tribal school, where all of my classmates were my neighbors, cousins, and close family friends, to Montessori, where there was still such a strong community. Both places had a profound love for education, and for young people, and gave them the space and the au-

continues >

tonomy to blossom in their own way, and in their own time.

I don't think that I realized how happy I was in Montessori until I moved to a very traditionally structured college preparatory school in second grade that had all these accolades as an institution. But the experience was not great.

It had really strict schedules, with bell schedules and four minutes between each class and uniforms, and you have to sit at your desk and all that. You're in this grade and this is what you're learning at this time. And there was so much less autonomy—raising your hand to go to the bathroom, so many bathroom passes a week, specific times to do specific things.

Then there were the demographics of a prep school. There was an obvious divide between people paying tuition and people on scholarships. And then there was an additional component of being native. I always felt like an outlier when I was in school. I just recognized that I was different than other kids. When you grow up on a reservation, that's just life to you. You're not thinking that that's different than other people. You don't think about the intricacies of being a tribal citizen or that you grow up in this very different culturally rich world. South Florida is very diverse of course. It's a true melting pot of the Latin community, the black community and even the white community. But it was always very apparent to me that I was the only native in my class. I felt probably the most out of place that I had ever felt.

We had a very small community of native students at that school and they were already expecting us to have learning challenges. So they put me through rigorous testing when I arrived. They kept telling my mom, "She's not up to grade level in reading." And mom would say, "No, no—she

was in Montessori. She was grades ahead," but they said, "No, no, she has to do summer school." So they made me do summer school in a group of students having reading challenges. When we would do the assignments I would have no trouble. But the teacher's position was, "Well, she has to be here." It was very confusing. I remember sitting in there thinking, "I can read this whole book by myself out loud, forwards, backwards," and it didn't matter. They just didn't believe me. Finally, I tested out of everything, and they rated me as having "normal ability" and put me in the grade that I was supposed to be in according to my age.

But I was still a little different. It didn't take long for them to say, "Oh, she's just one of those kids." And in that setting, the response is to isolate you from the other kids because, you know, "Cheyenne's just going to talk to everybody." So they put my desk away from everyone else all the time. That hurts as a little kid. I don't know if they think about the implications of that in the long run, but that was hard, to get punished for what was in my family praised as a gift—the gift of being able to speak, to be able to socialize with different people, to connect with people from all different backgrounds. With the work I'm in now, one of the largest components of my job and my company is connecting and talking with people. But I was punished for that in school.

I was pretty miserable through most of elementary middle and high school. I just did not enjoy being in school. There were still things that I would be attracted to—I loved chemistry!—but there wasn't this safety or capacity for that. You're not being praised for loving chemistry,

Later, in high school, I was diagnosed with ADHD. At that point, it was like, "Well, we're already almost at the finish line. What more is there

really to do for it?" But I didn't feel "disabled." It wasn't being hyper. It was being active—I was just a really active kid. I had so much energy to exert. In Montessori, I wasn't punished for it, or labeled as a bad kid. Montessori celebrates that individuality, that process of overcoming educational hills, figuring yourself out as a young person, and really homing in on your abilities and skills. And helping you to get through things you struggle with a little bit more. It gives the human experience to kids in a way that empowers them rather than boxing them in and making them a cookie cutter version of what a student should be.

But at the prep school, I was constantly isolated from the class—being othered, being yelled at. I got labeled as one of the troublemakers, with disciplinary issues. They wanted me to be obedient, to sit at my desk, and to meet these really rigorous rules and expectations. Obedience was rewarded, versus humanization of just being a kid in school. Looking back, it's insane that we put young people through this. Can they follow rules? Can they sit still? Can they be quiet? Can they conform?

When you keep hearing, "You're just a troublemaker, you're this, you're that," it eventually becomes part of your belief about yourself. So by high school, I was in a tough place. I had moved to public school for the first time, which was another social shock, going from a top rated college prep school to a decent public school. I was excited that I didn't have to wear uniforms anymore, but I didn't realize there weren't going to be, for example, enough textbooks for my classroom. The scheduling was different, the attentiveness was very different, and I just was not prepared for that at all.

So that transition was really difficult, and by my junior year I had pretty much accepted that school

continues >

was just not for me. “I’m just not a good student. I’m not smart. I’m not capable.” That became a part of my identity. A lot of personal things were happening and I got to a this very dark, lonely place. I was really struggling with anxiety and depression, and barely making it to school. And when I was making it to school, I had teachers that didn’t care. Instead of maybe looking at the student that’s struggling and asking, “Hey, is everything okay? What’s going on?” it was more like, “Here’s our star student that decided to come in today.” And I didn’t respond well to that type of like heckling. It didn’t make me feel any better than I was already feeling. I just had an anger brewing. So I dropped out. And I struggled for a few more years.

But eventually I realized that I needed a diploma to make a living. So I went back in a very unconventional way. I had technically been kicked out of the system. No school would take me back. But there was this alternative program for troubled students that got kicked out, or aged out of the system, called BRB—standing for “be right back,” which I thought was so lame. But I did phenomenally well! The staff were great, and I got very close with the vice principal and principal, and my teacher. I ended up graduating with a high school diploma, and I immediately applied to colleges. And in college I finally realized like, “Oh, I’m not stupid. I’m not incapable. I’m not

all of these things that these teachers had convinced me of for so long.” I just needed an setting where I could excel.

In college I had that independent work I’d had in Montessori and everything kind of started clicking into place. You had to schedule and manage yourself and tap into skills that should be built through elementary all the way through high school, but my prep school did not. I graduated with a 4.0, I was the head of the Student Association for Accounting, I was in student government, and they asked me to present to the Accreditation Board on behalf of my program

It was really great in the moment. But when I look at the entire timeline, it’s kind of sad to think that it took me well into my early twenties for me to realize like, “Hey! You’re not dumb.”

And when you zoom out, and you look at the larger picture, we as a society have so much to learn. What you can take away from the foundational teachings that come out of indigenous communities all over the world is the importance of our young. Because we know that they are the future of our communities. And if you’re not empowering the very vessels that are going to be leading your community, teaching your community, feeding your community, clothing your community and so on, you’re really like not setting your people up for success.

So now, having rediscovered Montessori, and seeing some of the

similarities with indigenous education, I wish there could be more schools like that. It makes sense to create a space where kids want to learn, and can learn at a pace that is good for them, and enrich them in a way that positively impacts them for the long run well into their adulthood. And feel respected and seen. That’s part of what I got with Coach Sylvia under the banyan tree.

Cheyenne Kippenberger is a Seminole and Chilean woman, advocate for Indigenous people and a former Miss Indian World.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the
PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2024 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector