

What is education?

Dr Timothy Taylor, a parent of two children who benefited from a Montessori primary education at Wharfedale Montessori in Yorkshire, shares his views on education.

When I reflect on what education means, I recall the definition of the psychologist B.F. Skinner: “Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten”. He meant that it is about the habits of mind that allow not just the retention of facts, but their evaluation. It is also to do with character-building, and absorbing culture in its broadest sense.

Some people think that education is only about bodies of knowledge. That does have something to do with it; less, however, than governments suppose. They, perhaps bending to a public pressure to show that they have actually done something about education, have stressed the old medieval virtues of regurgitation and repetition. Small, necessary virtues, but wholly inadequate for a full educational blossoming.

The worry that some parents have when faced with the Montessori method is that it doesn't have the tests, it doesn't have the desks in rows, and the bell does not go on the hour. And, although we know that these things can stress children to the point of breaking them, we are unsure, having not experienced it ourselves, that an unstructured replacement is any good. But, of course, there is nothing unstructured in the Montessori system, unless it is done badly. It might appear unstructured from outside, if one did not know what was going on. Certainly there is no imposed semblance of structure for its own sake. But there is a deep and logical structure. Montessori embodies a form of life that shapes itself around the child's soul, to lead it out in a well-ordered, and highly disciplined way.



Pauline Harter (left) and Barbara Isaacs with children from Wharfedale Montessori School.

Discipline is perhaps not a word people associate with such teaching, but it is a good word. A few years ago, during one of my sabbaticals, I had the pleasure of being asked if I would teach a whole day in primary, at Wharfedale Montessori School, supported by regular staff. It was one of the most memorable days teaching I have ever had. We began with a slide show of my excavations in a little cave in the Dales, and I brought animal and human bones in, and other finds. Later, we used the number rods to make a physical representation of how long it had been since the prehistoric people had lived there. Sometime after lunch, a very light hubbub began among the children and, not knowing what else to say, I dredged an old cliché from somewhere in the back of my mind and said, in a fairly quiet yet firm tone: “I want to be able to hear a pin drop”. Perhaps I shouldn't have been amazed, but I was, because by the time I had reached the ‘p’ of drop, I actually could have heard a pin drop, easily. And so it continued to the end of the day.

I had noticed this good order before, from outside so to speak. But, of course, Montessori children have spirit too, to go with their politeness. Typically they are firm. This is because they know their own minds. They know what their capacities are and what they want out of life, while respecting others' right to discover the world. The social obligation of respecting others right to be educated I know to have always been a touchstone of Montessori. The skills that each child learns at his or her own pace, protected from a high-pressure scheme of official

judgement, are skills for life. In particular I would single out an ability to concentrate, to persevere, to break tasks down into logical steps, to complete work, and to understand the underlying principles involved in every case.

I was educating myself on the day that I taught. If I say ‘I still remember’, what I mean is that I shall never forget what we did with the number rods. Using the marks that should have been ten to represent 25 years – a generation of a prehistoric family – we made a spiral round the table, until we had gone from the Mesolithic, some 7000 years ago, and before the first farmers in the Dale, through the Bronze and Iron Ages, the Roman and Saxon periods, right up to the present. I realized myself – in some ways for the first time – just how amazingly old my archaeological material was.

I always suspected that Maria Montessori's method, based as it is on touch and sound and the manipulation of physical objects, was not some wayward ‘alternative’ to current state sector teaching. Recently, I have come to realize that it operationalizes a powerful tradition to which Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey belonged; in short, an intellectual mainstream. What now surprises me most is why a poorly conceived, frankly medieval, system should persist outside Montessori, and continue to be supported by successive governments. ■

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