



Developing Resilient Children After 100 Years of Montessori Education

By Meg Drake

At the turn of the 20th century, Maria Montessori called for “a revolution in society’s approach to human development” (Montessori, 1966). She advanced a precise, scientifically based theory that has stood the test of time, decade after decade. The planes of development that Montessori referred to as “a series of reactions induced by systematic stimuli or psychological phenomena of growth” (1966) were the foundations of other developmental theories, including those of Erik Erikson and, later, Jean Piaget. Without question, Montessori gave birth to a revolution that continues to influence pedagogy today.

In this millennium, educators are faced with a number of issues that

Dr. Montessori could not have predicted. Today, students are different from the children Dr. Montessori observed in her *Casa dei Bambini*. They are influenced by technology in all its forms. Some suffer from medical problems such as complex food allergies, which wreak havoc on their bodies and brains. Others have authentic learning differences that can be difficult to understand and deal with (Shaywitz, 2003; Hallowell, 1995; Lyon, G. R., 1995). Nonetheless, Dr. Montessori’s directive that teachers respond to the “internal needs of a life in process of development” (1966) remains clear. Despite changing times, Montessori teachers remain steadfast in their approach to meet the “universal needs of the soul” (1966). Even with external pressure to conform to the

demands of competitive communities, Montessori education continues to produce resilient children who persevere despite obstacles.

Robert Brooks, a professor at Harvard Medical School and a leading authority on self-esteem and resilience, maintains that “resilient children possess certain qualities and/or ways of viewing themselves and the world that are not apparent in youngsters who have not been successful in meeting challenges and pressures” (Brooks, 2001). He posits 10 guideposts that form the foundation of a resilient mindset. It is clear that, after 100 years in practice, the prepared Montessori environment facilitates the development of this human psychological capacity.

1. Teaching empathy

Empathy is a critical factor in developing resilience. The Montessori classroom affords teachers time to sit down with a child who may be experiencing frustration with an academic or social issue and work it out. Montessori teachers take the time to listen to their students express frustration as well as jubilation. Further, the prepared classroom allows teachers to be flexible in creating plans for students. If one material is not successful in teaching an objective, a viable alternative is quickly available. A teacher's empathic, flexible response to problem solving in the classroom creates a sense of security for the students. "Dr. Montessori advised that teachers show a degree of warmth and sensitivity that is reminiscent of the characteristics of parents whose children are securely attached" (Lillard, 2005). As a result, classrooms create a feeling of security where a child feels safe to take risks. It is through this safety net that a resilient mind-set is fostered.

2. Effectively communicating

"Effective communication involves actively listening to our children" (Brooks, 2001). Walk into a Montessori classroom and you will see children with their hands on the shoulders of their teachers, waiting patiently until it is their turn to talk. In some cases, a train of children is formed with their hands on one another's shoulders. The lesson is explicit. When it is the child's turn, all attention is focused on that child. They are never interrupted or told their way of thinking is wrong. Teachers model effective communication skills in their classrooms when they accept the students' message and do not criticize or judge. Children are taught to take turns listening and speaking and are encouraged to respect another's points of view. Students in a Montessori classroom are afforded the opportunity to learn that everyone is different and to accept and celebrate the differences among us.

3. Believing in the worth of a child

Montessori educators find a way to believe in the worth of every child. Each individual is given an opportunity to express her strengths in a prepared environment that is full of opportunities to shine. Montessori believed that each child has an inherent set of strengths and that these strengths will emerge differently from each individual. She designed the classrooms to be appealing to young minds. The materials, the furniture, and the architecture are all designed to provide maximum opportunities to release potential. "Leave the child free to make use of his powers and he will show himself capable of success," Montessori wrote (1948). Dr. Brooks refers to "islands of competence" (2001) as the foundations for growth. Montessori teachers look for unique strengths in students as a basis for further achievements. During circle time, children are afforded an opportunity to share something special or to be the student of the day with unique privileges. By doing so, an unconditional environment is created where each child feels safe to express himself.

4. Creating opportunities for ownership/developing a sense of community

Montessori classrooms provide children with an inherent feeling of ownership. Classroom responsibilities are assigned according to each child's style and unique set of skills. Order is maintained with everyone's cooperation. By assigning a child a daily job, children learn to respect their community. They are encouraged to clean up after themselves so the next person can enjoy the same experience. Each student plays an active role in keeping the classroom neat and presentable. Often, classrooms are adorned with special artwork, created by the students and thoughtfully displayed for all to see. Even classroom pets are an integral part of the classroom culture

and are expected to be taken care of through group effort. Individual work spaces are often designated with the intention that each individual is responsible for its accessibility for group time. Students learn that their classroom is their sacred space, where all should feel welcomed and appreciated.

5. Setting realistic goals/orchestration of success

"Well-designed accommodations, both in the way children are taught and in the kinds of work they are expected to produce" are important, according to Brooks (2001), and are easily created in a Montessori classroom. Children learn that not everyone succeeds in a universal fashion. They can see that some of their peers pick up new concepts with ease, while others struggle and may need follow-up lessons. But in a Montessori classroom, the pace at which a student completes a task is often irrelevant because the class is a heterogeneous mix of learning styles and age groups. Children's individual needs are carefully calculated in daily expectations orchestrated by the teacher. Collaboration between two students is fostered when a teacher suggests that a student find a friend with whom to work. Throughout the day, students are encouraged to ask their peers for assistance in figuring out a problem. The message is clear: "Keep going. Find the answer with the help of your friend. Keep looking and you will discover what you need." Classroom demands can be adjusted for children with learning differences without others noticing; students will still meet the same objectives. If one student accomplishes something notable, his achievement is often a source of admiration and joy for others.

Closely connected to the setting of realistic goals is the orchestration of competence. Children need to feel successful in order to take risks. In a Montessori classroom, children feel free to gravitate toward the activities

with which they are most comfortable. It becomes an important diagnostic observation when a child spends most of her time in the Practical Life area and does not move toward any other activities. In these cases, it is necessary to help a child feel competent in a less familiar area. A reticent child may need a special invitation to learn how to use a new material by herself or with a friend. The approach to the lesson and positive feedback help the child learn there is nothing to be afraid or ashamed of.

Successive approximations to a larger goal can easily be built while encouraging a child to take the risks necessary for success. In teaching a child how to write a paragraph, for example, focus begins at the sentence level where attention is paid to the mechanics as well as to the content. Writing sentences can begin at the most basic level with a minimal number of words and can be increased to include a more complex structure over time. As soon as the student demonstrates competence at the sentence level, the notion of building a paragraph can be introduced. Failure and humiliation are minimized in a classroom where children learn through peer collaboration or private tutorial and feel no different from anyone else.

6. Teaching children to learn from mistakes

Because Montessori classrooms are set up to support the development of competence for students, it is easy for teachers to help them learn from their mistakes. "Children with a resilient mind-set perceive mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than defeats" (Brooks, 2001). Unlike other classrooms, Montessori educators do not grade children with letters, numbers, categorical labels, or dichotomous pass/fail assignments. Rather, every child is free to experience success in whatever form it may take. One student may write a narrative to express

her discoveries whereas another student may create a dramatic presentation. Assignments may be easily modified to fit an individual's skill set.

Further, most lessons have a built in "control of error," brilliantly designed by Dr. Montessori to ". . . lead the child to apply his reasoning power to his work" (Montessori, 1948). Children who go to Montessori schools learn over time that mistakes are not to be feared; they are not criticized or ridiculed by others when they do something wrong. Mistakes may often



go unnoticed by others or might even be corrected quietly by peers in collaborative engagement. Montessori saw the prepared environment as a key to reaching potential in children. With an abundance of opportunities available for students to pursue their interests, the path to competence is a broad one, accommodating different approaches.

7. Developing responsibility, compassion for others, and social conscience

"Resilience and self-worth are enhanced when children are provided with opportunities to shine and taste success, especially by making a positive difference in their world" (Brooks, 2001). Charitable work is emphasized in every Montessori school. Food drives, clothing drives, and special charity events often are planned by students, even at the kindergarten level. Seventh- and eighth-grade stu-

dents at one Montessori school enjoy "Midnight Runs," which are organized by the Episcopal Church and are chaperoned by the organization. The students collect clothing donations from families, make sandwiches and hot cocoa, pack bag lunches, and pile it all into a van. They hand-deliver the donations—shoes, belts, socks, toiletries, underwear, coats, and cookies—to homeless men and women in Manhattan at midnight! Such an experience affords teenage students the opportunity to witness firsthand the plights of those in poverty and helps them develop a sense of civic duty. "When children are enlisted in helping others and engaging in responsible behaviors, we communicate our trust in them and faith in their ability to handle a variety of tasks. In turn, involvement in these tasks reinforces several characteristics of a resilient mind-set in children" (Brooks, 2001).

8. Teaching children to make decisions and solve problems

Montessori believed that children need to exercise self-control in order to develop their capabilities to cope with conflict. "Resilient children are able to define problems, consider different solutions, attempt what they judge to be the most appropriate solution, and learn from the outcome" (Brooks, 2001). When a young student in a Montessori classroom has a problem and seeks the aid of a teacher, the student is often asked to consider "What can you do about that?" The student is given the power to resolve the issue independently and is encouraged to use words in solving problems. If the child has difficulty finding the words, a teacher may model the appropriate manner. "When children develop their own plans of action with the guidance of teachers, their sense of ownership and control is reinforced, as is their resilience" (Brooks, 2001).

9. Disciplining in ways that promote self-discipline and self-worth

“Comprehending the rationale for limits and consequences” (Brooks, 2001) is part of the curriculum in a Montessori school. Every classroom is considered a community, where children are taught to respect others’ needs. Some children establish a Bill of Rights during the first days of each year. When a student defies the Bill of Rights, it is discussed in the context of the community. Circle time affords teachers opportunities to discuss conflicts and model problem-solving techniques. The development of a sense of ownership and responsibility for one’s behavior is the ultimate goal. As each year progresses, children learn to reflect on their actions and foresee likely consequences of their behavior through group meetings and classroom discussions. The children develop an awareness that each one makes a difference in his/her community. Daily experiences are often punctuated by a lesson on the rights of an individual to have a quiet space in which to work or on the Golden Rule.

10. Creating a close alliance between home and school

Close communication between home and school is essential in developing a resilient mind-set in students. It is important to develop a positive relationship with parents in order to ease fears and to celebrate competence. In many Montessori schools, parents walk their children to their classrooms, inviting daily contact. Even though a teacher may not have the time to chat at the door, the invitation is enough to allow a mother or father to relax, having witnessed the way in which the child enters the classroom. When Montessori established her Children’s Houses, mothers were required to meet with teachers once a week to discuss their children. “When parents and teachers are working in concert in an atmosphere of mutual respect and

when their interactions with children are guided by similar principles for nurturing a resilient mind-set, the energy, productivity, and excitement of this partnership will yield lifelong benefits for the children in their care” (Brooks, 2001). Conversely, trust is difficult to establish or maintain when parents feel that they do not understand the objectives in the classroom. The loss of trust can mark the beginning of a negative cycle, characterized by an exchange of defensive reactions on the part of the teacher and challenges from the parent. The student is the one who loses as communication shuts down.

Because students in a Montessori classroom are actively engaged in different ways all day long, the teacher has an opportunity to witness growth in several areas. When a Montessori teacher is empathic, she can handle parental concerns by listening and understanding. Often, students are asked to join in on a conference, which allows the parent-teacher team to demystify the alliance and send a message of consistency to the student. Armed with an abundance of information about students, coupled with an empathic response, a Montessori teacher is equipped to handle parental concerns in a proactive manner. It is exactly this positive, respectful relationship between parents and schools that sets the stage for success in developing a resilient mind-set.

Conclusion

Brooks’s 10 guideposts mesh with Montessori’s fundamental principles of education. In a time when terror looms in public and war is being waged in foreign countries, resilience is more critical than ever. In addition to the acquisition of “intellectual vigor, independence, and initiative” (Montessori, 2004), Montessori students develop the ability to recover or bounce back from adversity. Montessori education integrates “the psychological principles of mind, consciousness, and

thought that combine to create all human experience and behavior from the inside out” (Kelley, 2005). The interaction between a child and an environment that is conducive to developing a resilient mind-set encourages the child “to come to an understanding of himself and the limits of his universe and thus achieve an integration of his personality” (Montessori, 1948). Montessori had it right.

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