



# Montessori: Where to Begin a Lifetime of Learning... and a Future of Innovative Success

By Mimi Basso

Parents decide to send their children to WSMS for many reasons, but probably *not* because the *Wall Street Journal* or *Forbes* told them it might be a good idea.



One of the primary reasons that parents choose WSMS is that they share the school's belief that the Montessori approach—particularly as practiced at WSMS—is “where to begin” their children's lifetime of learning. “Lifetime of learning” is a phrase of which we never tire. When Maria Montessori opened her first school in 1906, she recognized the importance of each child's early experiences as the foundation of a healthy, fully realized adulthood. She charged her teachers with the thoughtful preparation of learning environments in which children could develop not only physical, social, and intellectual competencies, but a positive self-image and a positive disposition toward learning.



“... The world is finally catching up with Maria Montessori's insights.”

Given this history, it should, perhaps, be not all that surprising that the Montessori approach has been drawing an increasing amount of attention and admiration lately from various business media outlets. The general observation running throughout these think pieces and blog posts is that children who have been encouraged to explore their environments grow up to have more intuitive and successful experiences in their academic and working careers. While I agree with this assessment, I am fascinated by this intersection of the Montessori and business worlds, and wanted to share what I've learned about it.

In an article for the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011, journalist Peter Sims identifies a connection shared by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the late master chef Julia Child, and rapper/entrepreneur Sean “Diddy” Combs, among others: they are/were all innovators in their fields, and they all had a Montessori education. The article cites a study in which many of the 500 innovative entrepreneurs interviewed turn out to have attended Montessori schools, “where they learned to follow their curiosity.” Sims concludes by exhorting his readers to try to “change the way we've been trained to think. That begins in small, achievable ways, with increased experimentation and inquisitiveness. ... Questions are the new answers.”

Perhaps so, but, as Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry points out in a blog post for Forbes.com from this past January, “There is nothing ‘new’ about this teaching method: let kids figure things out on their own, and they'll not only learn better but be more passionate.” That post is titled, fittingly, “The Future of Education Was Invented in 1906.” Along the same lines, in a blog post for Forbes.com from 2011, Steve Denning writes, “The idea that we

don't have to reinvent the wheel [is] striking. The example of thousands of Montessori schools is before us. Montessori puts the student at the center. It is proven to work. ...The world is finally catching up with Maria Montessori's insights.”

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry offers a possible explanation as to why the Montessori approach has withstood the test of time:

*Montessori education was so groundbreaking because it was the first (and, to my knowledge), scientific education method. ... Maria Montessori, a doctor and a researcher ... experimented with methods and, based on the results, built up a theory of the child, which she then tested and refined through experiment. ... It's because of this scientific character of Montessori education that it produces such excellent results, results that are validated again and again.*

Montessori schools have been yielding these “excellent results” for more than 100 years; WSMS, for the past 50. Certainly, the post-WSMS experiences of our graduates contribute to the ongoing validation of Dr. Montessori's vision. Upon leaving WSMS, our students move on to schools with a broad variety of educational philosophies. But these children have learned to be receptive and inquiring, and even in the most structured

environment they can and do benefit from this mindset. As they continue through the higher grades, into college, and on to their careers, their educational foundation holds fast: if the first attempt doesn't work, they regroup and take a different approach.

It is that lifelong "joy of discovery" that is the true measure of success, and it is what all of us at WSMS strive every day to sustain in our students.

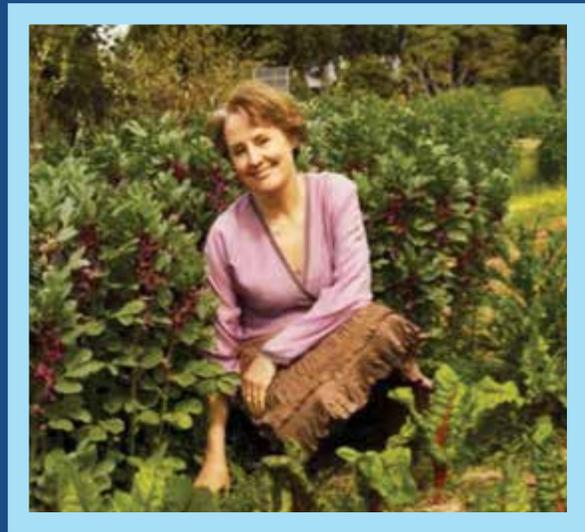


## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Chef, author, and restaurateur Alice Waters is another example of someone whose Montessori background is helping her change our world. Many know her as the proprietor of the legendary restaurant Chez Panisse, but Waters was also once a Montessori teacher. She cites the latter experience as instrumental in her creation of the Edible Schoolyard Project (ESY), which integrates the creation and use of organic gardens into the curriculum and food program of urban public schools. ESY is currently implemented in some 2,000 schools in 50 states and 29 countries.

In an interview published on the American Montessori Society's website, Waters explains, "When students come into the garden-classroom for their math class, they are measuring the vegetable beds—they are doing math by osmosis, effortlessly absorbing their lessons. This is the beauty of a sensory education—which is, at its core, a Montessori education: the way all the doors into your mind are thrown wide open at once."

For more information about ESY, visit:  
<http://edibleschoolyard.org/>



## DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Two short, fast-paced "321 Fast Draw" videos on YouTube argue with charm and insight for the Montessori approach.

One is by Daniel Petter-Lipstein, a lawyer and the parent of two Montessori students, who relates the following anecdote (quoted here from a written version posted on un-schooled.net):

*My daughter's lower elementary teacher (Montessori classes are typically multi-age, lower elementary is grades 1-3 together) recently told me that a few kids in her classroom were learning about the triangle and they asked, "Can a triangle have more or less than 180 degrees?" In classic Montessori style, the teacher turned the question back on them and said, "Use the hands-on geometric materials and try and make an actual triangle that is more or less than 180 degrees." So the children have their question honored and arrive at the proper answer by themselves. This story also highlights the role of a teacher in a Montessori classroom as being a "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage."*

The other video is by Trevor Eissler, a pilot/flight instructor and the parent of three Montessori students, who observes:

*Children are naturally interested in learning. ...Montessori schools stoke that by flame by promoting hands-on, self-paced, collaborative, challenging and joyful learning. They encourage divergent thinking instead of convergent thinking, innovation instead of standardization.*

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