

Montessori or Public Kindergarten

by Aline D. Wolf

If you are the parent of a four year-old presently in a Montessori class, you are probably delighted with your child's progress and are looking to his continuation of Montessori next year when he is five. Most parents who choose Montessori for their pre-schooler not only want him to complete this cycle of pre-school learning but they want him to continue Montessori at the elementary level if it is available.

It is possible, however, that you are one of a smaller number of parents who look upon Montessori as a preparation for public kindergarten. A Montessori school, these parents feel, is a place where a very young child can be taken care of until he is old enough for public school. Each year some parents withdraw their five year-olds from Montessori just as they are beginning to unfold as young leaders, beginning readers and budding mathematicians. When the transfer is made at this point the children actually miss the most fruitful part of the Montessori experience.

There is no doubt that some circumstances almost force parents to withdraw their five year-old from a Montessori school. A sudden financial crisis, impossible transportation arrangements, a personality conflict with a individual Montessori teacher or a child's special problem which might be helped by a more structured environment, all indicate that a change should be made.

When compelling reasons, similar to these, do not exist, you have the freedom to observe both programs carefully and to try to evaluate the influence which each might have on your child. You should not hesitate to ask to observe either the public or Montessori school. The exercise of this legitimate right of parent is the only way you can get the first-hand information necessary for making wise decisions.

It will be helpful to begin by observing your own four year-old in the Montessori classroom during the spring months. Is he comfortable and happy? How does he interact with other children? Does he choose his own activities? How long can he concentrate? What math exercises can he do? What reading or language activities has he begun?

Next you should visit the public kindergarten which your child could attend. Do the children enjoy learning? How long do they concentrate? What math and reading exercises are available as the next step to what your child is doing now? What art, music and nature activities are in the class? Are there opportunities for independent work and for leadership?

The next step in the sequence is to re-visit the Montessori school. This time, rather than watching your own child, look at the classroom as a whole and particularly at what the five year-olds are doing. How do they compare with the five year-olds in the public school? What are they doing in math and reading? Are they leaders? Are they self-confident? Is the classroom a happy place for learning? What music, nature and creative activities are in progress?

After this series of observations you should give careful thought to the long-range as well as the immediate advantages of one program over another. The "right-now" benefits of choosing a public school program, such as the relief from tuition and transportation responsibilities, are often very obvious to parents. The long-range benefits of another year of Montessori are sometimes more subtle and difficult to recognize. Unwittingly some parents give up substantial long term benefits for motives that are not always educationally sound. An analysis of these reasons may be helpful to you.

“We feel that the best learning happens when the younger children can watch older children. Debbie really benefited from her past two years in Montessori. But next year, she won’t have any older ones to learn from. She’s apt to pick up baby habits again.”

Imitating older children is only one aspect of learning in a mixed age group. The book, *Children Teach Children* by Gartner, Kohler and Riessman (Harper and Row, 1971) gives many statistics which show that when an older child helps a younger child, it is actually the older child who benefits most from the experience.

Because the teacher in a Montessori classroom is not constantly directing group activities, there are many opportunities for the five year-olds to help the younger ones. Besides reinforcing their academic knowledge, this experience enhances their self-esteem and develops their self-confidence - two qualities which enable them to try new things in later learning. To deprive the five year-old of this experience is to deprive him of his year of leadership. When he was younger, he was unconsciously looking forward to the time when he would be one of “the older ones”. If, instead, he is put into a kindergarten where he is again at the bottom of the ladder, this cycle of maturing is interrupted. Perhaps the loss is most unfortunate for the “only child” or for a child who is the youngest in the family because such a child does not have the opportunity to lead younger children at home.

“At public school all the kids meet their friends in kindergarten. If I wait until first grade to put Susan in public school, she’s going to have a hard time getting in with the group.”

The problem of adapting to a new group is one which parents worry about more than the children do. It is not unusual to find parents questioning the teacher about this situation weeks after the child and his classmates have forgotten that he is new.

Addressing himself specifically to this problem, Joseph S. Silverman, M.D., a psychiatrist interested in young children wrote, “Confronting an already formed peer group in elementary school is of course a challenge for any child. The transition from a Montessori kindergarten to a public first grade, however, is handled with ease by most children. That they do so suggests to me that the challenge to their coping capacities is actually fortuitous. For, after all, we find in most situations that to protect a child from a challenge he can meet is to retard his maturation.”

“Harry did beautifully in Montessori for two years, but I think he’s had enough of it now. We can save the tuition money for his college education.”

This is a natural inclination even when there is no serious financial problem. Where, however, will the money be better invested? Will his education be guaranteed more by the fact that he becomes interested and excited about learning or by the fact that you have money in the bank? If he becomes bored, he may decide against further education long before the college years. Since many scholarships are available to good students, perhaps an interest in learning is the best guarantee of a college education.

“ All the other kids in the neighborhood are going to public school. Peter wants to go with them. He says he doesn’t like his old school any more.”

When a child tells you he dislikes school you should try to determine his motivation for saying so. Either he is really unhappy in his present classroom or his saying this because he wants you to let him do something else. Observing him in his classroom (if possible, without letting him know) is your best way to judge. If he seems totally restless, bored, withdrawn, angry or disruptive, you must seriously consider what

he is telling you. But if he seems comfortable, busy and absorbed most of the time, with just the normal amount of mischief and daydreaming, then you can assume he is happy.

Saying he wants to go with the other kids is a normal and frequent reaction of youngsters whose friends are discussing their approaching entrance into public kindergarten. For many of them it will be their first school experience and their excitement naturally affects your child. If you and your spouse react as individuals who are confident in your own judgment, you will not panic at this childhood remark. Instead you will convey to your child your own enthusiasm for all the things he is doing in **his** school.

“I think Montessori was fine for Tim when he was younger, but he knows most of the things in the Montessori classroom by now. I think he’s tired of it and he needs a fresh start in kindergarten.”

It is almost impossible to imagine a four year old finishing and tiring of the academic materials. The Golden Beads which illustrate the Decimal System could, for example, be used for such difficult maneuvers as square root and long division. In reading, as in math, because the necessary materials are at hand, a youngster can go as far as his interest and ability take him.

For example, in a Montessori classroom a five year old can gain an early understanding of many difficult concepts which are the usual stumbling blocks in grade school. Long before he is faced with such **abstract** terms as *Peninsula, History, Verb, Unit or Fraction*, he meets them in simple concrete materials which are fun to manipulate. He can build a peninsula, put pictures on a Time Line of history, act out verbs, “carry one” in addition by going to the Bank and changing ten Units into one Ten Bar, put two fractional quarters together to make one-half, etc.

The opportunity to learn to read at his own pace is, perhaps, the most important advantage for the five year-old in the Montessori classroom. He receives individual help as he works with the reading materials and is neither pressured to keep up with other youngsters, nor bored by having to wait for others to catch up with him. As he masters the phonetic skills, the Reading Corner invites him to spend comfortable hours with books he selects himself, thus fostering his desire to read. Many children begin reading and math at four but the most exciting work is done when they are five. If you transfer your child before this year of fruition, you will probably lose the best return on your financial investment in pre-school education.

When selecting a school for your child the important thing to remember is that you and your spouse, as parents, are the only people who should make this decision. You should not feel pressured by remarks from neighbours, from in-laws or particularly from your own child. You, his parents, best understand his needs. You have the maturity to judge the available programs. You have the wisdom to choose the school which offers the best opportunities for your five year-old.