

Montessori and Raising Original Thinkers

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In a recent article in the Atlantic, and in his book **Originals**, award winning educator and bestselling author Adam Grant describes how we can raise “original thinkers”.

He says, “Too much structure, order, and discipline can constrain creativity, but so can too little. In a classroom with extensive constraints, kids don’t learn to think for themselves. Give kids all the freedom in the world, and they can get caught in choice paralysis, lack frameworks for figuring out how to approach a problem, or develop plenty of novel ideas but fail to implement them. I think balance comes in alternating different pedagogical approaches. Lecture for 10 minutes, then let kids develop their own way of teaching the lesson learned and present it in small groups”

When I read this it struck me that these words could have come right out of one of Maria Montessori’s books. Montessori’s concept of freedom is frequently misunderstood and sometimes misapplied. Montessori believed strongly in a balance between freedom and structure – or more precisely she believed in freedom *within* structure.

Dr. Maria Montessori envisioned an order in the design of the classroom where everything has its place and where there is a clear sequence of what comes next. The order she promoted was also to be found in the trust and relationship between teacher and student in regard to an agreed-upon set of goals. And she believed that there was a self-organizational principle at work in each of us – a drive to be masters of our destiny.

Contrary to what some people think, Montessori did not believe in unfettered freedom. She did believe that students needed a significant amount of choice in order to develop the life skills of planning, goal setting and self-discipline. Today in Montessori (or non-Montessori) schools across the country, we see that when students are allowed some measure of choice in selecting their work – as well as some choice in when they want to do it and with whom – they are able to develop building 21st century competencies such as organizational skills, big picture thinking, creative problem solving and collaboration.

And it seems that Adam Grant concurs with another central tenet of Montessori philosophy – the vital role of curiosity. In his book **Originals**, Grant says that curiosity is the driver of original thinking, and that this ultimately leads to a questioning of why things are the way they are. “When we become curious about the dissatisfying “defaults” in our world, we begin to recognize that most of them were created by people. And this awareness gives us the courage to contemplate how we can change them.”

According to Maria Montessori, if students are told what to do each minute of each day, there is no room for them to explore their key interests and passions – and this takes the very heart out of education. It also kills curiosity – and blocks possible pathways to learning and social change that curiosity may naturally open.

Indeed if we look at the current testing culture of most public schools, what is being tested is usually not the higher order thinking skills students will need to succeed. Perhaps even more concerning is that the current testing culture is anathema to the kind of innovative thinking and creative problem solving needed to advance our society and bring solutions to the challenges we face as a species.

In Montessori, facts are important as they relate to other facts – and students build higher order thinking skills by connecting facts into concepts. So assessment in a typical Montessori school is reflective of these goals and is more complex than a simple test of content covered. In the Montessori approach, *how* facts are organized and presented is as important as the knowledge of the facts themselves – and this *how* is where the originality is fostered.

Montessori evaluations may include presentations with peer feedback as well as exhibits, projects and portfolios. This is in addition to quizzes, exams and standardized tests that Montessori schools may implement. In the end, what is central in a Montessori classroom are the ideas of the student – and what is valued most is when these ideas can be expressed in a cogent and effective fashion.

Parents whose children attend Montessori schools can be conflicted about their choice. On the one hand they love the fact that Montessori is fostering their child's passion for learning and his/her innate curiosity – and that their child is in a value based program that advocates for the voice of each child to be heard. At the same time parents rightfully want to ensure that their child will not be left behind in an achievement gap and that they will be able to perform well on traditional tests to enter the best colleges and universities.

It turns out that parents are not the only ones faced with this dilemma. Adam Grant points out that that high achievement and originality are not always in alignment. In **Originals** he says for example that “child prodigies, it turns out, rarely go on to change the world. When psychologists study history’s most eminent and influential people, they discover that many of them weren’t unusually gifted as children.” “Although child prodigies are often rich in both talent and ambition, what hold them back from moving the world forward is that they don’t learn to be original.”

As an educator of 30 years, I have worked with super high achieving students for whom academics came easy – as well as students who had to work extremely hard to make it through academically. I have seen both kinds of students – and those in between – find success and make a positive impact on the world at the same time. My advice to parents is to support your children in achieving as highly as they are capable, but

always be vigilant to keep their flame of curiosity burning. Honoring the originality of our children will always be the most important kind of support we can give them.

Maria Montessori was far ahead of her time, and today's scientists and thought leaders are now re-discovering the power of her ideas and observations – especially when it comes to unleashing the power of the individual.

-Andrew Kutt

For more on Adam Grant's interview and publications see the link below to the Atlantic article on *Educating an Original Thinker* or read his great book **Originals** published by Viking