

There's No Such Thing as the Real World

By Peter Piché

Last spring, I attended the Spring Chorus Concert at C. E. Jordan High in Durham, NC, the public high school that both my children attended after they'd gone from the Toddler program through eighth grade at Montessori Community School, also in Durham. My daughter and son, both accomplished musicians, collaborated to sing a duet. They chose the song "No Such Thing" by pop icon John Mayer, which can be seen as a teenage lament about how adults "love to tell you [to] stay inside the lines." The line from the song that has stuck with me is "there's no such thing as the real world—just a lie you've got to rise above."

Many parents who send their children to Montessori schools secretly wonder when they should transition them to a "real school," which will toughen them up so that they can compete in the "real world" of winners and losers (a paradigm reinforced as the political and societal operating system of the United States during our last presidential election). In particular, I've seen fathers worrying and wondering whether all this nurturing in Montessori schools is inherently good for their children, especially their boys.

Somehow, we've been enculturated to believe that school ought to be somewhat painful and a bit of a slog if it is to prepare children for the real world of winners and losers. As both a Montessori dad and a career Montessori teacher, this notion always makes me cringe. I insist to parents that the reason to keep children enrolled in quality Montessori schools for as long as possible is because of the real world itself. That is to say, I personally am not very satisfied with the status quo that generally manifests itself as the real world. I kept my own children in Montessori programs as long as I could because I believe Montessori has the potential to help young people create a *new* world, of which we are so desperately in need.

And precisely how does Montessori education do this? Despite what some may believe, it isn't about superior academic achievement. It is true that the unique Montessori aspect of auto-education allows for children's innate gifts to emerge and enables them to pursue those gifts as they also gain competence in basic skills. But most essential is the simulation of community through a multiage environment, where "softer" skills like leadership, collaboration, creativity, empathy, and exploration are cultivated by design and with intention. The "lie we've got to rise above" is the idea that these gifts can be cultivated in an educational setting where conformity and

compliance are the norm. Being conditioned to do what you're told only leads to preservation of the status quo. Montessori education was never designed for that. In fact, Montessori herself wrote (2007, p. 69): "We must help the child to act for himself, will for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit."

When I look at my own two Montessori alums, one now about to enter her second year at the University of North Carolina, and the other going into his senior year in high school, I see two very different, diverse persons who possess one important trait in common, cultivated through their years in a Montessori setting: conviction. Both my kids know how to lead and how to speak up and act. So when they sing more lines from "No Such Thing" with that same conviction—"I am invincible, as long as I'm alive"—I believe them, and I am hopeful for our collective future.

PETER PICHE is Montessori-credentialed (Primary, Elementary I–II). He also has experience teaching at the Secondary level. He founded the Adolescent Community at Montessori Community School in Durham, NC. He serves as a consultant to schools participating in the AMS Pathway of Continuous School Improvement and is a professional leadership coach to school leaders. Contact him at peter@growwisecoaching.com.

References

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