

A Democratic Phenomenon: Emerging Adolescent Programs in Montessori Schools

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Theories of democratic education make the assumption that democracy's virtue lies in its inclusiveness, its ability to incorporate previously disenfranchised groups into its political decision making process. However, these theories typically focus solely on the redistribution of power between administrators and teachers, instead of applying their guiding principles to students as well. This exclusion of students is then justified by the assertion that adolescents lack the qualifications necessary to share power in the school's political process. Thus, theories of democratic education usually conclude that while schools cannot be democratic, because power cannot be shared among all participants, schools that are more inclusive of teachers come closer to the democratic ideal than others.

While we agree that inclusion and the political equality it represents is fundamental to the democratic ideal, it is also true that exclusiveness is equally fundamental to the practice of democracy.¹ Thus, we contend that these "most inclusive" schools are already democratic, but not because they share power with teachers. Rather, these schools should be seen as democratic precisely because they exclude students from the school's political process, especially those processes which relate to students' work. To challenge the way democracy as education is practiced, we have extracted a principle of mutual interaction from Maria Montessori's own assumptions about democracy and education. By using this principle it is possible to move beyond the contradictions inherent in this discussion and value the contributions of all participants in the political process within schools.

Theoretically, the principle of mutual interaction describes the dynamic complementary relationship between the political and educational positions. Within the concept of democratic education, these two positions compete for priority in the practice of schooling. The political position is focused on the question, "Who should have authority to shape the education of future citizens?"² The educational position is centered around the question, "How can one prepare an environment so that an individual can develop in an unrestricted manner?"

Theories of democratic education typically value the political position above the educational one because they assume that genuine inclusiveness will result from redistributing power. However, since the realignment of power tends to promote both inclusive and exclusive tendencies, we contend that the educational position should be valued as much as the political, so that the universal element may interact mutually as an equal partner to the partisan element in the process of deliberation. Thus, the relationship between these positions is *mutual* in that their equal value constrains each other and provides balance to the process of deliberation. Their relationship is *interactive* in that this process becomes a reciprocal exchange of critiques of the other's excesses and/or deficiencies. Thus, the principle of mutual

interaction changes the way one constructs limits on authority, which legitimates learning to rule, by ruling, while ruled.³

Although much of Montessori's writing and lectures remain untranslated into English, the sources that are available present an adequate picture of her assumptions about democracy and education. While it is clear that Montessori valued democracy as "our civilization's highest form of government,"⁴ it is equally clear that she refused to label her own methods democratic. A recently published lecture that Montessori delivered in Paris in 1949 is a good example of why she makes this distinction. Montessori begins by saying that:

Education should not be limited by the democratic ideal or associated with any other ideal which is difficult to define. One wanders far from education when one begins to discuss the exact meaning of the democratic ideal. Education should be a science and a help to life, a definite and exact study which following the previously discovered laws of life will become something exact and discernible.⁵

Here, Montessori indicates that there is an important distinction between education which is a universal experience, and the democratic ideal which is a much more narrow concept. Furthermore, Montessori considered democracy limited because, by nature, its form is changeable. This is in contrast to education, which she conceived as a science which studied the laws governing the development of persons. Later in her lecture Montessori states, "Again, to speak of a democratic school community seems to be asking for misunderstanding."⁶ It seems then that while Montessori valued democracy as the best form of government yet conceived, she insisted that the democratic ideal was inconsistent with education because, by definition, it established ideological limits on universal experience. Thus, in a discussion of democratic education, one must first distinguish democracy from education by understanding that the inclusive impulse in democracy mirrors the universal ideal of education, but also limits its breadth by democracy's intrinsic partisan claims.⁷

However, the experience of Montessori schools in Europe during the 1930s demonstrates that her practice of education still had an affinity for democratic politics. Both Hitler and Mussolini expressed interest in Montessori schools as a way to create a new Fascist social order.⁸ At this time, Montessori was described by her associates as being apolitical and allowed Mussolini to appropriate her schools in Italy. However, as the control of fascism became more pervasive in society, Montessori schools began to close. By 1935 Montessori's methods were forbidden in Nazi Germany, by 1936 the remaining schools in Italy had been closed, and in 1938 all existing Montessori schools in Austria were shut down.⁹ Montessori, herself was forced to flee Italy, traveling as an exile first to Spain and then to India.¹⁰ Given that the Nazi Party eventually viewed her schools as a threat to the advance of fascism,¹¹ there might be a historical corollary. Since Montessori's practice moves education away from the totalitarian ideology of authoritarian dictatorship, it also moves education toward the democratic ideal in that it fosters a greater respect for persons, which resembles the practice of citizens in a democracy. Translated into the politics of schooling, this would suggest a greater level of respect for students,

whose membership in the school polity, by virtue of their engagement in work, entitles them to a greater level of participation in the decision making process.

The reason Montessori's practice has such an affinity for the democratic ideal stems from the intellectual heritage she shares with philosophers sympathetic to democratic or pseudodemocratic initiatives. Initially, Montessori shared the principle of individuality with Locke and Rousseau. Her basic claim was that one must study each child and his or her own unique personality before attempting to educate him or her, because all persons will manifest and realize their own possibilities by following their own impulses.¹² Similarly, Locke argued that the individual student was the main concern of the teacher in *Thoughts Concerning Education*. Also, Rousseau thought it was imperative that a teacher should know the nature of a student, because education should be "suited to the nature of the child."¹³ Montessori's own contributions in developing this principle lie in her employment of practical exercises that avoid the overt conflict between personal development and the claims of society.¹⁴

A second principle, the principle of freedom, is found in their writing.¹⁵ For Montessori, freedom originates from the first principle, in that a child matures in his or her development in the absence of restrictions on his or her individuality.¹⁶ Locke makes the claim that a necessary condition of true education is freedom.¹⁷ In *Emile*, Rousseau suggests that a student would develop his intellect if one would leave him alone to profit from his own devices and experiences.¹⁸ Again, Montessori's main contribution to the principle of freedom is a practical one. She has been successful in overcoming the problem of extending the kind of education Rousseau wanted for *Emile* to other students who were not in his exceptional situation. She did this by giving children a significant measure of genuine freedom in her schools.¹⁹

The third principle shared by Montessori, Locke, and Rousseau is a principle of child development. Montessori claims that the senses form the basis of a higher life and that their cultivation in early childhood is a precondition to success in one's later educational experiences.²⁰ Although Locke distinguishes between the faculties of the mind and sensory experience, he confines education in its origins to sense impressions.²¹ Rousseau even anticipates Montessori's view concerning the accurate discrimination between sense-perceived objects when he says, "To exercise the senses is not only to make use of them: It involves learning to judge accurately by their means."²² Thus, the third principle of child development also supports the claim that Montessori's practices have an affinity for democratic education. Although Montessori refuses to use the democratic ideal within her own discourse, the affinity of this principle to the democratic ideal is, in fact, the very strength of her theories and practice from the democratic perspective.²³

The principle of mutual interaction that we have extracted out of Montessori's writing, therefore, resembles the democratic ideal, yet also differs from the presumption of the ideal because it transcends the ideological discourse of inclusion. To this extent, this principle is helpful in judging whether or not a phenomenon of schooling is representative of democratic education, because one can distinguish between proposals that merely assume their own inclusiveness and those that

genuinely redistribute power among participants. If a phenomenon exhibits the qualities of politics, but not education, one would conclude that it incompletely embodies the virtue of democratic citizenship. On the other hand, if a phenomenon exhibits the mutual interaction of both positions, where one complements the other by constraining its excesses and filling in its deficiencies, then one would conclude that this kind of activity is characteristic of what democratic education should be.

In 1987 Amy Gutman advanced a theory of democratic education to address the problem of authority in schools. While her analysis clearly highlighted the shortcomings of traditional approaches to this problem, her conclusions did not adequately address the assumptions within the concept of inclusion. In *Democratic Education*, Gutman develops the ideal of democratic education as *conscious social reproduction*, which she defines as “the substance of our core commitment to arrive at an agreement on our educational aims.”²⁴ Two principles serve as limits to secure a place in society where “children can deliberate among a range of good lives and good societies.”²⁵ The first principle is one of *nonrepression*, which prevents any group in society, including the state, from using education as a means to stifle the rational deliberation over alternative conceptions of the good life and the society.²⁶ The second principle is one of *nondiscrimination*, in which “states and families may not exclude entire groups of children from schooling by denying them an education which is conducive to deliberation among conceptions of the good life and the good society.”²⁷ Using the principles of nonrepression and non-discrimination, one is able to derive from particular cases instances where conscious social reproduction, the ideal of democratic education, is actualized.

In *Democratic Education*, Gutman criticizes Dewey’s laboratory school at the University of Chicago and the concept of Schools-Within-Schools promulgated by Ernest Boyer.²⁸ With regard to Dewey’s school, Gutman comments that Dewey’s conception of an “ideal, democratic school as a ‘miniature community, an embryonic society,’ is misleading” because at Dewey’s school “students did not have the same freedom, authority, or influence as teachers over the curriculum or the structure of their schooling.”²⁹ Although it cultivated the prototypical virtues of democracy among its students, Dewey’s school is characteristic of schools of its kind because it left almost all significant educational decisions in the hands of teachers and administrators.³⁰

Regarding the Schools-Within-Schools approach, which was piloted at Brookline, Gutman noted that while participatory approaches to learning usually appeared to be more successful in generating a personal commitment on the part of students to learn, there was little evidence that this predisposition was created in individuals as a function of their schooling at places like Brookline. She comments that “these students probably enter Schools-Within-Schools with a commitment to participate.”³¹ From both of these examples of democracy within schools, Gutman concludes that:

democratic schools do not look like miniature societies, teachers have more authority, both formal and informal, than democratic legislators have, or ideally should have. But these schools do come close to living up to the educational standard dictated by democratic values: democratize schools to the extent necessary to cultivate the participatory along with the disciplinary virtues of democratic character.³²

This illustrates the problem with assuming that the democratic ideal is inclusive because it redistributes power among the participants in the polity of the school. Theories of democratic education, like Gutman's, preserve the illusion that extending a greater measure of power to teachers is not only working in the direction of the democratic ideal, but is grudgingly the best that one can do, given the nature of adolescents. Accordingly, it is by excluding students that democratic schools become democratic, because in their exclusion, teachers find a greater measure of freedom.

There is another phenomenon of schooling, the emergence of adolescent programs at Montessori schools, which may serve as a better example of how the principle of mutual interaction operates in practice. In 1975, the Near North Montessori School in Chicago was the only school of its kind in the United States to have an adolescent program. Although the Whitby School began the revival of American Montessori programs in 1958, it was not until the mid-1970s that parents showed an acute interest in extending their children's Montessori training beyond the primary and elementary levels. By 1994 the number of adolescent programs at certified Montessori schools had proliferated to over 100, with their numbers growing each year.³³ Since Montessori, herself, did not write extensively about methods for schooling adolescents, these schools have had much flexibility to experiment in extending Montessori principles to the secondary level. To demonstrate how the principle of mutual interaction operates in these schools, we have isolated the characteristics of experimentation, individuality, and community as expressions of these embryonic societies.

Recent literature from these schools reveals that the ideal of *Erdkinder* has generated many experiments which have become the phenomenon of secondary programs in Montessori schools. Kahn notes that "generally speaking, the Montessori secondary programs, which now number approximately one hundred, have been experimental, with little or no documentation available. There is no governing standard or consensus of design."³⁴ Thus, the phenomenon of experimentation has devolved a measure of power from policy makers to teachers and students who are now responsible for extending Montessori theory into adolescent experience.

The second characteristic of this phenomenon is an emphasis on individuality. While a part of Montessori's theories from the beginning, the responsibilities of the individual have been extended in secondary programs. In these classrooms, adolescents "play the part" by "doing-at-the-same-time-as-preparing" to go out into society as a responsible person,³⁵ instead of only observing their environment or only being cast in a preparatory phase separated from experience and reality. This is an example of the principle of mutual interaction in that these students are learning to rule, by ruling, while ruled. Larry Schaefer notes that the proper relationship between student and teacher in the classroom should be characterized as between "the adult-in-formation and the adult-who-should-already-be-formed."³⁶ Viewing adolescents from this point of view places them on a more equal standing because it actualizes their potential as rulers, learning to rule.

The transition into a functional community where mutual interaction takes place occurs in small increments. A student begins as one who is being ruled, without

ruling, and then acquires more responsibility in the process of becoming one who rules, while ruled. This happens in the process of adolescents maturing in relationship to their environment. The original idea that children should share a respect for the physical environment of the classroom has been extended to secondary programs, so that students are not only responsible for cleaning the classroom, but are also responsible for coming up with the system to make it work. From this level of responsibility, students have acquired greater authority by participating as equals in class meetings. John Long confirms that many secondary programs integrate democratic experiences into their curriculum in his 1994 "Survey of Montessori Adolescent Programs." In his compiled list of key experiences for the adolescent, Long includes:

Building Community: assuming a participatory and responsible role within the community, building a just community, creating community, council meetings, (participatory democracy, resolution of issues), town meetings, group problem solving, cooperative activities, trust activities.³⁷

In some Montessori secondary experiments, students have acquired even more autonomy to design their own curriculum. At Ruffing Montessori School West in Rocky River, Ohio, adolescents select activities suited to their personal interests and use resources at the school and in their community to demonstrate their competency in their field of study.³⁸ Thus, the characteristic of valuing individuality at the adolescent level has resulted in the devolution of more power from teacher to student and is further along the continuum that expresses the transition to the full functioning of the principle of mutual interaction.

The third characteristic of the phenomenon of Montessori adolescent programs is the perception that the community of people that compose the secondary classroom is a microcosm of a democratic society. This is distinct from the earlier contention, that classroom communities might be "embryonic" or "prototypical" democratic communities, in that the practice of the associational principles of democracy is conjoint with the real redistribution of power. A precondition to the development of this understanding of community as civil society is the diverse composition of members. The classroom contains not just one teacher, but several teachers who share an equal standing with each other. Combined with a relatively small student body composed of various ages, and a director, the presence of equals in the classroom necessitates compromise regarding even every day events. This diversity serves as a kind of institutional constraint on the accumulation of power within a group by one individual or within the community by any one group.

In political discourse, the kind of constraint most closely parallel to that exerted by the principle of mutual interaction is civil religion. In Montessori schools, there is an explicit agreement to abide by general precepts, such as the respect of persons, which are operating in the primary classroom. These precepts result in an unconscious ethic which acts as a kind of socio-political constraint on the arbitrary usurpation of power by individuals. Since respecting individuals is a function of everyday activities, persons in the community have a vested interest in protecting the value of these ethical standards.

The manifestation of mutual interaction *qua* civil religion is reinforced by the basic questions which organize the foundations of academic inquiry. In 1993, Kahn noted that “discussion is the primary mode of this classroom, inquiry is the result of dialogue, and community is sustained by the face-to-face encounter of dialogue, problem-solving, coaching, etc.”³⁹ In fact, his suggestions for the history, civics, geography, and economics curriculum make the democratic ideal and participatory citizenship two of the five key questions of academic study.⁴⁰ His first question is solely in reference to the democratic ideal. For example, he asks:

What is the democratic ideal? How, when, why, and where has it arisen in the course of human history? Compared to tyrannies, have democracies been long lasting or brief? What constraints does the democratic ideal place on the majority? ...What work is still needed to be done to close the gap in the United States between the democratic ideal and daily practice?⁴¹

Of participatory citizenship he wonders:

Why are people who live in societies organized under the democratic ideal expected to participate in civic life? What forms has this participation taken? What forms need to be promoted? What conditions have inhibited citizen participation in the past? What especially is the role of deliberation? Can individualism get out of hand? Has it?⁴²

The institutional aspect of a diverse population of equals, the social manifestation of a civil religion based on Montessori principles, and an academic emphasis on inquiring about the democratic ideal thus all contribute to the functioning of the principle of mutual interaction within the high school community. Here, too, is the clearest manifestation of the principle of mutual interaction functioning alongside the aspiration to the democratic ideal. So, although Montessori did not use the democratic ideal to shape her science of education, the principle of mutual interaction which resembles and transcends the democratic ideal still addresses the standing issues of democratic schooling.⁴³

1. While the historical development of the idea that democracy is both fundamentally inclusive and exclusive is beyond the scope of this essay, both Athens and the early American period should serve as examples of citizens claiming freedom for themselves, while enslaving others.

2. Amy Gutman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 16.

3. In this sense, the principle of mutual interaction resembles the claim by Aristotle that the virtue of living as a democratic citizen in a republic is that one has a knowledge of ruling free persons from both the perspective of ruler and ruled. However, this principle differs from Aristotle in that one learns to rule, by ruling while ruled, instead of simply by being ruled. See Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 91-92. For an even different, but connected principle (of interaction), see, also, John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).

4. Camillo Grazzini, “Cosmic Education at the Elementary Level and the Role of the Materials,” *The NAMTA Journal* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 55.

5. Maria Montessori, “Education and Democracy,” *The Child, Society, and the World: Unpublished Speeches and Writings*, trans. Caroline Juler and Heather Yesson (Oxford: CLIO Press, 1989), 101.

6. *Ibid.*, 104.

7. See, for example, Elizabeth A. Kelly, “Education, Democracy, and Public Knowledge” (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995).

7. Mussolini even became the President of the Montessori Society of Italy. See Elizabeth G. Hainstock, *The Essential Montessori* (New York: Plume, 1986), 16.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

10. Standing notes that Montessori herself realized that schools dedicated to developing a free personality could not survive under totalitarian rule. See E.M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 85.
11. William Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori* (London: George G. Harrap, 1914), 183, 195. He states, "there is none of Montessori's principles which is not to be found in more adequate form in Rousseau," 185.
12. *Ibid.*, 46. Rousseau also shared with Montessori the biological foundations of individual human nature.
13. *Ibid.*, 187, 195.
14. *Ibid.*, 41-42, 184-5.
15. Maria Montessori, "The Two Natures of the Child," Second Lecture of the 19th International Montessori Training Course held in London, 1933, *AMI Communications*, 4 (1995), 8. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 183.
16. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 28-29, 41, 228.
17. Emile, ii, 90; Boyd, 54, 234.
18. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 186, 213, 219.
19. *Ibid.*, 183.
20. *Ibid.*, 24-6, 228, 247-8.
21. Emile, ii., 97,
22. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 44-46, 50-52, 234.
23. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 185.
24. Gutman, *Democratic Education*, 39. Political scientists are primarily concerned with political socialization and frequently subordinate education under unconscious social reproduction, 15.
25. *Ibid.*, 44.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 45.
28. Gutman, *Democratic Education*, 93. See, also, Ernest L. Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education In America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).
29. Gutman, *Democratic Education*, 93.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 89.
32. *Ibid.*, 94.
33. Paula Polk Lillard, *Montessori Today* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 153.
34. David Kahn, "Montessori Adolescent Education: Toward An Emerging Framework," *The NAMTA Journal* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1993), 57.
35. David Kahn, "Unifying the Urban Contribution: Moving Toward Erdkinder," *The NAMTA Journal* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 24.
36. Larry Schaefer, "To Dance with the Adolescent," *The NAMTA Journal* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 12.
37. John Long, "Survey of Montessori Adolescent Programs: Interpretive Commentary," *The NAMTA Journal Special Report* (July 1994), 44.
38. Kahn, "Montessori Adolescent Education: Toward an Emerging Framework," 62.
39. *Ibid.*, 64. Lawrence Schaefer, founder of the Lake Country School, supports this claim by stating that adolescents "need to build community." See "A Montessori Vision of Adolescence," *The NAMTA Journal* 18, no. 3 (Fall-Winter 1986), 7. This is confirmed by John Long in his "Survey of Montessori Adolescent Programs," where he notes that adolescents who make the transition from a Montessori School to a public high school, "missed the Montessori community of peers and adults." See Long, 18.
40. Kahn, "Montessori Adolescent Education," 67.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 68.
43. Boyd, *From Locke To Montessori*, 188.