

# Montessori schools: children do what they want, and learn quickly

by Steve Gilbert

The building is small both in height and width. The halls crowd in on you when you enter. But as you watch the children arriving, being escorted in by their parents, you are aware that this is no ordinary school.

It is in fact, a Montessori school. Such institutions, are world wide in nature, the brain-child of one educational rebel by the name of Madame Maria Montessori.

Madame Montessori began her career as a teacher in the late 19th century. By profession, she was a physician, a graduate of the University of Rome. This brought her into contact with some mentally retarded children who were considered uneducable. Trying out her own method of instruction on them, she met with great success. They performed as well on examinations as did a group of normal children.

Through this success and through her work with the children of the lower classes, Madame Montessori formulated a new, quite distinct educational system based on the psychological tendencies of man.

She toured North America in the early part of this century lecturing on this system, but, although Montessori schools had sprung up rapidly throughout western Europe, it was 1950 before they were successful (in Washington D.C.) on this continent.

Helma Trass, whom I interviewed last week, introduced Montessori to Toronto in 1961. Since that time two schools have developed in our city.

Mrs. Trass informed me that the main objective of these schools was to prepare a child for life, by allowing him to educate himself in the environment of the classroom. In the junior school (Casa de Bambini) children of ages 2 1/4 to 6 learn the basic fundamentals: tying shoes, spelling, adding, all through the use of various props in the classroom quite similar to those used by kindergarten teachers in normal schools. Thus, the child becomes self-sufficient through personal experiment and achievement.

Montessori teachers are not specialists in any particular subject. University degrees are not compulsory but it's preferable that they have a number of years of experience. Young teachers are accepted, however, as I discovered when an attractive, mini-skirted English girl interrupted my interview to speak with Mrs. Trass. All teachers must take a course at the Montessori Teacher's College in Washington or the one in London. Some are also selected to take advanced courses in Bergamo, Italy. The staff is about 95 female and mostly of English origin.

Teachers do very little actual instructing. Rather they aid students by answering any questions that might occur as a result of a

child's individual investigations. Naturally this necessitates at least a general knowledge of all disciplines on the part of the teacher.

Mrs. Trass informed me that because the standards are high, the Montessori system has encountered certain teacher recruitment problems in the last few years. However, programmes sponsoring teachers taking Montessori courses have been introduced in an attempt to alleviate these difficulties.

Students, in contrast to their teachers, are not subject to such high standards. They learn at their own rate, through the maximum utilization of their senses. There are therefore no real lagers or slowpokes in the system.

Children are accepted into the Casa as long as they are toilet trained and do not unnecessarily disturb the environment of the classroom. There is no religious preference exercised. Tuition, however, is the stumbling block for many parents. In round figures it costs \$500 for a child to attend the junior school on a half day basis and \$750 for a full day student.

When I asked Mrs. Trass if the children had any difficulty with admission to ordinary schools, she answered by way of an example. Apparently, the parents of a Montessori student in Toronto's junior school had decided to transfer him to an ordinary public school, most probably because of monetary reasons. The public school, however, refused to accept him till the following year. They had deemed it necessary (due to his high level of knowledge) to put the student in grade three (yet) since he was only four years old they had felt personality conflicts might result with other students. This child had attended Montessori for only 2 1/2 years.

Though many Montessori students run into problems such as those of the boy just mentioned, most of them perform above average on achievement tests and are eventually able to enter the regular school system.

The future of Montessori schools in Canada seems uncertain. At present they are undergoing limited expansion. Financial problems are always ominous. Although their teachers receive the same salary as those in regular elementary schools, I got the impression that the recruitment problem is becoming acute. This plus the absence of Government grants (since Montessori is an international organization) hampers progress.

However, the devotion of the teachers is admirable. One of them, Mrs. Audrey Sillick by name, told me that she had been continually frustrated teaching in the regular school system, but that she had found new hope in Montessori and wanted to devote her life to it. This sort of attitude, will no doubt make this free school a dominant influence in the future of many educational systems.

# Rochdale flops

by Frank R. Rob

Certainly you've heard of the place. It's been in all the best newscasts, and all the most avant-garde journals. It's even the 'in' thing at cocktail parties among professors' wives.

But it doesn't work.

Somebody moved the old Rochdale office out of its cubby-hole on Huron Street, and put them on Bloor. Rochdale went from a fine hangout to a sleazy chrome boutique in one giant step.

The idea of Rochdale grew out of the lack of housing for students in the city. Interested parties set up co-operative residences in houses, and the idea of communal living flourished.

But then the idea grew, and became a concept whereby those in the co-ops decided they could educate themselves. So they set up their own college, and called it Rochdale for lack of a better name, and they had done a good thing in small houses.

But then they decided they should expand, and encourage others to 'cast off the shackles of university', and join them.

They touched a soft spot in the stone hearts of the right financial moguls, and they financed a high-rise co-op, just off the U. of T. campus.

Then they opened this fall, and things really got moving. They drew from every weird little corner of society as these are not admission restricting at all, and the present resident student population consists of a real mixed bag of draft-dodgers, high-school dropouts, and professors with long hair and beards. In fact, Joe McCarthy would have had a ball.

But with the volume came the coldness of a new institution, and this is crushing all creativity in favor of a more uniform and mediocre output of slop.

Even the leaders, those who pass themselves off as 'resource people', are at heart becoming cold and calculating in their creative endeavours.

One of the many chiefs, Dennis Lee, originally liked the idea of a non-accredited college, but it's gotten out of hand, even for him.

The college itself is run entirely by the inhabitants, and is best known not for its creative output, but for its wild parties that seem somehow to be immune to legal intervention.

There are still a few hard-core intellectual spirits about, but they can't keep pace with the hedonists.

The college has a registrar and a treasurer, and even some other people in authority, but it's a pure commune, and it's a real wild place to live.

The idea of a co-op has been squashed by the residence fees, and the thought of creative freedom has been put aside in favor of mass participation.

The college gets good press through the C.B.C. and Time Magazine, but for what it does, it deserves nothing more than extinction.

Those who go there now as full-time students will find themselves out in the cold in a couple of years when the fun wears off.

A pity that such talent and youth is dying for no good cause.

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