

Maria Montessori and Flow Theory:

The role of subjective experience in
developmental processes

OUTLINE OF TALK

Introduction: *Spirito affine*

- A. FOUNDATION IN CHILDHOOD
- B. EXPERIENCE AT THE CENTER
- C. SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

Final thoughts: *Beauty, nature, and spirit*

INTRODUCTION

- Background: Finding flow in music
- Csikszentmihalyi and the University of Chicago
- Dissertation question: How do you create a family context for flow?
 - I was a kindred spirit without knowing it!

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

- First contact with Montessori education . . .

ACADEMY OF MOVEMENT AND MUSIC KINDER A.R.T.S

Montessori Environment

Child's Name Casey Rathunde

Date March, 1988

Casey has also worked in our practical life area. She spent a long period of time one day cleaning up a water spill by using an eye dropper. She was intrigued by her unique solution (children usually use a towel to wipe up a spill) and by her ability to accomplish her goal (she kept at it very patiently until all the water was back in the bottle).

Self-direction and concentration were left undisturbed

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

A first connection between Montessori education and flow theory:

A view of human nature that puts the child first

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

- “Man seems to have two embryonic periods. One is prenatal, like that of the animals; the other is postnatal and only man has this. The prolonged infancy of man separates him entirely from the animals.”

- *The absorbent mind*

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

“By changing the centre from the adult -- and adult values -- to the child and his values, we should change the whole path of civilization”

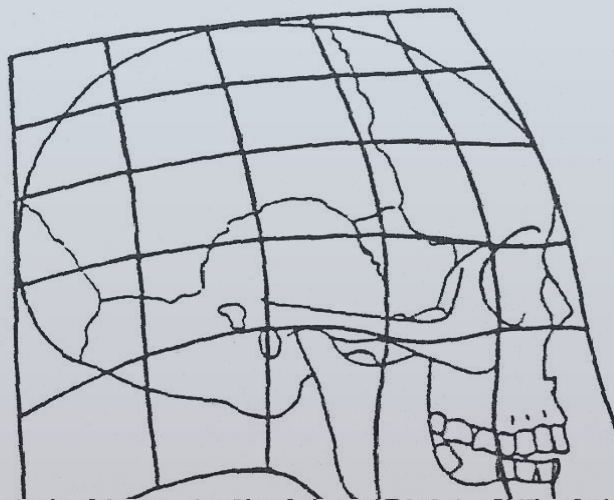
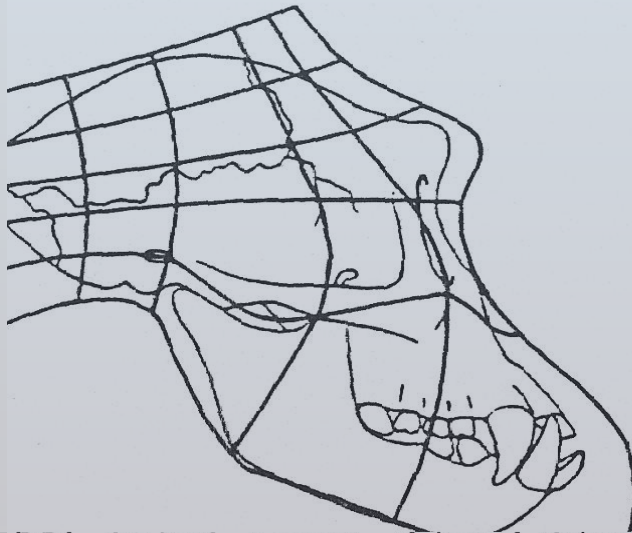
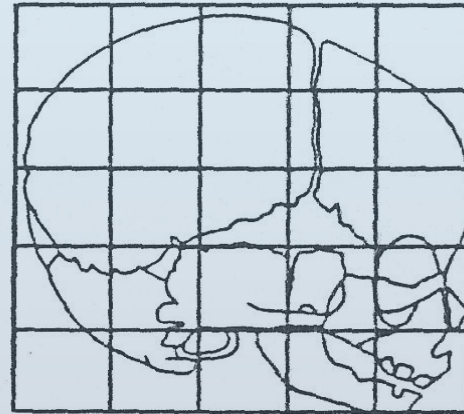
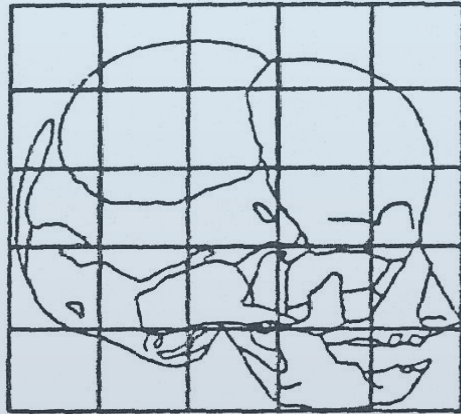
“The highest honor and the deepest gratitude you can pay me is to turn your attention from me in the direction in which I am pointing -- to The Child.”

- Maria Montessori: Her life and work

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

- Foundation of flow in *neoteny* (from Greek neos, "young" and teínein, "to extend")
- In developmental biology: the slowing down and lengthening of the developmental phases, *thus extending childlike characteristics into adulthood*

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD



FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

- Long periods of dependence and protection allow exploration, playfulness, flexibility, trust, and so on
- *Evolution prepares us for intrinsically motivated concentration and flow*
- These key qualities of the child need protection so we can “die young as late as possible”

FOUNDATION: THE CHILD

- Maria Montessori's call to put the child first was revolutionary
- Social policy would be radically altered if this point of view was adopted
 - The U.S. is slow to this position, but there is hope (I think) because of new brain research

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

- *A second connection* between Montessori education and flow theory:

Both place *deep concentration and flow* at the heart of education and lifelong development

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

- Montessori's description of concentration anticipates the description of flow

“The paths the child follows in the active construction of his individuality are indeed identical with those followed by the genius. His characteristics are absorbed attention, a profound concentration which isolates him from all the stimuli of his environment.”

- *Spontaneous activity in education*

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

- Montessori saw this type of experience as central to lifelong and exceptional adult development

“It is only in persons of exceptional power ... that this love of work persists as an irresistible impulse ... for example the artists, discoverers, explorers, reformers ... who, like children, have by their heroic effort rediscovered the instinct of the species.”

- Maria Montessori: Her life and work

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

Flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi):

- complete involvement
- clear feedback
- confident skills can meet challenges
- action and awareness merge in the moment
- ego disappears
- little awareness of time passing
- intrinsically motivated

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

- Flow is important for creativity and development

“Well, you're right in the work. You lose your sense of time ...The idea is to be so saturated with it that there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're making meaning and dismantling meaning, and remaking it ... you have feeling that there's no other way of saying what you're saying.”

- interview with poet Mark Strand

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

These states enhance lifelong development because the person:

- Has better focus and more energy
- Can free themselves from boredom and anxiety
- Is self-directed to find new challenges and build new skills in order to find flow again

EXPERIENCE AT CENTER

- Both perspectives value *engagement over performance to an external standard*
- Because...if a student fully engaged and intrinsically motivated, their best performance will result
- A great deal of EVIDENCE supports this view

... but it is often ignored

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

- *A third connection* between Montessori education and flow theory:

The qualities of a context (school and family) that socializes this style of engagement

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

5 Montessori insights that anticipated current ideas

1. The connection between body and mind (Anticipates the idea of *embodiment*)

“More than in any other system of education, [Montessori’s] whole method is based on a deep understanding of the relationship between these two elements -- mind and body.” - *E.M. Standing*

- Abstract thinking is grounded in the body and senses

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

2. The importance of freedom *and* discipline
(Anticipates the idea of *authoritative contexts*)

“On this question of liberty . . . You must not imagine that liberty is something without rule or law”

- *Maria Montessori: Her life and work*

- Such an environment facilitated a child's spontaneous concentration

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

3. The right challenges at the right time
(Anticipates *developmentally appropriate practice*)

"I have found that in his development, the child passes through certain phases, each of which has its own particular needs." - *Four Planes of Education*

- Flow requires the right skill / challenge balance

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

4. The right amount (“Golden Mean”) of instruction
(Anticipates the idea of *guided participation*)

“The general rule is that the teacher should not intervene when she finds the child engaged in some spontaneous activity which is orderly and creative.”
- E.M. Standing

- A good teacher is not the center of attention

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

5. A teacher eliminates distraction and protects a child's intrinsically motivated focus
(Anticipates the idea of an *autotelic* or *flow* context)

"Praise, help, or even a look, may be enough to interrupt him ... The great principle which brings success to the teacher is this: as soon as concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist."

- *The Absorbent Mind*

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

Flow theory and educational/developmental research support key “Montessorian” views on school contexts

- 2-year study comparing 5 Montessori schools to 6 demographically matched traditional schools

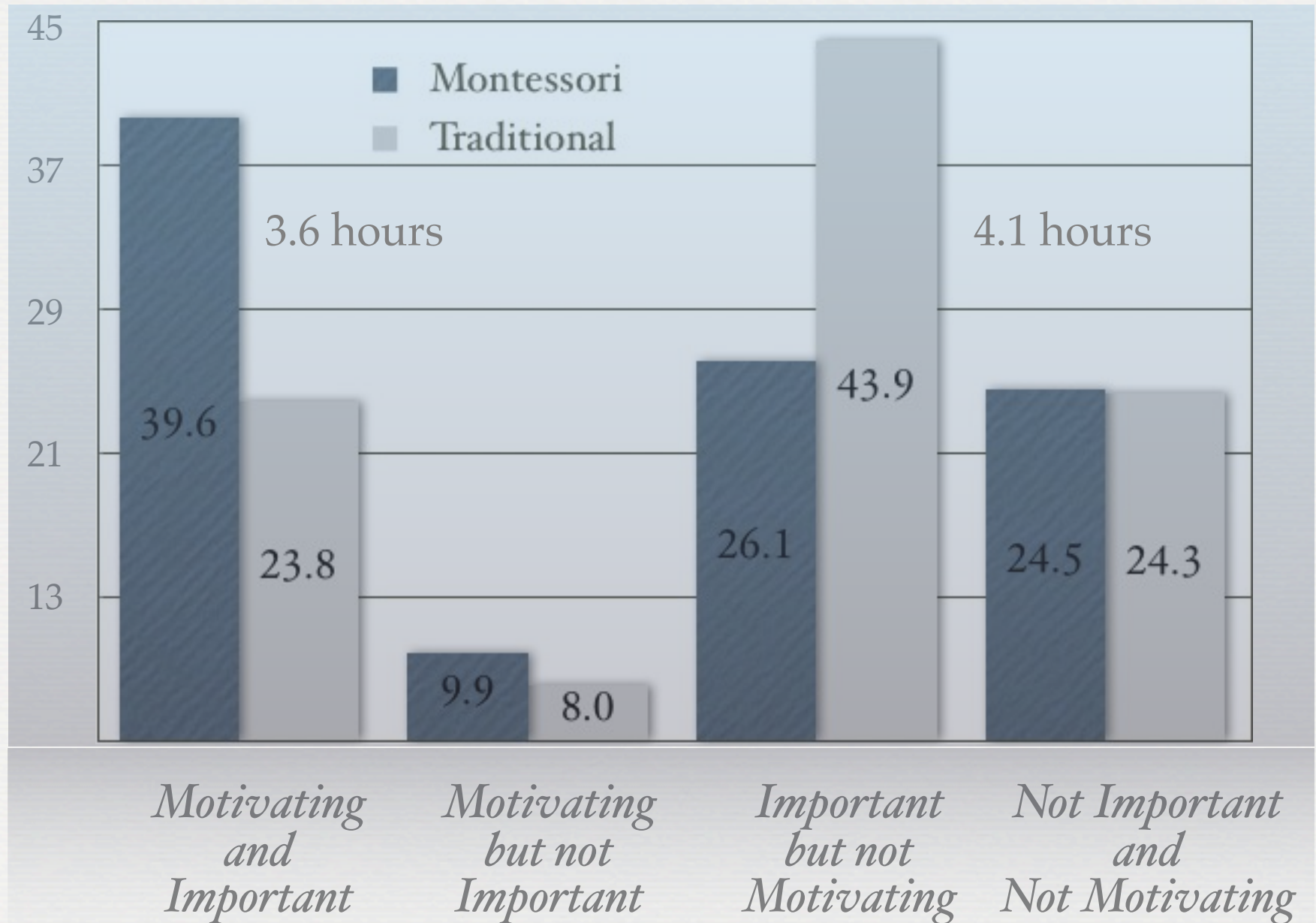
This is one of the most interesting findings . . .

Montessori vs. Traditional Schools

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SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

- What kind of student emerges from these positive school (and family) contexts?

Maria Montessori thought that the *recurrence of deep concentration* resulted in the **normalized child** who was capable of sustaining concentration and development

- A child was “normalized” because this was the natural disposition of the human organism

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

- Flow theory has used two different concepts to describe the person capable of sustaining flow and development:

Normalized
child

=

Complex person
Autotelic person

SUMMARY

- 3 strong connections between Montessori education and flow theory
- Foundation of intrinsic motivation in the evolution-based qualities of the child
- Placing deep concentration and flow at the center of education and lifelong development
- Creating a context for concentration and flow that can socialize a more self-directed child

BEAUTY, NATURE, SPIRIT

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Maria Montessori was also ahead of her time in understanding the importance of beauty and nature

There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees . . . in a real forest. Something emanates from those trees which speaks to the soul, something no book, no museum is capable of giving.



BEAUTY, NATURE, SPIRIT

FINAL THOUGHTS

"We must speak to [the student's] soul. . . . We must give him grandeur."

"It is necessary to make use of this psychological state, which permits the viewing of things in their entirety, and to let [the student] note that everything in the universe is interrelated"

- From childhood to adolescence

BEAUTY, NATURE, SPIRIT

FINAL THOUGHTS

Very little has been done yet in educational or developmental research to examine these ideas

- In these times when:
 - Many schools impose a disembodied mind
 - Students are exposed to enormous cynicism

*Montessori's insights about beauty and nature
are important for a student's spirit*