

Growing up Montessori-style

Duhovka explores a method in which pupils lead the learning process

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A wealth of educational opportunities and options exist for parents with student-age children in Prague. One of the newest to the city, but certainly not a new concept, is a Montessori education.

In 1897, Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, began to establish her unique approach to education, developing her own philosophy and methods after attending courses in pedagogy at the University of Rome and reading educational theory of the previous two centuries. In 1907, she opened her first classroom in a tenement building in Rome. From there, her educational methods spread to the United States in 1911 and beyond. Today, Montessori education is practiced in approximately 20,000 schools worldwide. One of them, the Duhovka Group, opened its doors in Prague as a preschool in 2008. From there, founders Ivana and Tomáš Janeček expanded their Montessori-style schools to a second preschool in Malá Strana, as well as absorbing primary school Škola Hrou in 2010, which already had a tradition of applying alternative teaching methods, and opening two new classes in 2011 and 2012. The eight-year Duhovka High School opened its first Czech-English class in Prague 6 and another Montessori class accepted new pupils in September 2011 in Prague 4.

Judy Luman, who serves as the director of the Elementary Montessori Education Teacher Program for Duhovka Group's elementary school, and is a Montessori methodologist, explains that a Montessori education, though it has traditions of its own, is anything but traditional.

"A Montessori school is a multi-age classroom," she says. "So, here at Duhovka Montessori, we have three classrooms for first-, second- and third-graders, and we have two classrooms that are for first- and second-graders this year. We have two teachers



The parameters are set by their teachers, but students at Montessori schools have the freedom to choose their own activities. COURTESY PHOTO



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Classes often work from concrete experience to abstract comprehension, but great attention is given to the differences in children's needs and challenges.

one English teacher and one Czech teacher. They have equal responsibilities; they are co-teachers. The children work cooperatively in small groups, individually, and in large groups, and they teach each other. We present a program that's not just two teachers with a classroom of children, it's 20 teachers within the environment. You see younger children helping older children and vice versa; it depends on what their strengths are."

Luman explains that a Montessori education diverges from the traditional classroom and planned lesson format. Instead, she explains, teachers are urged to meet their students at their individual levels, rather than teaching the class as a whole and expecting all of the students to meet the level set by the instructor. "We meet them where they are; we don't move as a whole class and leave people behind," she explains. "So we have certain skills and outputs: the Czech outputs that we have to meet, so we do meet those, but also where a child needs extra support, we're there to support them. And if they're just zooming forward or ahead, we can keep moving them beyond

what would be the traditional expectation for that grade level."

Because the students have the freedom of choice to work on activities or concepts as they see fit, Luman explains, Montessori schools see a good amount of movement of students as they shift from one activity to another, the parameters of which have been set out for the teachers. The teachers are constantly giving lessons to all the children, individually or in groups, and then the students go back to that work and practice until they show mastery in that specific concept or lesson. Luman points to the various intriguing materials used in Montessori classrooms, organized in a progressive manner, as a key to learning. Any given lesson becomes progressively more and more abstract as it is taught more in-depth. Quantities, for example, are introduced through individual beads that are then joined together into rows, squares and cubes, and only later are the tangible materials paired with written numbers. This, she says, gives children a concrete experience to which they can join their

conceptual understanding of a lesson. In an effort to deepen learning further, Montessori-style schools emphasize learning using as many senses as possible. In one classroom, a young pupil sits and traces printed letters made of sandpaper with his fingers, while he makes the letters' sounds out loud.

Though children are encouraged to explain concepts to one another, thus deepening their own understanding of a concept, in a Montessori-style education the teacher is crucial. He or she is responsible for carefully and closely monitoring and observing each given student, taking note of their individual progress and deficiencies and making sure each student is receiving the practice needed. This necessity for highly aware and capable teachers is part of the reason why Luman, after working as a Montessori teacher herself and putting her own children through Montessori schools, now works to train new teachers in the Montessori style.

"Teachers have to keep records in all areas of each child, so it's not just a class picture," she explains. "We have about

18 kids in each class right now and [teachers] work together, do a lot of observation, documentation, so that you can see when a child's ready to move forward. Also, you sit with them and they will explain the work to you, and the greatest way to see if they've mastered something is if they're explaining it to another student. So we step back and we can watch them work with other children and when we see that they've mastered it it's time to move them to the next step."

Luman says it is also equally as important to train the students' parents in a Montessori-style education, not only to familiarize them with the concepts and learning style, but also so they may integrate some lessons into their children's home life, as well. A Montessori-style education emphasizes a whole-person philosophy, not just a purely academic education. Emphasis is also given on practical life, teaching students how to operate in life; preschool children are taught how to clean their own dishes, so that as they grow through life they become self-sufficient. Luman says that some parents enjoy the concept of

a Montessori education so much that they decide to sign up for her teacher training program, and many even end up completely changing their professions.

One such parent is Joanna Šafařík, whose two children attend Duhovka Group's schools. After she started training in the summer as an elementary trainee, Šafařík says that she was sure Montessori was the way she wanted to educate her own children. She says she had no concerns about her children being able to transition into a non-Montessori school like a higher-education college or university.

"Before I knew about Montessori, the more research I did actually felt very comfortable with the system itself, because college is not only sitting down, test-taking, and lecturing. There's an aspect of that in college, but also research, and a lot of do-it-yourself, and work with groups, and you do that in undergrad and also in graduate school," Šafařík says. "So I think a Montessori kid can have a much better chance to succeed in college."