

A parent's thoughts on her daughter's Montessori education

“Montessori students really do learn the essentials ...and, in my opinion, they learn so much more. It isn't really just about what students learn but the *environment within which* they learn.”

Dr. Angela Young

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My daughter started her first semester of high school a few weeks ago. What an exciting time for both of us. She graduated from the Meher Montessori Middle School after 8 years at Meher. I've always been deeply concerned and careful about her school experience, as I'm sure you are concerned about your child's experience too.

One of the big questions raised from time to time was about how the transition to a more traditional school would be for her. Will she adapt? Succeed? Will her experiences prepare her for high school and beyond?

Sure, I had the usual concern about the ease with which she would transition to a larger environment with grades, structured work assignments, tests, and teachers who may presume students "know the deal." Obviously I always came back to the same conclusion. My daughter was experiencing learning that transcended school environments and teaching practices, she was developing the ability to succeed...anywhere.

Now, I'm more certain than ever that I chose correctly for my daughter. Here's why:

As a college professor I see instructors striving for integration of concepts across subjects, hands-on learning, practice, and exploration. Exactly what my daughter was getting since the first year at Meher. Teachers, including me, sought ways to motivate students to question, converse, show a desire to learn, not just earn a grade. Anyone can - with painfully detailed instructions - create only what is asked of them. The world does not need that. The world needs creative, confident, motivated problem solvers.

High schools and even some middle schools are creating programs that offer holistic learning experiences. It's known well and widely that students who engage in and experience subjects learn more and can apply what they've learned. Innovative learning programs are striving to be what Montessori always was.

Looking back on my daughter's experiences, I don't know why I was worried about adaptation. Through my daughter's years at Meher, I shared many experiences. I went to Pathfinder Ranch and watched children quickly learn the rules - and there were several. Camp Surf brought new instructors, rules and requirements, and again, within a day, it was as if we'd been there for years. I saw my daughter work through each new semester, subject, teacher and project with an inquiring and open mind. It has been very similar in high school. My daughter saw the process, teachers, policies, and social norms and again, a new world became home. I think adaptation is a part of the human experience but when it is a part of the learning experience, students become skilled at adaptation itself.

At Meher, my daughter found her voice and developed her ability to express it. It is not just the Montessori curriculum and tools that helped her to do that. It was, I believe, the entire Meher learning environment and community. At Meher, my daughter identified her process of learning - what works for her. She learned her interests. She learned to expect a sense of community. She learned to concentrate and complete work. She had time to spend time on concepts she needed more work on and to advance and explore those things at which she was quickly proficient - without stigma

either way. She developed confidence. Montessori students really do learn the essential math, English, science, history and other basic subjects needed to excel in high school and beyond. And, in my opinion, they learn so much more. It isn't really just about what students learn but the environment within which they learn.

The misconceptions about a Montessori education are many and pressure can be daunting. Our dearest treasures are held in the very hearts of our children so, of course, decisions that affect their futures are overwhelming. I wish I had relaxed a bit, trusted what I knew deep inside, and even more thoroughly enjoyed those elementary and middle school years. They go by so quickly. Now I know, more certainly than before, that my daughter experienced wonderful and productive early school years in a place where she was free to become herself.

Enjoy this school year and thank you Meher Montessori teachers, dedicated staff, students and parents, for giving me and my daughter community, knowledge and experiences that will provide a powerful foundation for her success and happiness.

Dr. Angela Young is Professor and Associate Dean at the College of Business & Economics, California State University, Los Angeles. Her daughter, Alys Hurlic, was a Meher Montessori student from first to eighth year and is now a happy and successful high school student at Ramona Convent Secondary School. She aspires to become a wildlife biologist. Her Mother hopes she can text from the rainforest!