

Connecting Montessori Practice and Entrepreneurship

By Janet Bagby, PhD, and Tracey Sulak, PhD

Currently there are about 7.6 million businesses in the United States, a number estimated to grow to 7.9 million by 2020, fueled by entrepreneurship (IBISWorld, 2015; Bansal, 2012). How does one instill entrepreneurial values in today's young students? According to Lamas (2015), teaching students to think and/or behave differently is one step. Van der Kuip and Verheul (2004) suggest that evaluating the Montessori method of education could identify key factors that can be implemented in entrepreneurial education.

Some of today's most creative innovators and entrepreneurs began their education in Montessori schools (Lamas, 2015). For example, Larry Page and Sergey Brin of Google were Montessori-educated (Hicks, 2014). In a 2004 interview with Barbara Walters, Page said that the Montessori environment assisted him in "being self-motivated, questioning what's going on in the world, doing things a little bit differently" (Sanford, 2014). After interviewing a large number of entrepreneurs, Gregersen (2011) reported that many were influenced by Montessori education.

While personal characteristics might predispose someone to entrepreneurship, it is important to recognize the influence education has on students' future intentions (Soomro & Shah, 2015). Tolerating ambiguity and possessing high self-efficacy often predispose individuals to entrepreneurship, and the Montessori environment supports development in both areas (Segal, Borgia & Schoenfeld, 2005). For example, students in Montessori classrooms develop increased self-efficacy for academic work because the curriculum is paced to match the student. Rather than asking students to complete unfamiliar tasks, Montessori teachers model the process and often use didactic materials to support instruction. The cycle of setting goals, working to achieve these goals, and then setting higher goals has been linked to higher self-efficacy; students gain a positive view of success in the future (Mitchell & Shepherd, 2010).

However, research indicates that entrepreneurship education should be taught in a realistic environment

that promotes active learning and encourages reflective processes in daily learning (Kassean, Vanevenhoven, Liguori & Winkel, 2015). At AMS-accredited Chiaravalle Montessori School, in Evanston, IL, head of school Robyn McCloud-Springer describes their curriculum as "Modern Montessori," in which they apply "traditional Montessori to our current lives and global community" and prepare "our students for innovative and entrepreneurial professions." Chiaravalle altered the traditional Montessori curriculum, opting, as McCloud-Springer stated, "to reduce specialist classes such as formal art and drama and reallocate a portion of those faculty hours to facilitating student-driven work. When we allow students to take their inspiration and translate it into making something tangible, they are practicing valuable innovation."

Montessori schools may not strike outsiders as the best place for entrepreneurial education, but when one considers soft skills, such as development of self-efficacy, and executive function skills, such as organization, then the relationship between Montessori and entrepreneurialism becomes more apparent. As Maria Montessori (1946, p. 69) says, "We must help the child to act for himself, will for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit."

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