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How creative learning could benefit Southeast Asia's children

By: Euan Black - POSTED ON: October 3, 2016

The Montessori approach to education is well placed to serve growing regional demand for creative thinking, yet Southeast Asia's devotion to grades and testing is proving difficult to shake



Kindergarten students grab their pencils during school openings at the Mayfield Montessori school in Quezon City, Philippines.
Photo: EPA/MIKE ALQUINTO

A new approach to education

In 1896, Maria Montessori defied social convention to become the first Italian woman to graduate with a degree in medicine. While a significant milestone, her legacy would ultimately centre upon something else entirely: her revolutionary contribution to the study of teaching.

Montessori challenged the prevailing dictatorial approach to education that placed the teacher at the centre of the classroom, arguing that learning should instead be led by the child. In 1909, she consolidated her methods and philosophies into a book, which has since inspired countless teachers dissatisfied with conventional teaching principles.

On a recent visit to Phnom Penh Montessori International School's (PPMI)'s campus in the northwest of Cambodia's capital, children of varying ages could be seen intently concentrating on diverse tasks while teachers monitored from a distance. PPMI's principal, Chamroeun Koun, explained that teachers at the school are expected to act as an "observer, record-keeper and facilitator" and that multi-age classrooms were used to better prepare children for integration into society.

Montessori believed that children were active learners and needed to acquire specific skills at certain stages of their cognitive development. As a result, Montessori classrooms are comprised of materials specifically designed to meet a child's developmental as well as individual needs, such as numbers and letters made from sandpaper that children are encouraged to trace over using their finger, which simultaneously improves their literacy and fine motor skills.



(<https://goo.gl/Hlb3tn>).

Believing that promoting children's innate spirit of discovery would not only yield the best developmental results but also instil within them a lifelong desire for learning, Montessori further reasoned that children should be permitted to explore their classrooms freely.

Renowned innovators such as Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the brains behind Google, have credited their success to the freedom given to them in their early Montessori education. "We both went to [a] Montessori school, and I think it was part of that training of not following rules and orders, and being self-motivated, questioning what's going on in the world, doing things a little bit differently," Brin said during an interview on ABC.

Likewise, a 2006 comparative study published in *Science* magazine found that Montessori students develop into "more mature, creative and socially adept children" than those educated through traditional methods.

Preparing children for the future

The enhanced creativity and interpersonal skills developed by the Montessori method could make the system better suited to the demands of the future economy given that, according to a report earlier this year by the World Economic Forum, increasing automation means that complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity will be the three most sought after workplace skills in 2020.

In a 2014 report titled *Innovative Asia: Advancing the Knowledge-Based Economy*, the Asian Development Bank underscored the need for some Asean nations to diversify their economic outlook (<https://sea-globe.com/asean-out-of-school-children/>). It stated that “[e]merging economies will, however, find it impossible to continue their success under the same growth models used so effectively over the past few decades, as technology accelerates and changes the ways countries produce and trade”.

Speaking to *Southeast Asia Globe* last October, Anne Rose Dingemans, the managing director in Cambodia for online jobs portal Everjobs, said that firms routinely complained that graduates lacked the skills their businesses required. “Soft skills like innovative and critical thinking as well as problem solving are the most commonly mentioned,” she said.

Thailand openly acknowledged the ineffectiveness of its national education system when it passed an education reform act in 1999 that committed the country to a complete overhaul of its teaching methods. Education would no longer be based upon rote learning but “student-centred learning”. Inevitably, such an alien philosophy did not immediately take root among educators in Thailand, with many finding it almost impossible to adopt the methods as no formal training was initially provided.

Kannekar Butt, president of the Montessori Association of Thailand (MAT), attempted to mitigate the effects of the absence of teacher training. Starting out with a pilot project that introduced the Montessori method to six schools in the central Thai city of Nakhon Pathom in 2004, Butt went on to help establish the MAT in April 2006, opening up 65 Montessori classrooms the following year for children aged three to six years.

“There are now Montessori schools in most areas of the country, particularly in areas with expatriate residents,” stated John Mood, director of Montessori House Phuket International School. Mood explained that this is in part thanks to Thailand’s Ministry of Education, which has “proven sufficiently flexible to give licences to Montessori schools and during assessments has [shown] an understanding of the different approach to education provided by Montessori schools”.

Mounting pressure to find a solution to decreasing enrolment numbers and declining teaching standards in Thailand’s rural state schools provided the impetus for the government’s initial decision to embrace Montessori schooling, according to Butt.

“As schools needed to consolidate students from... grade[s] with dwindling numbers into multi-age classrooms covering various grades, the Montessori methodology was presented as a viable method for teaching groups of children of different ages,” she said.

Resistance

Unfortunately, said Koun, Cambodia's Ministry of Education has not been as open to educational reform as its counterpart in Thailand, with government funding for such ventures not forthcoming. Koun lamented the Cambodian ministry's difficulty in grasping the philosophies at the heart of the Montessori method, citing a recent visit from a ministry official who insisted the school implement lesson plans despite having been briefed on the school's commitment to Montessori principles.

However, Koun explained, Cambodia needs more than governmental reform if it is to reap the benefits of Montessori schooling. "It has to start with the parents... they must understand what Montessori education is all about. Every day [they demand] a schedule, a lesson plan, a sequence, things like that, and it is not possible."

Frustration at parents' inability to accept the less-structured elements of Montessori schooling appears to be a common complaint among Montessori schools across Southeast Asia.

Monica Lim, principal of the Brainy Child Montessori School in Singapore, described how her school felt compelled to adapt their methods due to pressure from students' parents. "If we don't use worksheets at all, then the parents here don't think their children will be ready for Primary 1," she said.

Resistance to Montessori principles is prevalent in Singapore, where the influence of Confucianism, with its emphasis on hard work, perseverance and the submission of individuality to harmonious social relationships, is more keenly felt. As a result, most parents were brought up to believe that school grades determine future success. While parents have proven resistant to change, the Singaporean government has openly acknowledged the need to reform its approach to education.

"The old formulae for success are unlikely to prepare our young for the new circumstances and new problems they will face... But we must ensure that our young can think for themselves," said Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1997 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' speech. Since then, Singapore has been slowly moving away from an emphasis on grades and testing.

In a bid to develop a more holistic approach to education, the government introduced a physical education syllabus in 2014 that committed 10-20% of curriculum time in primary and secondary schools to outdoor education. More recently, it announced its intention to implement a compulsory five-day outdoor activities camp for 14-16 year olds in 2020.

Despite this shift towards a more holistic education system, the Singaporean government "doesn't recognise the Montessori method", according to Lim. And this absence of state recognition exacerbates one of the Montessori community's major challenges: inconsistent standards.

"Parents should be sceptical"

Without a trademark restricting the use of the name Montessori to schools that adhere to a strict set of criteria, sending a child to a self-proclaimed Montessori school may not mean they receive a Montessori education.

“Parents should be sceptical of schools based on the quality of services they expect for their child and cannot assume that a school that claims to use Montessori methods is actually adhering to all the principles and practices,” said Butt.

In lieu of one predominant accreditation body, Angeline Lillard, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and author of *Montessori: The Science behind the Genius*, urged interested parents to research the Montessori method and interrogate schools’ credentials. “[T]hey can look at what organisations have certified the school, and where and how the teachers were trained. They can also look at whether the school has a complete set of Montessori materials and whether the children are concentrating deeply as they use the materials.”

In an authentic Montessori classroom, she added, parents should expect to see “all children, including the youngest ones, working independently or in small groups by choice, and happily”.

“There will always be a debate about what the purpose of early years education is: is it childcare to enable parents to contribute to the economy, is it preparation for school, or is it a distinct phase which provides a holistic learning environment that values children [and] creates independent, articulate, happy children who will thrive and therefore excel in school and contribute to the economy?” said Celia Greenway, director of education at the University of Birmingham, UK.

The success of the Finnish education system, lauded for its employment of innovative teaching methods and consistently placed at the top of world education rankings, adds weight to the latter theory. In Finland, children do not receive any formal academic training until they are seven, homework is minimal and play is encouraged.

Finland’s success suggests that many Southeast Asian nations should consider radically changing their teaching methods to maximise competitiveness in the years ahead, and the Singaporean and Thai governments’ openness to progressive teaching methods are to be encouraged.

As Maria Montessori herself declared: “An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live.”

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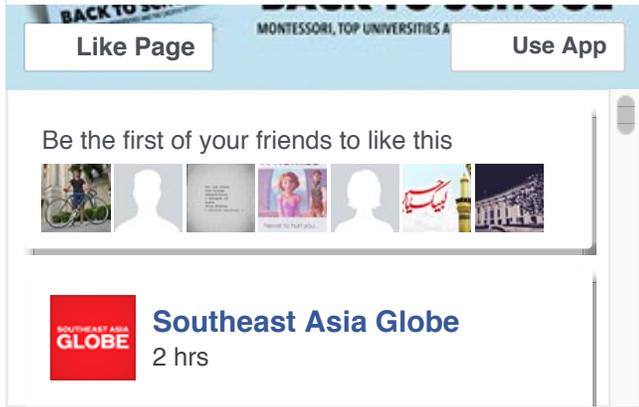


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