



# *A Brief Introduction to Montessori in the Universe of Childhood Education*

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*Updated January 2017*

## *What is Bay Farm Montessori?*

A smaller, cuter, more expensive version of a public school...

...with a dedicated and skilled staff...

...and a really cool arts program...

...and a funky “village” campus?

Maybe it looks that way.

But underneath, it's actually something very different.

## *The Proposition:*

- Bay Farm is, in fact, an embodiment of a key educational idea that is different from the common understanding of what childhood education means.
- As such, Bay Farm is part of a centuries-old contest of ideas about how children learn and what it means to teach.

# *A Short History of Public Education*

- Pre-1800s: private, religious schooling
- Public education began mid-1800s to 1880
- Three major schools of thought:
  - Conventional/Mainstream (public schools)
  - Humanist/progressive tradition
  - Religious/conservative tradition
- Formative influences for the mainstream/public schools:
  - Calvinist view of human nature
  - The factory model of industrial production

# *John Calvin (not Hobbes)*



French theologian, 1509-1564

- Original sin and natural depravity
- Children by nature lazy and disorderly, have to be kept in order and compelled to learn
- Truth is received, revealed (from scripture)
- Teachers possess/present/transmit truth
- Students listen/memorize



# *The Factory Model*

- Mass production:
  - Regimentation
  - Discipline
  - Piecework
- Students move from one specialized classroom to the next
- Objective: obedient, hard-working, good citizens
- Today: more variety, experimentation, choice
- ...but many public school buildings still look like factories

# *The Humanist-Progressive Tradition (H-P)*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)



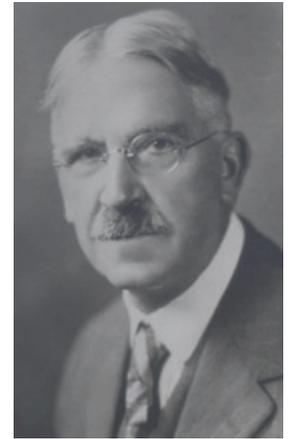
- Human beings are good by nature
- Children are inherently curious; need nurture and guidance, not correction
- Importance of emotional and artistic dimensions of humans, education
- Education is not just filling children with information, but helping them develop their innate creativity and goodness

## *H-P Tradition cont'd*

- Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827, b. Zurich)
  - Predecessor of Montessori
  - Emphasized natural development
  - Group kids by level of development, not age
- F. Josef Neef (1770-1854, b. Alsace, France)
  - Brought Pestalozzi's ideas to the US in 1808
- Francis Parker (1837-1902, b. New Hampshire)
  - Active role of child in education
  - Schools should appeal to real interests of children
  - School reforms in Quincy, Boston, Chicago

## *H-P Tradition cont'd*

John Dewey (1859-1952, b. Vermont)

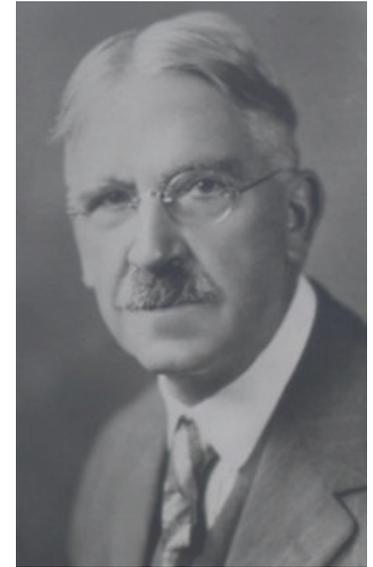


- Founder of pragmatism, secular humanism
- Reality is what we experience through our senses
- No transcendent or supernatural domain; no revealed, ultimate truth
- Ideas are true if they help us understand things
- Humans are product of (ongoing) evolution
- No absolute moral norms; circumstances determine what is ethical
- Moral judgment evolves with experience and judgment

# *John Dewey on Education*

## Purpose of education:

- Help child develop a lively interest in the world
- Learn to think critically
- Become an active member of the community
- Live successfully & happily
- Nurture openness to experience, desire to learn in every situation, throughout life



Dewey's ideas influenced public and private education in the US, 1890-1930

# Since Dewey.....



- 1940-1960: progressive ideas fall out of favor
  - But not dead: *Summerhill* (A.S.Neill, 1961)
- 1960s, 70s: some 1,000 alternative, neo-progressive schools
  - Most were short-lived; some endured (you're looking at one of those!)
- 1970s: H-P ideas and practices make extensive inroads into public school system
- Early 1980s: progressive and neo-progressive practices established in most public schools
- Late 1980s to present: conservatism and “crisis thinking,” back-to-basics, emphasis on testing, curricular standards

# *Religious/Traditionalist Schools*

- Most pre-public schools were based in religious traditions
- Conservative Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics rejected early public schools
  - Absence of real moral, religious teaching
- 1880s: Catholic parochial schools
  - Teacher-centered, authoritarian, textbooks & memorization, structure & external motivation
- Recent growth driven by:
  - Elimination of religious elements from public schools
  - Progressive ideas, Dewey's secular humanism
  - Religious revival; evangelical and fundamentalist groups
- 15,000 conservative Christian schools established since the 1980s; more than 1 million students
- 1 million children home-schooled in Christian tradition

# *Childhood Education in the US (2006)*

- 55 million kids; >90% in public schools
- 5 million in 28,000 non-public schools (K-12)
  - 2 million kids in 8,000 religious/culturally conservative schools
  - 1 million-plus kids home-schooled
  - 1.5 million kids in 14,000 “conventional” private schools
  - 500,000 kids in 6,000+ humanist/progressive schools, including:
    - ~4,000 Montessori Schools (8,000 worldwide) – started 1907
    - 200 Waldorf Schools
    - 350 Free/Democratic Schools (Summerhill)
    - 100 Friends Schools
    - etc.

# *Montessori: H-P at the Core*

Maria Montessori (1870-1952): Italian physician (and devout Catholic); pursued scientific study of how children learn

- Children are natural learners, programmed to learn (borne out by modern neuroscience)
- Children will learn best with little interference, in an environment that is designed to promote natural inclination to learn
- Children are naturally good
- Education = gradual, natural unfolding of abilities and personality
- Note: this does not make Montessori incompatible with spirituality!

# *Montessori vs. Traditional Education*

- Child-centered
- Teacher as mentor/guide
- Experiential
- Intrinsic rewards (not grades)
- Self-directed activity
- Individual pace
- “light the candle”
- Teacher-centered
- Teacher as authority figure
- Textbooks
- Extrinsic rewards (grades)
- Teacher-directed
- Common pace (factory)
- “fill the vessel”

Fundamentally different starting point & approach!

# *Montessori Method: Environment & Teachers*

- Teachers:
  - Common philosophy/training
  - Humility before the child; guide/mentor
- Environment:
  - Freedom with discipline
  - Child's own sense of structure & order
  - Emphasis on reality & nature
  - Beauty and atmosphere
  - Montessori materials
  - Development of community life (peace education)

# *Montessori Today*

- Largest segment of H-P school spectrum in the United States & the world
- Some 3,000 Montessori-trained teachers in the nation's public schools
- “programmed for learning” concept borne out by recent research in neuroscience, linguistics, etc.
- Conventional schools at all levels (primary to university) are working to shift to more engaged learning practices

# *Partnership with Families*

- Critical to success of Montessori education
- Frequent communication between teachers, parents
- Parents need to understand what goes on in Montessori classrooms – it's not the public school you (probably) went to!
- Montessori principles for home life
  - Help with parenting challenges
  - Maximize effectiveness of classroom education (and return on your investment in Bay Farm!)

## *What you can do:*

- Recognize that Montessori is why the school does the amazing things it does for kids
- Dedicate yourself to learning – along with your children – about education & Montessori
  - MPA Parent Education sessions
  - Observe in classrooms
  - Read, think, exchange ideas
- Remember why you're here – Bay Farm is a learning community for your kids **and for you!**