

Assessment for human flourishing

A new model of assessment for a century-old model of education

BY NCMPS STAFF

The following is an excerpt from the upcoming NCMPS Assessment Playbook, a collection of tools and strategies for assessment in public Montessori programs, available this spring at the NCMPS Public Montessori Symposium, March 20-21, in Washington, D.C. Information and registration at public-montessori.org/symposium.

Here's a problem that has dogged Montessori educators for nearly two decades:

How do we implement Montessori faithfully within an educational system that uses standardized testing as the primary means of ensuring accountability for schools and families?

Standardized testing has been part of American educational culture since the turn of the 20th century, but in recent decades schools—both public and independent—have been acutely affected by the assumptions that govern the current accountability regime and the testing industry that both feeds and profits from that regime. Parents, public officials, and policymakers demand proof that students are learning at acceptable levels. Test developers aim to create instruments that are valid, reliable, and deployable at scale. And because evidence of learning is defined almost exclusively by achievement on a narrow range of measures, tests, testing, and the process of enabling more students to test better has come to define what it means to go to school.

Few educators—Montessori or otherwise—are happy about this condition.

Indeed, assessment, at least as it is currently configured, sends shivers down the spines of most teachers. Two issues predominate. First, the demands associated with standardized testing have narrowed the educational experience of students. Second, analyzing spreadsheets, strategizing about growth, and customizing lessons for the sake of the tests has added to the ever-expanding job description for teachers. For a growing number of teachers, this com-

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bination has proven to be untenable, and not just for Montessori. A 2014 NEA study reports that nearly half of U.S. teachers consider leaving the profession due to standardized testing.

For Montessori teachers, the impact may be even greater. When surveyed, public Montessori educators (leaders as well as teachers) identify the current assessment culture as one of their most significant challenges, along with funding and staffing. Reconciling an emphatically child-centered pedagogy with an assessment system that, by design, is all about transmission, efficiency, and sorting is a confounding proposition. Add race, socioeconomic status and equity to the mix and the challenges grow even more complex. When human flourishing is the goal, and when obvious and persistent disparities that correlate with race and income exist, and when addressing those disparities is measured, largely, by tests that ignore the goal of human flourishing, what's a socially-minded educator to do?

At NCMPS, we believe that human

flourishing rather than achievement --as defined by standardized tests-- should be the goal of education. By human flourishing we mean the capacity to thrive socially, emotionally, intellectually and economically, to participate meaningfully in family, community, and civic life, to live a life of curiosity, agency, and satisfaction. Human flourishing means, as Maria Montessori put it, "becoming a person of one's time and place," with the means and where-

withal not only to function within, but to shape society. Standardized tests, at least as currently designed, not only fail to address these crucial capacities, they drive the experience of schooling toward narrower and narrower activities, which render the experience of learning, at best, decontextualized and instrumental.

At the same time, we are not, on principle, opposed to assessment. In fact, we are convinced that it is possible to assess children, classrooms, and schools in ways that are constructive, equitable, and rigorous, and that also advance the overarching goal of human flourishing. We believe strongly that schools should hold themselves accountable to the children and families they serve. We also recognize that Montessori, based on observation, is inherently data-centric. Building on that premise, we assert that the best way to serve all children and families is for schools to cultivate sustainable systems for assessing their impact using

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a range of data sources. We don't, in other words, accept the premise that the problem with our current educational culture is measurement. On the contrary, we think it's clear that data, measurement, and vigorous attention to how well we are realizing our collective mission should drive all school operations. For such a system to be effective, however, we must pay careful attention to both what we measure and how we do it.

To this end, NCMPS is developing a new framework for assessment in public Montessori schools—and one that we hope might in time extend to all schools. Within this framework, academic achievement is a subset of human flourishing, and should be central, though not exclusive, to every school's goals and approach.

Our framework for assessing human flourishing rests on two principles derived from years of learning lessons in public Montessori schools. First, like human development, assessment must be a system rather than an event. Second, that system requires carefully coordinated tools to operate with both precision and coherence in measuring and reporting on what matters most to human flourishing.

Assessment as a system

Growth and development are continuous and multi-faceted, and so must be the system for assessment. Testing children episodically against a pre-determined set of standards—as measured, say, on a given day in March—drives practice toward a focus on the measurement rather than the child, on performing rather than learning. When we shift the focus to address what is going with the child—What interests her? What is she ready for? What obstacles is she confronting?—assessment becomes a comprehensive system which yields information that supports the overarching goal of realizing human potential.

Tools for measurement

In our work with schools over the last ten years, we have developed, field-tested, and refined a collection of tools which work together to assess and support the inputs that drive human development, and the outcomes we expect. Many of them are already in use in schools, and they will be collected and shared later this year in an Assessment Playbook. A few examples:

Observing Work Engagement Forms: These one-page forms, used in our Coaching work and applicable to general observation, direct the observer's attention to children's passage through various stages of engagement with Montessori materials, and can be used to gather granular data about the functioning of a classroom. Primary, Elementary, and Adolescent versions have been developed.

Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS): This widely used tool assesses the inputs in the form of child and adult behaviors, and environmental characteristics, proven to support developmental outcomes such as executive functions, social-emotional flexibility, and linguistic and cultural fluency.

Staff Appraisal Instruments: These rubrics are used to assess assistants, teachers, and leaders according to behaviors which support development, such as observation, invitation, and follow-through. The measures are aligned with the elements in the DERS and the Essential Elements Rubric.

Essential Elements Rubric: This school-wide assessment tool helps programs assess their progress towards creating a learning environment that supports development in all its aspects, from the drop-off line to the classroom.

What about the tests?

When it comes to required standardized tests such as PARCC, STAR, MAP, and others, we recognize that a

school's continued existence may stand or fall on test scores. Here we know we must be simultaneously playing both the short and long game. In the short run, it's essential to prepare students for these measures. This means maintaining pedagogical integrity while fulfilling compliance expectations. Fully implementing Montessori, supporting executive function development, and balancing freedom within limits will help children develop the skills and knowledge they need. If additional support in specific targeted areas is needed, it can be implemented within the Montessori framework. But trading away the Montessori for drudgery and drill can never support human flourishing.

Changing the assessment industry is the long game and playing the short game doesn't mean accepting the premise of either the form or content of existing measurements. When we let children's joy and curiosity guide us and we follow their success with cohesive and comprehensive accountability tools that reflect and support their development, we will be leading a movement. With well-articulated systems for capturing both the flourishing of our students and the environments that support it, we can change the conversation.

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