

1. Haiti: Montessori-Based Teacher Training and Preschools

The Montessori Preschool Project provides high-quality, internationally recognized teacher training. Through a scholarship scheme, individuals with limited economic resources are financially supported to become certified preschool teachers and to open their own preschools. The project was created and is supported by the Peter-Hesse Foundation, Solidarity in Partnership for One World, a non-profit organization registered in Germany and Haiti. Peter Hesse started the foundation in 1981 for the purpose of sustaining small self-help projects for poor people in Haiti. Initially, the foundation focused on 2-day seminars on project management for self-help groups and on alleviation of small financial bottlenecks, mostly for rural initiatives. In 1984, the foundation changed its emphasis to early childhood care and development, which led to creation of the foundation's first teacher training center (in 1986), the Centre Montessori d'Haiti.

Mission

The Montessori Preschool Project aims to influence Haiti's education sector, at public and private levels, by demonstrating that high-quality early childhood education is possible—even with limited resources—if the quality and length of teacher training are adequate. The mission of the Montessori program is to give poor children a better chance to develop themselves early enough through quality teacher training and creation of community-based preschools. The training of qualified teachers translates directly into increased local capacity to provide early stimulation and education programs of good quality to children ages 2.5–5 years.

Cultural Context

Haiti's culture is based heavily on oral communication. Teachers are accustomed to memorizing and reciting teaching material, but have difficulty applying this knowledge in the classroom. To improve application, most of the Montessori training course is presented

through oral instruction in Creole, the local language. In addition, the project adapted the curriculum to the needs of student teachers in Haiti, adding substantial practice time to help them transfer theory into practice. The student teachers must complete supervised internships, create didactical material, and be able to adapt everyday objects as teaching tools. Haitian teachers compensate for a shortage of books and materials by developing their own lessons, teaching materials, and visual aids.

Methodology and Approach

Montessori education embraces a child-centered philosophy that emphasizes individuals' learning paths and the capabilities of each child. Children can access different kinds of materials freely and are encouraged to learn at their own pace. The freedom for purposeful activity allows children to develop not only their intellectual faculties, but also their powers of deliberation, intuition, independence, and self-discipline, as well as the social awareness and behavior needed to function in the world. Teachers and children are taught mutual respect and nonaggressive behavior; competition is strictly avoided.

In the Montessori approach, didactical materials present knowledge to children in an orderly way so that their intellect can classify the information into an organized system of thought. This process of working with the material exercises a child's intellect constantly and expands the child's mental abilities. The effectiveness of the material derives from the thoughtfully planned manner of its presentation, which flows from:

- Concepts presented in isolation (which reduces the confusion of receiving too many ideas at once), to
- Appreciation of various difficulties in isolation, from easiest to most difficult (for young children, from concrete to abstract), to
- Use of a graduated series of self-teaching materials suited to the various stages of a child's development, to
- Incorporation of body movement (occupation) for specific purposes (i.e., combining movement and mental concentration).

More than 50 percent of the didactical material for Montessori preschools, including most reading material, is produced locally. Teachers make most of the material at the beginning of the academic year. In addition, one basic set of imported Montessori teaching materials, which costs approximately US\$1,000, is provided to each new preschool. Because the Montessori teaching material benefits the child's cognitive development even when a teacher does not fully understand the didactical background, teachers who do not completely comprehend the Montessori pedagogy can become effective teachers. From training in the Montessori teaching method, people from poor communities and with relatively low levels of education have become certified teachers.

Children attending Montessori preschools range in age from 2.5–5 years and, in exceptional cases, 6 years. Classes are not divided by age groups, and children are invited to learn from each other and to interact across ages. Older children learn to take pride in helping weaker and smaller children and, thereby, enhance their social skills.

Implementation

Montessori student teachers complete a 9-month training course, a final examination, and two 6-week internships in an affiliated Montessori school. They can receive three types of diplomas: assistant's diploma, national teacher diploma, and international Montessori directress/director diploma. All student teachers are examined and given their diploma by the Centre Montessori d'Haiti. To obtain the international diploma, students must pass all parts (written, oral demonstration, practical) of the national examination conducted by the Centre Montessori d'Haiti, demonstrate a complete understanding of the Montessori philosophy, and pass a second examination conducted by an outside, internationally recognized specialist. About 20 percent of all Montessori-trained student teachers have obtained the international Montessori directress/director diploma, which certifies them as Montessori teachers entitled to teach and open schools in Haiti and around the world. After teaching for 1 year, they can also

become assistant student teacher trainers in one of Haiti's Montessori training centers.

About 50 percent of all Montessori student teachers are scholarship students who sign a contract with the Centre Montessori d'Haiti which obliges them to teach for 3 years in a poor community after they complete their training. Most teachers return to their own locale to establish a school, and most extend their commitment beyond the initial 3-year agreement.

All Montessori project preschools throughout Haiti are strongly linked by their common structures, teaching philosophy, and administrative organization. Each summer break, the teachers gather for a 3-week workshop to share experiences and enrich their teaching skills. During 1996–97, the Centre Montessori d'Haiti interrupted its teacher training courses to strengthen the Montessori preschool structure across Haiti and to conduct evaluations. Also in 1996, seventy-five Haitian Montessori teachers established the Association Montessori d'Haiti (AMOH), a professional teachers group.

Evolution

The Montessori Preschool Project in Haiti began in 1986. Since then, forty-three Montessori preschools have been established, and forty-one are still operating, having persisted in Haiti's turbulent years of political instability. They provide services, in sixty preschool classes, for about 2,000 children each year from poor communities.

Sustainability and increasing local teaching capacity are essential aspects of the project. When it began, one Montessori training center, with a preschool class of twenty-five children, trained twenty teachers in the first 9-month course. Both the center and the class were directed by expatriates. Under the leadership of a London-trained Montessori specialist from Trinidad, the capacity of the center soon grew to an annual average of forty students, mostly women. Recently, two additional training centers were established with financial support from the Peter-Hesse Foundation and are linked closely to the original center. With all three centers, the Montessori project currently has the capacity to train sixty teachers each year.

The forty-one operating Montessori preschools include one for children with human immunodeficiency virus infection, one for deaf children, and two attached to an orphanage. Since the project began, an average of three new preschools open each year. Over the years, only one preschool has ceased operation, and one has returned to Haiti's traditional system of rote learning. Classes remain "small" (thirty children per class), compared with the traditional Haitian classrooms of sixty children. To date, 450 teachers have been trained; 297 have received national teacher diplomas, and 83 have received international teaching diplomas. The increase in local capacity to train qualified teachers translates directly into increased capacity to provide high-quality stimulation and education programs for preschool aged children. The children stay in the Montessori schools an average of 2 to 3 years. Of the 2,000 children enrolled each year, only about 10 percent drop out. About 660 children graduate each year, and more than 80 percent continue on to primary school. Parents do not seem to favor enrollment of boys over girls at the preschool level, which helps to increase the number of girls going on to primary school.

Financial Support

The average annual financial support for the Montessori Preschool Project has been US\$100,000 or less. Often far less has been available, but funding has always been sufficient to support the project. Financing is secured privately by the founder and approximately fifty individual donors per year. The German government occasionally assists with small grants to cover exceptional needs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the German Development Service (DED) have financed a U.N. volunteer in past years.

The foundation's funding supports overall project coordination and supervision and scholarship students who later teach in schools for disadvantaged children in poor communities. In addition, each new preschool receives US\$3,000–\$4,000 in startup funds which are used to purchase a basic set of Montessori teaching material, help with school construction and administrative organization, and

314 *Simone Kirpal*

procure technical advice. Montessori graduates are encouraged, and financially supported, to open Montessori preschools for children at risk if the local community provides support to enable the school to become sustainable in the long term.

Other financial resources are limited, but sufficient to sustain the preschools and are secured through school fees and community in-kind contributions (e.g., providing a building). The Montessori training centers raise financial contributions from the regular fees paid by student teachers who are not on scholarship. The two recently established training centers are paying back startup funds to the project by providing scholarships for a number of student teachers each year.

Principles of Success

The success of the Montessori Preschool Project can be attributed to the following characteristics.

- *Driven by Demand.* The Montessori Preschool Project started small and has expanded in a sustainable manner.
- *Community-based.* Schools are opened only when requested by a community and when community involvement proves to be reliable.
- *Teacher Ownership.* Teachers privately own the schools and are accountable for financing, student performance, and school reputation.
- *Financially Sustainable.* Schools and training centers become financially independent after approximately 1 year.
- *Culturally Relevant.* The project builds on indigenous cultural patterns, and the teaching methods are adapted to the local language (Creole) and oral culture.
- *Well-defined Selection Criteria.* Selection criteria for student teachers are clearly defined, and scholarship students are screened carefully to ensure their future commitment to rural communities.

- *Low-income Employment Opportunities.* The project provides employment opportunities for low-income individuals. Poor students who have completed secondary education can become qualified and certified teachers and are supported to open their own preschools.
- *Economically Inclusive.* The program brings together teachers and children from different economic backgrounds. The combination of poor and rich students helps the schools become financially sustainable and achieve a good reputation.
- *Successful Teaching Method.* The Montessori approach builds self-esteem, confidence, problem-solving skills, and positive life attitudes.

Outlook

The Montessori Preschool Project is making strides in going to scale, program evaluation, and advocacy and visibility.

Going to Scale

Haiti continues to have a great unsatisfied demand for high-quality preschools. With the two new Montessori training centers, training capacity has increased from twenty to sixty teachers per academic year. This increase is expected to have long-term spill-over effects as new teachers open new preschools in poor communities.

To improve the educational standard in Haiti, better teacher training is needed at all school levels. The Peter-Hesse Foundation proposes to establish a resource center to provide assistance and professional development for teachers of preschool and primary school. To improve their skills in teaching and curriculum development, teachers using the center would be able to participate in continuing education and special-topic seminars with professional education experts. They would have professional assistance to access print and electronic media materials, do research, and review didactical materials for specific classroom needs. To reach working teachers, the center would be available to any teacher from the public or private

316 *Simone Kirpal*

sector and would remain open during off-work times (e.g., Saturdays, vacation periods).

Program Evaluation

In addition to its own 1996–97 evaluation, the Centre Montessori d’Haiti is pursuing an independent external evaluation of the project’s effect on the educational outcomes of poor children and the professional development of proficient preschool teachers.

Advocacy and Visibility

Promoting high-quality early child development and education as a priority in development politics, in Germany and internationally, is an important part of the foundation’s activities. For broader visibility, the foundation registered as an NGO and is represented in several childcare networks and at international early child development and U.N. conferences. The foundation’s “Three Suggestions for One World Development” was selected as input from NGOs to the U.N. World Summit for Social Development, held in March 1995. The Montessori Preschool Project was also internationally selected for presentation at EXPO 2000 in Hannover, Germany.
