St. Paul’s Episcopal Montessori School: Holistic Learning and Social Diversity

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By Bekah McNeel

We are all different. That’s a simple statement, something we take for granted. However, when looking at educational systems in America, Texas, or San Antonio, we rarely see this diversity reflected in curricula. Most commonly, kids are taught as though they all learn the same way and classrooms are full of kids from the same socioeconomic group.

In a world where everyone around you looks, talks, and spends money like you do, it’s possible to grow up with a limited view of just how diverse the world really is – or to develop destructive dichotomies like “smart” vs. “dumb.”

Which leads many parents to schools like St. Paul’s Episcopal Montessori School. The Montessori philosophy of education maintains that there is more to a child’s education than test scores (in fact test scores are often counter-productive), and that children should be guided in an environment where they naturally thrive. At St. Paul’s, children are educated holistically from ages 18 months to 12 years.

Visionary founder, Kay Karcher Mijangos, who retired this year, dreamed of an economically and culturally diverse student body. Combining those ideals – holistic learning and social diversity – the children of St. Paul’s are being educated not only in their core academic subjects, but in a larger truth: the world is full of people who are different than you – and that’s a good thing.
“Everybody can learn something from everybody else,” said Douglas Earle, the former rector of St. Paul’s who brought Mijangos’ vision on to the church property in 2005 with her first five students.

Parents with mobility and/or means to send their children to private schools have long enjoyed a broad selection of alternatives. They can shop programs and educational philosophies to find the right environment for their young learner. Few wealthy children fall through the cracks.

But what about the kids whose parents cannot afford to live in the best district, or pay for private school? What about the young artists who are bored and therefore disruptive? Or the future engineers who require hands-on learning?

Those students are likely to struggle or become disillusioned with education, unless they are given the opportunity to learn in their own “language.”
These children have a place at St. Paul’s, where 50% of the students receive assistance, thanks to an ambitious scholarship fund fed by individuals and foundations around San Antonio. Located in the Government Hill neighborhood and backed by four local Episcopal churches, the school is populated by neighborhood kids, as well as the children of local leaders.

It’s a testimony to the quality of the education that it is a school of choice for those with options, as well as many who do not share the school’s founding religious faith.

“They never shoved it down our throat,” says St. Paul’s parent and committed atheist Laura Salazar.

In fact an ecumenical influence can be seen throughout the school, even up into the board, which has included everyone from Episcopalians to Buddhists.

Earle said that the school aims to be religious, but not doctrinal.

“We want the kids to develop a sense of the sacred that permeates everything,” Earle said.

“They use the same words we use at home,” Salazar said, “Like ‘respect others.’”
Because the school teaches that everything is sacred, students are encouraged to explore and learn from everything around them. Mijangos has championed after school programming that includes cooking, yoga, gardening. She’s brought on specialists in motor-skills, language, and music to ensure that children are stimulated and reached according to their unique learning languages.

In her farewell address at an evening service in her honor, Mijangos commented on the holistic nature of the education at St. Paul’s. “(During a school day) they’ve discussed Plato and planted nasturtium … what a wonderful and varied day these students have had.”

The school is in the heart of the area most affected by the development along Broadway, and is certain to experience a certain amount of gentrification. Board member Kathleen Weir Vale remains confident that this will not change their commitment to underserved kids or cultivating, “a school that looks like the world.”

“We want to draw the whole community,” Vale said.
“It’s such a nice thing for a kid to get to walk to school,” said neighbor and St. Paul’s parent Cristina Noriega. She loves the neighborhood atmosphere, as well as the experienced educators. “From the second I walked in I got this sense of happiness.”

Much of that happiness comes from students whose love of learning is cultivated by guides who steer them toward discovery, rather than “teachers” who impart knowledge. Often times, Mijangos reported, students left campus reluctantly in the afternoon, and showed up as early as they could the next morning, itching to get back to projects in which they had become engrossed.

Lest anyone reduce the Montessori approach to feel-good or doubt that it prepares students sufficiently to compete in other academic environments, consider the case of Joaquina Guevara, daughter of Laura Salazar and local artist Jacinto Guevara.

Joaquina is an alumna of St. Paul’s, who went to middle school at St. George’s Episcopal School. As she considered where she would go to high school, she underwent a process that most students do not approach until they are looking into college. Instead of limiting herself to local elites like St. Mary’s
Hall, TMI, and Keystone, she took her search national. The winner? Virginia’s Chatham Hall, an all-girls private prep school where she received a full scholarship.

Happy kids like to learn.

As with the retirement of any beloved visionary, some might be concerned about the hold Mijangos is leaving. Not to worry. According to Vale and others, the new headmistress, though her name cannot be released at this time, is a dynamo with a long history in Montessori education.

And to ensure that Mijangos’ vision of outreach carries on? In addition to already vast scholarship funds available, the “Miss Kay Scholarship Fund” will award $15,000 annually.

Diversity in education may be one of the most obvious and yet ambitious of all proscriptions for how to reform our education. It’s difficult to scale in any natural way. For now, schools like St. Paul’s demonstrate the social and educational philosophy that believes every child is worth the investment.

Bekah is a native San Antonian. She went away to Los Angeles for undergrad before earning her MSc in Media and Communication from the London School of Economics. She made it back home and now works for Ker and Downey. She is one of the founding members of Read the Change, a web-based philanthropy and frequent contributor to the Rivard Report. You can also find her at her blog, Free Bekah.

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