

Fostering the Future *Montessori Education in LatAm*

Montessori education is a widespread and well-known early education method. Developed by the Italian doctor-cum-pedagogy theorist Maria Montessori in the early 20th century, it spread from Italy to most corners of the globe over the next 100 years, becoming particularly popular in the US as one of the most successful alternative education models of recent decades. Designed to foster autonomy, creativity and spontaneity, among other characteristics often lacking in traditional school settings, Montessori education has garnered attention not only from progressive-minded parents but anyone who values healthy development and innovation, including entrepreneurs and business managers. A recent blog post on the Harvard Business Review website, for instance, is entitled “Develop Leaders the Montessori way.” Articles in the same publication as well as others have shown that

successful innovators and business leaders often draw on Montessori’s ideas – and that many, indeed, went to Montessori schools.

But as Montessori education has become viable, reputable and successful in the US and elsewhere, there are few Montessori and Montessori-inspired schools in LatAm. South of Mexico, there is only one official center for training Montessori teachers: the Fundación Argentina María Montessori (FAMM), located in Parque Austral, the technology and business park in Pilar, Argentina, just outside the city of Buenos Aires.

Founded by Constanza Carballo and Marisa Canova de Sioli, both Argentine education professionals trained in Montessori methods, with the help of a generous grant from a private group based in Singapore, the Fundación has held Montessori training work-

shops for teachers from around the world, mostly from South America, with 75% coming from Argentina. Both Ms. Carballo and Ms. Canova de Sioli work for free, and they use tuition revenue to pay for rent and expenses. With the little money that they have been able to raise so far, they offer scholarships for students to attend training courses, all of whom must be involved in a socially beneficial project of some kind. FAMM’s current space is a single large room on the ground floor of an office building, designed to simulate a Montessori preschool – an oasis of imagination and play amidst the more corporate (if progressive) feel of the Parque.

And yet, according to Ms. Carballo and Ms. Canova de Soli, the Parque is in fact a perfectly apt location for FAMM. “The Parque invited us because of the innovative character of Montessori,” Ms. Canova de Soli says. “As Montessori has extended around the world, people have been interested in researching its efficacy and seeing the data. Our intention is to do that research here, and that research into innovation gives us a synergistic relationship with the Parque.”

■ Bucking the Trend

Yet the hospitality and support that they find within the Parque and the community of the Universidad del Austral, one of LatAm’s best, does not extend to their country as a whole. “In Argentina education is undervalued,” says Ms. Canova di Soli, “even as economists, neuroscientists and many studies have shown that in order to create a healthy person and society, investment in early education is where you see some of the best returns.”

According to Jorge Basaldua, an author and professor of education at the Universidad del Austral who works closely with FAMM, this lack of support for socially beneficial,

private projects such as the FAMB arises, in part, from Argentina's tax system. "In Argentina there is a problem with education distinct from what you see in the US or Chile, for example," he explains. "In those countries, there are tax laws allowing companies and individuals to donate portions of their income for charitable purposes, including education. Here there are no such laws, so it's very difficult to get the money together for a school, a kindergarten or a university."

Finding the Funds

It has been difficult, then, for FAMB to raise the money to meet its current needs and realize its vision, including providing more scholarships to visiting trainees and expanding the space to include a functioning classroom where trainees can apply their knowledge. Instead, Mr. Basaldua says, FAMB must rely on the generosity of private donors. "You usually need a big private donor to found the school" – like FAMB's founding donors in Singapore – "and smaller donors to help complete the job," he explains. He estimates that FAMB needs about US\$1 million for its near-future development needs.

Complete Human Beings

Ms. Constanza, Ms. Canova de Siolia, and Mr. Basaldua see FAMB as providing vital training to teachers – and Montessori schools in general as providing vital care for children – to face the challenges of the world with behaviors and habits that will lead to better innovation and creativity. "Almost every school says that they want to form well-integrated people, but here we offer the possibility of making it a practical reality, not just an idea," says Ms. Canova de Sioli. "By fostering in the children a proactive attitude and autonomy," Ms. Carballo concurs, "we are giving them the tools to be complete human beings. Our situation as a region is vulnerable, and these children will need these qualities when they are adults."

