

## What If I Were A Fish? - Mahesh Rajangam

When Beth and Lisa invited me to pen a Peer to Peer essay, I was both delighted and petrified. I was delighted because I had so much to share, especially as a "convert" dad who went from having a skeptical view, to being a passionate believer in the pedagogy, and petrified because my writing skills may not be able to convey the depth of my conversion. So with that caveat I am excited to share my thoughts which also allows me to reflect on my Montessori journey and reminisce on all those mini "Ah-ha" moments (and there were many such moments) that have firmly shaped my outlook towards childhood education and development.

As a way of background, I migrated to this country in the mid 1990's from India to pursue my graduate education. I was fortunate to receive a high quality education, both in elementary and high school and enroll to study engineering at a renowned university. The system of education I was exposed to in India served me well and set me up for success. It was also a system that was highly structured and extremely formal with tests/exams/grades and rankings.

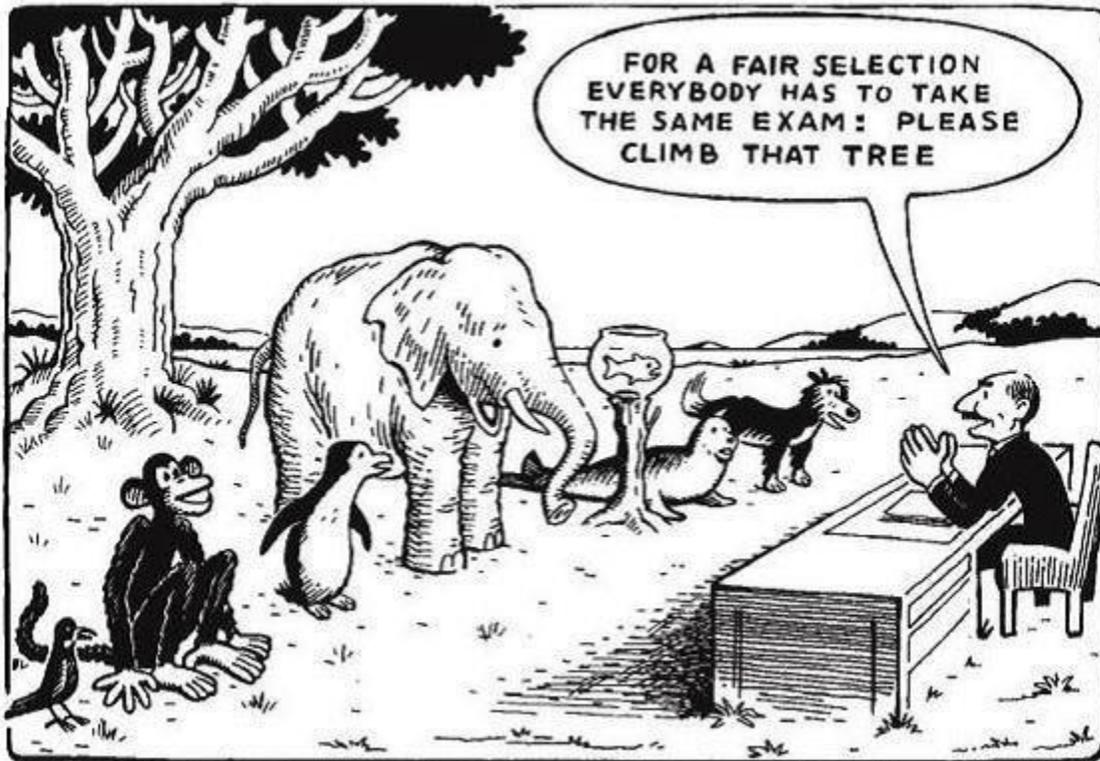
When it was time to explore kindergarten school for our first child, our visit to The Montessori School was memorable. I remember Aadit, our son, walking into Ashley's prepared classroom and exploring the materials. All along we observed Ashley carefully guiding our son through the space and not making choices for him. In about 30 minutes, he had immersed himself in the "Pink Tower" material and was focused on placing the tiny final piece. The parent education session that followed helped me understand the school's mission and educational philosophy. This was my first exposure to Montessori and I was intrigued, but skeptical for the long run. Meanwhile, my wife Archana had an unshakable clarity of thought from the beginning to choose TMS for our child and held strong to the choice. We enrolled Aadit in the Primary Program.

There were many moments in my Montessori journey that showcased the value of the education my children were receiving. It took me a few years of "FOMO" (fear of missing out) syndrome to turn around my thinking, and I would like to highlight a few realizations that finally erased any FOMO.

- **Love for Learning:** In every plane of their education, I was able to see the love. My children were not being taught in the literal sense, but guided through the prepared classroom and material to explore and learn. Whether it was science, math, or language, the foundation my children were building would last a lifetime. It dawned upon me that the Montessori Method works because it delivers to each child what that individual child needs to succeed and does not pull each child in the classroom to the "median". Aadit is one of a kind and his needs are different than our other child Tanvi. But, don't ask me how, it works for both of them! It is remarkable!
  - My son graduated from The Montessori School, and is currently a freshman at Greens Farms Academy. We have absolutely no doubt that his academic and classroom success at GFA is attributable to his foundation from his years at The Montessori School. It is an observation his current teachers make as well.
- **Inquisitiveness and Independence:** Have you bumped into a 4-year old Primary child visiting staff, and students in other classes, with a clipboard and pencil in hand? I saw my daughter Tanvi do this. She wanted to know what the most popular color was among students, and with a little encouragement from her teacher she set out to do her first "Survey". As a dad of a 4-year old, I saw the math she was learning, but more importantly when I look back at this experience I see the life skills she was learning while exploring her curiosity, i.e. leadership, ability to interact with new people, communication skills and most importantly a sense of accomplishment. Skills that prepare our children for the real world.
- **Developing Good Citizens and Leaders:** A well rounded individual needs to have the skills of empathy, love and compassion to be a productive member of the community. Over the years with the school, I have seen our children learn and demonstrate these qualities in varied forms. Be it Aadit stopping to pick up an opponent he legally tripped up in a soccer match, or Tanvi taking care to ensure that all her peers are being treated fairly.

As I mentioned in my opening, there were many moments throughout my Montessori journey that reinforced my commitment to the way my children were educated. A realization that drove me to be more engaged with the broader school community outside of just my children's classrooms, viz. serving on the Board, and as the Annual Giving Chair. My wife Archana has gone beyond my efforts and has been an active member of the Montessori community, wearing many different hats. When I reflect on my Montessori journey, two key drivers summarize my "conversion": (a) A complete trust in the pedagogy and the teachers who deliver the education to our children with a focus on "learning" rather than "teaching". (b) A true appreciation for the wholeness of education our children receive right from Toddlers through Upper Elementary. This allowed me to be mindful as a parent to not get distracted by other programs focused on just one dimension. What I call FOMO.

After my 12 years with the school, it is clear to me the success of the program for children is proportional to the commitment of the parents to the program. As my daughter graduates from Upper Elementary next year, I leave as a proud Montessori dad who is confident and has a strong sense of conviction that both of my children are well prepared for the real world with their strong and well-rounded foundation. I leave you with a cartoon that I have shared with many before. It represents the structured education I grew up with, and a system that I didn't want my children to go through.



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*Mahesh Rajangam – Parent of Aadit and Tanvi.*