Maria Montessori in America

When Maria Montessori docked in New York on her first trip to America in 1913, crowds greeted her ship, and her arrival made the front pages. Montessori, Italy's first female physician, was toasted as a revolutionary educator. By the end of her visit a few weeks later, "it seemed reasonable to suppose that American education would never be the same again," Rita Kramer writes in "Maria Montessori: A Biography." But instead of flourishing, interest in Montessori's method withered in the United States. When she decided to leave Italy in 1934 because Benito Mussolini's regime was interfering with her schools, Montessori decamped to Holland. And while her reform movement had influence in Europe and Asia, Kramer writes that it "took on more and more of the character of a special cult rather than becoming part of the mainstream of educational theory and practice." It took the free-spirited 1960s to revive Montessori education in the United States. Montessori herself had died a decade earlier. But her emphasis on children's "absorbent minds" and their capacity to teach themselves was in tune with the era's rebellion against schools' traditional strictures. Montessori classrooms, with their silver candlesticks (for polishing, to teach life skills), beautiful toy-like cubes, and child-size shelves and bins, seemed the perfect romantic alternative to boring workbooks and rows of desks. They still do. Mothering Magazine, my own barometer of granola parenting gone too far, calls them "magical" and filled with a "sense of wonder." One hundred years after the opening of Montessori's first school in the slums of Rome, 5,000 schools devoted to her method dot the United States, and there are 17,000 more worldwide. Many are preschools, but some are for older kids as well. Montessori would have expected no less, as she became quite the grande dame in her later years. But she would not be pleased about the confusion that continues to surround her method. In some ways, Montessori education remains a cult: Those outside the fold (and lots of families inside it) have little idea about what exactly it is. The fog of magic and romance obscures the key to a Montessori classroom: that it's all about structure and framework and purpose. Maria Montessori may have called the child "an amorphous, splendid being in search of his own proper form," but her schools now hinge on a different canny insight of hers: Those splendid little beings crave order. My son Simon, who is 4, has spent the year at a Montessori school in Bethesda, and last week, I got permission to show up and watch. Promptly at 9 a.m., Simon's teacher clapped her hands, stared down my son and his friends, who were chortling over a book of "Star Wars" stickers, and said, "Gentlemen, it's time to get into our work." The "work" thing is one of Maria Montessori's quirks — she thought children's imaginary play was a waste of time. For months, I made fun of Montessori "work." But the kids don't. Within minutes, two dozen of them were dispersed around the room, intent on their morning's pursuit. Simon's friend Caleb set to work on a "long sevens," a chain built from increments of beads separated into groups of seven. He'd reached 294 and figured out that 301 came next. A girl named Sailor took out a collection of different-sized pink cubes and stacked them. Nicholas wrote "spyder" and "fly" and "prayin mant" with the movable alphabet. Each letter is a grippable three-inch rubber cut-out, with blue for consonants and red for vowels. And

Simon, my irrepressible, short-fused man of mischief, calmly rolled out a mat for himself on the floor, took out the "bank" and began matching the number 3,987. All this activity underscores the crux of the Montessori method: It is structured, sometimes rigidly so. It's about the appeal of precision: Sailor's pink cubes fit together in only one way, so she instinctively corrected herself when she mis-stacked them. Montessori isn't magic. It's fine-tuned and detail-driven and tactile, like a workshop for two dozen good-humored but serious young elves. Last fall, Science magazine gave its pages to a well-designed study that found measurable advantages for the Montessori method. The researchers compared 59 Montessori students with 53 kids who'd tried to get into the same public Montessori school in Wisconsin and lost out in a lottery (a strategy that addressed the methodological concern that families that choose Montessori differ from those that don't). By the end of kindergarten, the Montessori students outscored the others on standardized tests of reading and math, treated one another better on the playground and "showed more concern for fairness and justice," the study found. By the end of elementary school, the test-score gap closed. But the Montessori kids "wrote more creative essays with more complex sentence structures," responded better to social dilemmas and were more likely to say they felt a sense of community at school. The Wisconsin school in the study is urban, and most of its students are minorities. That's quite different from the private and upscale cast of Montessori in most of the United States. But that norm is starting to change, with 250 to 300 public Montessori-model schools now open nationwide. Maria Montessori started her revolution among Italy's pauper children, so it makes sense that her method works without the head start of affluence. The biggest problem for American Montessori education at the moment may be about identification. Any school can call itself Montessori, and that doesn't bode well for quality control. The real test is probably teacher training. Through various colleges and universities, Association Montessori Internationale offers college graduates full-time nine-month courses that are the hallmark of Montessori-ness. Carrie Dworshak, Simon's excellent teacher, says the one she completed was much harder than her college coursework. The Montessori culture smacks faintly of indoctrination. But maybe in the end it's that intensity — as well as Maria Montessori's basic wisdom that kids can teach themselves if they're operating within a sturdy framework — that accounts for the continuing appeal of her schools. Other alternative education movements imported from Europe are similarly selfassured. The Waldorf method, founded by the Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner in 1919, stresses uninterrupted imaginary play, bans TV and keeps students with the same teacher for seven years. Reggio Emilia schools, a product of post-World War II Italy, stress long-term projects and an environment filled with beauty. The adherents to each method keep it alive by keeping the faith. So thanks, from the rest of us hangerson.