

# The Development of Experimental Education and Advancement of Montessori Education in Chinese Taipei

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This article sketches the Montessori landscape in Chinese Taipei, which embraced Montessori education in 1999 with the establishment of their first Montessori elementary school. Since 2014 the government has allowed experimental education and within six years there were ten Montessori elementary schools. Public schools can outsource school operations to private entities” as the United States does with charter schools. Taiwanese schools can adopt their own educational principles including Waldorf and Montessori.



*In 2020, 61 public school educators from 14 counties in Taiwan attend the 3-day Montessori for Public Schools workshop to learn about Montessori education and to discuss implementation possibilities.*



*A parent workshop explaining how one of the public schools converted to Montessori.*



*As part of the workshop, public schools share preliminary proposals for how their school can possibly convert to Montessori education.*

The first Montessori elementary school in Chinese Taipei was founded in 1999, but it was not until 2012 that Chinese Taipei had its third Montessori elementary school. In 2014, the Chinese Taipei government passed special laws allowing experimental education. In the years since then, an additional ten Montessori elementary schools have been established.

Before exploring the future of Chinese Taipei's Montessori development, this article will first examine Chinese Taipei's overall education environment over the past thirty years. How did it move from traditional and conservative to becoming more open and diverse? This examination will lead to a discussion of the rapid development of Montessori education in Chinese Taipei and then delve into some of the driving factors behind it.

It is worthwhile to first note that there are seventy-nine preschools (Early Childhood Educare) in Chinese Taipei that designate themselves as Montessori — a figure far higher than the number of Montessori elementary and middle schools combined. Since preschools do not fall under Chinese Taipei's national compulsory education, which covers grades one through twelve, preschools' pedagogy or education content do not require government approval. Thus, for the purposes of this article, the focus will solely be on Chinese Taipei's Montessori elementary and middle schools.

## The Three Laws of Experimental Education

To start, the term *experimental education* needs to be defined, as it has a specific meaning in our context. Experimental education is synonymous with the term *alternative education* used in most Western societies. In Chinese Taipei, the use of experimental education to refer to alternative education came about at the end of 2014, when the Legislative Yuan (equivalent to Legislative Branch) passed three laws related to experimental education (hereafter *the three laws*). These three laws were:

- 1 Enforcement Act for Non-School Type Experimental Education Across Education Levels at Senior High School or Below
- 2 Enforcement Act for School-Based Experimental Education, and
- 3 Enforcement Act Governing the Commissioning of the Operation of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools to the Private Sector.

The "Enforcement Act for Non-School Type Experimental Education Across Education Levels at Senior High School or Below" allowed parents or groups to engage in home-schooling or to establish education institutions with like-minded individuals or families. Under this model, the government retained the authority to approve and to

provide guidance but no longer held a major role in education. The "Enforcement Act for School-Based Experimental Education" allowed public and private schools to transition into experimental education schools, whose pedagogy and curriculum would not be limited by the national curriculum and its implementation procedures.

Last but not least, the "Enforcement Act Governing the Commissioning of the Operation of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools to the Private Sector" provided permission for public schools to outsource school operations to private entities to conduct experimental education on their behalf, much like how charter schools operate in the United States.

Upon passing professional and government assessments, the three laws allowed for the implementation of experimental education from elementary through senior high school levels without adherence to the national curriculum, thereby providing more freedom and relaxed regulations regarding the teaching venue and teacher qualifications. In 2017, a revision to the three laws extended its coverage to junior college, and universities were allowed to establish departments at both the under and graduate levels to run experimental education curriculums.

In Chinese Taipei, the term "experimental education" had come to refer to various public and private school systems that teach according to their own education principles and not in conformance to the national curriculum. Curriculums under the experimental framework tend to be more child-centred, being more respectful toward everyone's uniqueness and needs. Although the Montessori method's century-old heritage is far longer than Chinese Taipei's current national curriculum, it is still considered experimental education within Chinese Taipei's education and legal framework.

## The Development of Experimental Education in Chinese Taipei

For many, the enactment of the three laws was a bold move, as they empowered citizens with a greater scope of education choices, while narrowing the degree of government control on education. This seemingly sudden liberation was not at all quick but was a culmination of over thirty years of relentless efforts and evolvments.

A discussion of the development and history of Chinese Taipei's alternative education requires a retrospection into the period between 1949 and 1987. During this time, the governing party (KMT) had imposed martial law across the island of Chinese Taipei. As a result, the government heavily restricted freedom of speech and thinking. Minor infractions could mean jail time. When martial law finally

ended in 1987, many voices under the long period of suppression sought to be heard, leading to increased public demonstrations and protests. According to one sociology study, more than 8,000 protests, marches, and demonstrations, large and small, took place in 1993 alone (Wang). This was an inevitable process and a natural release of society's pent-up energy.

10 April 1994 was a landmark moment in Chinese Taipei's modern education history. According to reports (Public Television Service News), more than 10,000 parents and their children gathered in a mass demonstration to loudly express their long-held grievance against the rigid entrance examination system. Under this highly competitive education model, where rote memorization, test preparation, grades, and exam results were the key focus of education and individual identity, diminishment of students' happiness and love of learning was prevalent. The unprecedented rally in 1994 called for education reform on four fronts:

- 1 smaller class sizes
- 2 more high schools and universities
- 3 modernization of education, and
- 4 establishment of a fundamental law for education.

This was the largest demonstration comprising of students and their parents in our history and placed imminent pressure on the administration to take immediate action. In fact, many of Chinese Taipei's subsequent major education reforms can still be traced back to the after-effects of this rally.

The long-awaited Educational Fundamental Act went into effect in 1999, clearly establishing the government's role in protecting education diversity and providing parents with sufficient choices for their children's education. Although the act aimed high and was well-intentioned, it unfortunately lacked concrete measures, and left local governments largely in charge of how each county/city would implement the act's lofty education ideals. Due to the more conservative nature of local governments at the

time, the progressive new act did not translate into dramatic changes in the rigid school system between 1999 and 2014. The goals of education diversity and provision of more schooling choices did not actualize. Statistics from the Ministry of Education, which revealed that the number of students opting for home-schooling or alternative education showed no marked increase between 1999 and 2013, highlighted the act's inability to bring about change (Department of Statistics).

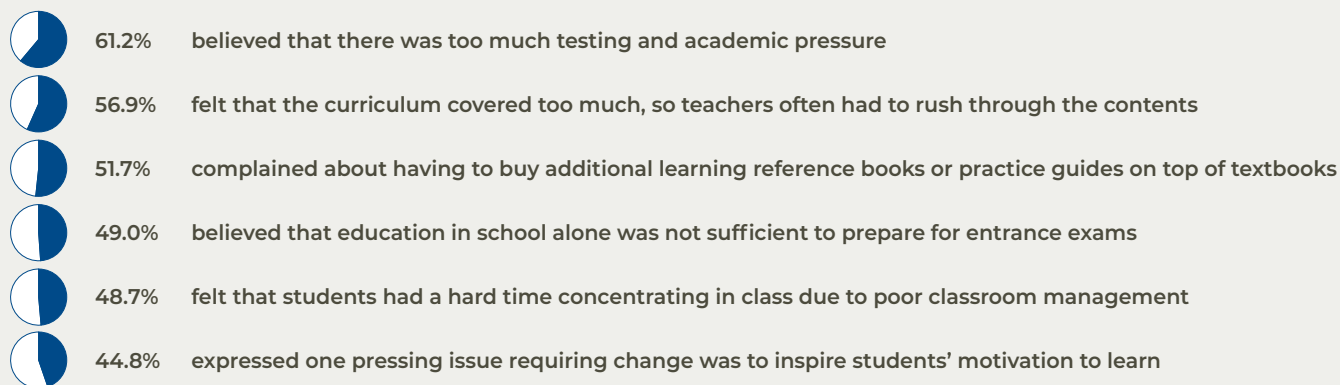
However, the sluggish transformation of the entrenched education system received a sudden boost with the passing of the three laws in late 2014. Official data showed that while the total number of school-age population was declining year by year in Chinese Taipei, the number of students participating in experimental education multiplied sevenfold, from less than 3,000 students in 2014 to over 20,000 in 2020 (K-12 Education Administration).

## The Push and Pull of Experimental Education

Looking back at the historical backdrop, the dramatic increase in the number of students in experimental education during the last six years was in part due to the diversity-friendly education environment that the three laws created. At the same time, there were other forces both pushing people away from the traditional school system, while pulling them toward experimental education.

Findings of two large-scale national surveys on education in 2015 and 2017 revealed that over half of all parents in Chinese Taipei were dissatisfied and felt insecure about the current education in elementary and middle schools (CommonWealth Parenting; The Professor Huang Kun-huei Education Foundation). Respondents raised a number of problems plaguing Chinese Taipei's elementary and middle school education:

### Parents in Taiwan were dissatisfied and felt insecure about the current education in elementary and middle schools



The two surveys pinpointed issues that were widespread across Chinese Taipei and still echoed the main grievances, which motivated the mass demonstration in 1994. Clearly, even until very recently, the methods of traditional schools were considered overwhelmingly dissatisfactory. When the three laws were passed in 2014, new opportunities for education arose. The braver amongst the disgruntled parents chose to leave traditional schools behind and to enter the realm of experimental education.

While this massive force was driving parents away from traditional schools, experimental education was blossoming into diverse and hugely attractive environments. Per the Ministry of Education, there are currently more than 200 experimental education establishments, all of which do not to adopt principles that align with the national curriculum (CommonWealth Parenting). An overview of the education principles and content of these schools show a wide range of variety, with Waldorf and Montessori being the most common pedagogies adopted from Western cultures. In addition, a number of education options have developed to serve unique, local needs, including indigenous education, humanistic education, project-based learning, explorative education, self-directed learning, and eco-learning to name a few.

In stark contrast to traditional schools, alternative or experimental education placed the child at the centre of learning. Their aim? Companionship and inspiration for the child on the path of learning. On the other end of the spectrum, conventional textbook-based learning viewed the child as an empty vessel that the adults must fill, and it is education's responsibility to cram in as much information as possible into children's minds.

Suddenly, with so many different types of schools and education options to choose from, it is no wonder that many parents dissatisfied with the current system were so strongly pulled toward experimental education.

## Two Driving Forces in the Development of Montessori Education

In the past years, the overall open education environment in Chinese Taipei has contributed to the rise of the Montessori method and other alternative education approaches, making them more visible and attractive to parents. However, there are two other major driving forces, which have led to the growth of Montessori education in Chinese Taipei in recent years.

The first of these forces is Ms Hu Lam. Originally an entrepreneur, Ms Lam founded the first Ms Lam School in 1984. This was the first Montessori preschool in Chinese Taipei staffed with AMI certified teachers. Currently, the Ms Lam School has several branches in Taipei, boasting the country's largest number of AMI trained teachers. In 2016, Ms Lam expanded into elementary education, establishing the largest Montessori elementary school with just under a hundred students.

The Ms Lam's schools have grown much in the past thirty-seven years, during which time Ms Lam generously sponsored numerous teachers to undergo AMI training. Many teachers remained in Ms Lam's schools, while others have relocated or have started Montessori schools of their own. Ms Lam greatly facilitated the spread of Montessori method throughout Chinese Taipei over the years as her schools have become the nurturing ground for Montessori professionals.

Ms Lam's elementary school, Taipei International Montessori School, is one amongst the ten Montessori elementary schools established in the past years. The founders or main teaching guides of four Montessori elementary schools on the list are all former teachers of Ms Lam's schools. It is a well-known fact in Chinese Taipei's Montessori circle that Ms Lam is always happy to provide

*One converting public school reorganizes classroom space to become a Montessori prepared environment.*



assistance to anyone wishing to observe her classrooms or to learn more about Montessori philosophies and practices. Undoubtedly, Ms Lam and her schools are an instrumental force in building the foundation of Montessori education in Chinese Taipei and is still actively contributing to its continued growth.

The second important driving force is the launch of the Y2 Foundation for Future Education (Y2) in 2017. Y2's mission is to advocate education diversity and accessibility, quality education for more children in Chinese Taipei and chose the promotion of Montessori education as its starting point. Y2 is a late addition to Chinese Taipei's Montessori scene. In collaboration with the College of Education at National Chengchi University, the Chinese Taipei Montessori Education Center (TMEC) was founded to promote Montessori education under the three pillars of research and development, training and orientation, and education platform. To this end, from 2017 to 2020, Y2 has committed over US\$1 million to fund crucial projects, such as research, advocate Montessori education, and sponsor outstanding individuals' AMI training to create social impact, all of which paved the way to its 2020 initiative to help and prepare public schools to transition to our first public Montessori schools.

It is worthy to note that as of 2021, three public elementary schools are preparing to transition to public Montessori through Y2's five-year sponsorship programme that encompasses AMI teacher training, classroom environment transformation, continued education, and advisement and consultation during the conversion process. Teachers and administrators from these three public schools have begun their AMI training in the summer of 2021.

Up until now, Montessori elementary and middle schools in Chinese Taipei have been private and small in scale, but costs of maintaining a high-fidelity Montessori programme are also high, creating an economic barrier for students

from blue-collar families. The availability of more public Montessori schools will certainly help make Montessori education accessible for more children.

Chinese Taipei currently has over 500 public schools with a student body of fewer than fifty students each, making them ideal environments to implement Montessori's mixed-age classrooms. Through the pilot transition programme for the three sponsored public schools, Y2 hopes to inspire more small-sized public schools to make the switch to Montessori, thereby enhancing social equity and improving the quality of education in rural and remote areas.

Furthermore, in 2021, Y2 has formally announced the start-up of its own international Montessori school for ages 0-18. The Y2S x Life Project, which brings together technology, community revival, and social entrepreneurship, and aims to offer one possible case study of Montessori theory implementation. The school will also serve as an education platform to openly share resources and lessons learned.

As discussed above, positive changes in the larger, social environment, as well as the dedication of Montessori professionals and organizations have all contributed to the significant growth of Montessori education in Chinese Taipei in the past years. Moreover, public interest and anticipation for Montessori education have really taken off in the last few years. Since its establishment in 2018, TMEC has organized numerous well-received events; their popularity has grown such that almost all events fill up well in advance.

As of 2021, there are thirteen Montessori elementary schools with many more, including public Montessori schools, in development. Montessori middle school education is still in its early stages in Chinese Taipei; three existing Montessori elementary schools have started

introducing the middle school curriculum. As more students graduate from Montessori elementary programmes and as Y2 continues to sponsor individuals to attend teacher training at the adolescent level, it is hopeful that more and more Montessori middle schools will become available.

## A Peek into the Future

The government of Chinese Taipei began implementing its new national curriculum in 2020, establishing the overall goal and direction of education as that of self-initiation, interaction, and common good. As many educators and schools scramble to find systematic ways to reach these objectives, there is research-based assurance found in Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius (Lillard). The Montessori method is a proven pathway to achieving self-initiation, interaction, and common good with great effect. Building upon many favourable conditions from the past and having multiple forces work together in the present, the outlook for the rapid development of Montessori education in Chinese Taipei is looking ever so promising.

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