Dalia Avello

Rafael Otto: This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. As usual, you can catch us on the airwaves on 99.1 FM in Portland on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen, wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm speaking with Dalia Avello who serves on the board of directors of the Oregon Montessori Association.

She trained as a psychologist, is a certified Montessori teacher and has expertise in the education and international development fields. She has led her career internationally, but calls Oregon home.

Dalia, it's great to have you on the podcast today. Welcome!

Dalia Avello: Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Rafael Otto: Let's start with a little bit of background about the Montessori approach to education. Can you talk about that history a little bit and give us some context? And what does it mean? What does the Montessori experience look like for young children and for teachers?

Dalia Avello: Absolutely. I would love to tell you. It's very interesting, but we need to go quite far in time. Think about late 1800s in Italy in Europe. So there was this woman called Maria who, uh, was quite smart, very determined. She wanted to be a doctor. Obviously not something that people expected her to do. But she persevered and eventually graduated, doing very well as a physician, from the University of Rome. And being a physician, she got a position helping in a psychiatric hospital associated with the university.

And one of the things that she describes in her books as seeing is that the hospitals in Rome were filled with children that were experiencing poverty. But she particularly wanted to work in this psychiatric hospital that was called "The Great Asylum of Rome," where they were the "feebleminded" and the "idiots." That's how the terms were used at the time. And so they, um, have all these children there together with the adults, and they had no hope for them because they didn't expect the society, do not expect these children to be able to do anything. So she felt very strongly about them, as such to work with them.

At the time, she also fell in love with someone and got pregnant, but out of wedlock. And that was a Catholic country where that was not something you could do. So she had to disappear for some time to have the baby. She did a lot of studying about what was happening in France. Because you might remember from studying, there was this boy in France that was found in the jungle when he was about fourteen. There are movies about him.

So a couple of physicians had found this boy and they were determined to bring this wild child to society and help him how to speak and teach. So she was interested in what these physicians in France did. She translated all of that while she waited for the baby to be born. Came back with all this knowledge from her European tour.

The baby went to a family because it was so hard for her to become a doctor. And I think she wanted to continue in the career. But imagine a mom that had to abandon her child. So she felt very connected with these children, started working with them and saw them as children that, because they were under the care of doctors, they were not under the care of educators.

Rafael Otto: Right.

Dalia Avello: And so she started working with them using these tools that the French doctors had created, and started to get really good results and people were very impressed. They were like, "Well, how do you do it Maria? Like, how is it possible? We had no hope for the children." And so she created an institute that also took, not just the children from the hospital, but the children that were at the schools. And they were deemed, how do you say, the most dangerous in the community, the children that were subnormal, the children that could not learn. Those children, the schools have the permission to expel them, but no one had the responsibility for taking care of them. So they were left to their own devices and they will become, you know, homeless.

So, families sometimes reject them. She took all of them. She took all of the children actually from the asylum, plus all the children they didn't want, and created the center and lived with them for 10 years. And then after the 10 years of huge success, she was very famous, you know, and she started to wonder: If I get all these results with children that had some difficulties, the children that are neurodiverse, how we will call them today, what will happen if I work with children that are developing normally?

And at the time there was this project in the slums of Rome being built. And, um, this gentleman had this group of abandoned children doing all kinds of things that they should not be doing. And there was no one controlling the children or taking care of them. And for him, it was cheaper to hire this lady that he saw in the newspaper than to pay for the damage these little criminals who are going to have. This is all the descriptions from the books.

So they gave her these children, she started the school and then she started to get tremendous results. And her key? She wasn't an educator. She couldn't have worked at a school even if she wanted, because she was a physician, not a teacher. She didn't have the credentials. So she used the scientific method and did a lot of observation and experimentation, created many materials.

And based on that, she said to get results see what worked for the children and the thing grew and grew. She published a book. It was supposed to be called, "Scientific Pedagogy." That was what Montessori education should have been called. But then, um, you will know like "Obamacare" and "TheAffordable Care Act," the Scientific Pedagogy ended up being called, Maria Montessori" or "Montessori Pedagogy,"which is what we know today. And it's essentially a system of vocational pedagogy that is based on the development of children, and it's based on serving the needs of children so that you help them develop. And the classrooms are, well, spaces for the children to flourish.

So the experience for the child is an environment where they feel welcome, where they have materials are very attractive to them, or they can work and they can develop the skills that they want to develop.

Rafael Otto: You mention this as part of the history in the schools that children were being expelled from the schools, and those were the kids that Maria wanted to work with initially. And so there's a connection to what's been happening here in Oregon, locally with the bill, which is called Senate bill 236, which prevents suspension and expulsion.

As of today recording this podcast, we know that that bill has passed and is headed to the governor's desk, Governor Brown's desk, for signing. Talk about that connection between the history of the Montessori approach and what's happening today in Oregon with the passage of that bill.

Dalia Avello: Absolutely. Well, I wish it wasn't a connection because I was talking to you about something from 1898... 1898! And we're in 2021. And yet still, this is something that happens. A child that has behavior that is natural. I wouldn't say that all behaviors of children are things that are developmentally expected.

Sometimes children have experienced from us. Sometimes children might have experienced difficulties and just like adults, they will not necessarily be the easiest or general basis of situations. But, it doesn't mean that there's nothing you can do with them, you know? And so this bill, we've been working on supporting it because it's just developmentally appropriate for children to have support from adults. You asked me about what an adult in Montessori environment does, either a parent or a teacher.Well, an adult follows a child and tries to help the child do and support and grow developmentally, and that is what I wish childcare was. Because Senate bill 236 is about the preschool suspension and expulsion.

I mean, really, really, really young children that have behaviors that are difficult for them. And create these situations are difficult for others, but situations that need help. It's a cry for help for me and not necessarily a badness.

Rafael Otto: I know you've been tracking the bill. So can you talk about some of the other pieces that are in there? It will ban suspension and expulsion by 2026. But there are some other components that I think are important. So could you talk about those?

Dalia Avello: Yeah, absolutely. Well, this bill does three things. The first one is that it directs the Early Learning division to conduct a small study on suspension and expulsion and report back to the legislature on results. Because we know that this is happening. We hear the families and the children and the providers.

We know that it's a reality, but in this day and age we need numbers and we need to know where is the impact happening so this study is very important. It's actually gathering information from something that we already know that it's happening. The second thing is that it's going to ban suspension and expulsion in early childhood programs that are licensed by the Early

Learning Division and received funding via The Early Learning Division. But it's not going to do it tomorrow, next month. It's going to do it in 2026.

So between now and then there's going to be a process of helping providers and families and hopefully children prepare for handling behaviors, so that ideally in a fantastic world would be that 2026 is when the ban is starting, and then we don't really need to because actually children aren't being expelled anyway. That's the idea until 2026. And then the third thing is that it will direct The Early Learning Division to report back to the legislature to give a recommendations of how to implement the ban.

And we'll say these are the things that we think should happen. And so those are the three key elements of this bill.

Rafael Otto: And you had a role in helping get this passed. You provided some testimony. People were considering how to vote on this bill and as part of that testimony, you've kind of talked about this already, but you did make the point that there's no such thing as a bad preschooler and I'm just wondering if you can elaborate a little bit on that.

Dalia Avello: Yes. I honestly don't think there is a bad preschooler. The reason I give the testimony, I have been helping with this bill from the back end as a researcher on information and because I feel passionate about it. I wasn't planning on testifying. But I do watch the testimonies on and the recordings are a wonderful thing.

I was watching the videos and then I started to feel a little bit uncomfortable because of the language that I was hearing. And imagine you're in your house, watching a bill, very excited about what to see, what these professionals have to do, what these legislators have to do and watch the testimonies. And the testimonies occasionally, and then also occasionally were talking about children being violent, children being bad and saying things like, "Well, these children, there's nothing you can do about them except expel them." And "This child is super bad and this is what they did to another child." And essentially it was like a description that to my impression was getting out of hand.

They were not taking into consideration that this was really, really young children and they were treating them as if they were future delinquents and absolutely bad, bad people. So I felt like, I'm watching this and I felt like I needed to speak up. And so I talk about development. I talk about the age and I made the point of expressing the age of the children in days. And so I told them like, the children will have less than 1500 days of life. We're talking about, I dunno, four year old. Saying you are an evil person. It just, it did not make sense. So we talk about that. We talk about development and we talk about children growing and having needs and expressing in the way they can using the tools that they have.

Sometimes they're so little, they don't have words. Well, they use their teeth, or sometimes they will bite and sometimes it will get frustrating because, well, things are frustrating for adults and children for all of us. That was the idea of the testimony.

Rafael Otto: Some of what came out of those hearings was, and some of the opposition to the bill, I think, was around this idea that suspension and expulsion can be tools to protect other students or teachers. I know thatcame up. And I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about that and what is needed? What do providers and educators need then to support them as educators for young children?

Dalia Avello: Yes. So, for me, there are two sides to this conversation about whether they are protections for other children or not. One side is my firm belief that providers. andit's just like a legislator, I have yet to meet a bad legislator. I have yet to meet a bad provider. I think everybody wants the best for children and they really are concerned about all the children.

So if you have a child that is having a very strong reaction and the other children are looking at them. With their eyes, with panic, you know, I understand that they will be concerned for that. And at the same time, if you know child development a little bit, you know that we do what we can. And so I think this child, this three-year-old did not wake up in the morning saying, "Hey, I'm going to go to my preschool today and I want to be hated by my classmates. I want my assistant to give me a stinky eye and I want the teachers to put the eyebrows, you know, across." That's not what they want to do. No one wants to have a bad day. They just can't do anything else. They do what they can with what they have. And so for me, the result is understanding of both sides and seeing this is a difficult situation that requires a lot of work together, and not just one training on someone saying, "Hey, this is what the technique you need to use."

And so, when you look at this bill, one of the elements that we're discussing the entire time was that we want coaching to be available. We want supports to be available for providers. So that the provider can call ahead of time or the provider can say, you know, "I have this child and something is happening. I can see the child is quiet. I can see the child has changed. What can I do?" And they have someone that can speak with them and help them solve and help them work through the process, so that they work with the family and with the child to get you a point that is not that point of expelling. But rather a point where things improve and you deescalate the situation.

Rafael Otto: Right. Right. Part of the motivation of the bill came from advocacy groups, like Black Child Development PDX and they were involved. I mean, many people were involved because of wanting to address the disparities in suspension and expulsion. We know that the expulsion rates and suspension rates were much higher for Black children, particularly black boys and children of color in general.

So can you talk about that context and those numbers, and what the bill also aims to do around mitigating those biases in the classroom?

Dalia Avello: I think it's, it's a complex answer. But, I think it's a complex topic here in Oregon. I've been living in Oregon only since 2014. And I remember that before I've lived in four different continents and I moved from California to here. But only when I live in Oregon, I had to ask someone who were the brown people that we're talking about. Because someone was saying,

"Well, the black and brown children..." and I was like, “Oh, can you tell me where are the brown people?" And my friend said to me, "Dalia, like, you are that person." And for me, it was so shocking because in other places where I have lived, I have not, I didn't need to learn the details of the different terms. I've always been myself. I always had the skin that I had. But in the places that I lived in Asia and Europe and here in the US and in California, it was never a topic. It was never important. And so. I have seen, being a witness and a guest in this state, that it is a topic that again, people have difficulty bringing it up, but it exists nonetheless. So, I don't think providers that will expel more black boys actually necessarily are thinking that they're doing something racist.

I don't think they think that they are racist. They might not want to be racist. I think most of the people that I have met in this state tell you that they're not racist. And yet when you're a brown person and you go do things, normal things, and your day-to-day, your life is not the same life that you have when you're a white person.

And I can see the difference because I'm with my white friends and I see that too. And so in this topic, I think what this bill and these conversations are trying to do is to elevate and say, Hey, our brains, human brains, mammals brains, we classify, we tend to classify people naturally. And so there are things that we do, there are decisions that we make. We might not like to confess, or we might not like to acknowledge that we are having behaviors that are racist, but the numbers will not lie. And the numbers will tell you that black boys are seen as aggressive and not the same way that a white boy with the same behavior will. Or you will see also for example, that a family with a black child that is struggling will have less opportunities. So you might have a family with a child that's struggling. Let's say that you quantify a tantrum from one to five. And so a child will have a tantrum category five. And that child, if it's in a white family, the provider might talk to the family, they might talk to their parents and they might talk to their collegues. There might be more steps to solve the problem than the steps that will be used for the black family.

Rafael Otto: Sure. Sure.

Dalia Avello: And so it's not exactly that you can see it, but if you look in detail, it's not so evident. You're not saying I'm expelling you because you are black. But in the same category five tantrum, which is not a category. I just invented it two seconds ago. But, In the same category five tantrum, a black child may have much less opportunities to do well or to compose themselves. And so that's when issues start to happen.

Rafael Otto: Right. The prevalence of the suspension and expulsion rates, part of what you're talking about. I know those rates are pretty common all over the country. And I'm just wondering if you, you know, having been now in Oregon for seven years and experiencing what you've experienced, is it... why is it different here? Why is it so different compared to what you've experienced in some of these other places you've lived?

Dalia Avello: Well, I wish I knew the answer. I will be writing books and being very famous. The main difference I can see it's just there is less people of color here compared to other places

and so it's just... new? I mean, I have friends. I love them by the way, like these examples of friends that I mentioned and my dear, dear friends. But I have had friends that I know they want the best for me. And they have asked me, for example, one of them once said, "Dalia, I didn't know you needed to use sunscreen." And I'm like, "Well, sunscreen has to do with skin so that's why I use it. I don't want the skin cancer, but please don't go and tell that to anyone else, because it has to do with skin."

And my friends were like, "Oh my goodness. I didn't know and thank you for telling," and that's it. And so the only explanation that I have is speaking with my friends that are Caucasian. They grew up born and raised in Portland or in Oregon, just didn't have exposure. They only knew white people putting sunscreen on. And so when they see the first black or brown lady or, you know, they see me, they are curious, like anyone will be. So I don't know. I think it's a very incomplete answer, but I don't think it's bad intention on anyone or most people.

Rafael Otto: Right, right. I appreciate you taking the time to, to try to answer that question, and I know it is complex and maybe a book is forthcoming for you on that.

One of the other things I wanted to ask you about was that I know you are working on efforts to better understand the impact of trauma on young children.

Can you talk about what those efforts are?

Dalia Avello: Yes, I'm very excited. There is an organization here in Oregon called Trauma Informed Oregon. They have different projects and one of the things that they want to do is to spread the word and help organizations learn about trauma, and help workers learn about trauma- informed care.

And they've been doing that project for several years. They've been doing training of trainers. Which is a very successful way, a very proven successful model where you train people in organizations and they go back to train others. So that way you spread the knowledge. But this training of trainers in trauma-informed care have been in English until now, all of them.

But we know that the Spanish speaking population in Oregon, it has been growing quite a bit and they have their own experiences. And so I have been helping develop a research project and a concrete project that is creating the first training of trainers for trauma- informed care for Spanish speakers, oriented towards the Spanish- speaking community.

So we have a cohort of 25 participants that are going to be the first group that is receiving these materials. Everything is translated and everything has been adapted to talk about things like acculturation. For example, in a training of trainers in English, you will not need to talk about what it's like to come into a different culture.

There's completely different from yours and what sacrifices you need to make, and what your brain does to adapt to the religion, the trends, the politics, the process. But that is something that when you're a guest in a country you need to do, um, and sometimes those processes are difficult and they're difficult for the families and for the children too.

And so we have a lot of groups that are sending participants and many of those groups were with children. And I'm very excited to share that opportunity because I know that the more work that we do and the more preparation we adults have prepared, we can relate and help to children.

Rafael Otto: It sounds amazing. Are there other things that we need to understand about language or aspects of culture when helping train educators or adults to help them work with people experiencing trauma.

Dalia Avello: I think in my experience, working with all kinds of providers, there is this idea of the equity lens. And there is a lot of that being talked about now, and it's great to hear that people are very interested. I'm not entirely sure everybody quite understands what an equity lens actually is. And it's like, some people might imagine a Nikon, as some people might imagine, a Canon lens and it's... it might be neither, you know?

The best thing I can say is taking some time to imagine what it's like to be that person, what it's like to do what you do. I have an accent, I grew up in another country. I'm an immigrant and being an immigrant, I have had conversations with colleagues about the immigration process in the US.

And so for example, it's very easy to say, this is a joke that we have in our meetings, but, every time you bring up immigration process, someone will say, "Well, why don't you marry someone so that you get a green card?" And that tells you, well, you know, even if I wanted to and there is like this amazing match, it doesn't help how the process work.

Rafael Otto: Yeah.

Dalia Avello: Obviously that is like an exaggeration of a joke. But it kind of tells you that I don't expect people that have never gone through an immigration process to understand it. And so if you haven't, you can't quite make decisions or understand or know what the person had to experience because when you land in an international airport in this country, there are two lines.

And one line is for all the American citizens. And that process is different from the one that we non-American citizens need to go. And so I don't know what happened in your line in the airport. And so most people that go to the line, they don't know what happened in mine and what questions we get asked.

So I think if there's one thing I could say, perhaps just, maybe you could wonder about what it's like. I wonder all the time.

Rafael Otto: Yeah, the power of being able to wonder and take the time to do that.

Dalia Avello: Yeah...

Rafael Otto: One more question for you. A little bit of a bigger picture question. But what kinds of changes are you seeing ahead of us that are good for children and families? You've talked

about a couple of examples. There's policy change that's happening right now in Oregon, but what else are you seeing on the horizon, and are those changes enough? Are we making enough progress and are we making progress that's fast enough?

Dalia Avello: I think it's a great question. I'm going to pretend that what I'm seeing is actually what I'm seeing. It might be my wish. I remember years ago, the first time I came to the US. This must have been like, 20 years ago. The situation about race and racism and all the things and all the jokes aside that I have made today, they will have not been possible for someone like me.

I might not even have been invited to talk with you, because why would you invite her to talk about these things, right? And yet here we are in 2021, 20 years later and it's happening. And if you asked me before, I'd never imagine that this would be possible. I think one element that I'm hoping and I'm wishing, and I think it might happen is that in the future, people will see how absolutely brilliant children are. Even babies. I mean, they're way smarter than adults in terms of just counting neurons and how many connections they're making. Like, we are really not at their speed in processing and they're learning so many things. Like, they are learning entire languages and vocabulary in such a short time.

They have the capacity to make incredibly complex decisions. The moment that you open your eyes and then you see how wonderful and rich children are. Even the youngest one. They are doing things you... I think adults find them funny because they don't understand actually what the children are doing. So my hope and what I think is that, in the future, people will be able to see children not as something fragile necessarily that we have to protect. They are fragile, of course, and we have to protect them, but they're also absolutely brilliant. And so I think there is more about participation of children.

We might see them more now with middle school and high school that you want them to give your opinion or give an input on this bill, or give an input on this policy. I can guarantee you, you can ask younger children. They will tell you information that is going to be useful if you know how to look for it, and then you pay attention to what they're explaining.

And so my hope is that there will be more participation, because all of us adults are making these decisions about them and their life. And they absolutely do have memory and they do have opinions and they have pretty good ideas. It's just that sometimes, you know, the, the language or the way they express it is not what you wanted necessarily. I hope that makes sense, but I think it's improving.

Rafael Otto: It does. It does. I like that a lot and I appreciate that perspective. We're going to have to wrap it up today, Dalia. It's been so good to have you on the podcast. I really appreciate you making the time to do that today.

Dalia Avello: Absolutely. Thank you for inviting me.