



CAMT NEWS

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

FALL 2009
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Ladies and Gentlemen of CAMT and our Montessori family.

It has been my pleasure to serve as your president for the past two years and my great honour to work with the women serving on your board for this and previous conferences. I have come to love what CAMT stands for: continuing improvement in the classroom through continuing growth of our Directresses and Directors.

The board has worked very hard to give you interesting and valuable workshops and keynotes and enjoyed the praise and suggestions of the members we represent. CAMT has a fantastic potential to become even better and serve you more and so I ask you, "Will you give us your time, experience and enthusiasm?"

I am stepping down as president as of today and will take on the role of past president. I will also accept the nomination for the position of treasurer as well as helping out anywhere needed. What about you? Think about what we can do together. Join us. Let's make CAMT more.

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UPCOMING CAMT WORKSHOPS

February	Music Workshop - Maureen Harris
April	Half-Day Mini-Conference featuring 2 topics
June	Strategies for September—Mary Flewelling-Pinchen

Visit our website at camt100.ca for more information!

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About CAMT



Canadian Association of Montessori Teachers

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Making Montessori History in the Land of the Maple Leaf

We're looking for you.....

Are you the teacher your students will remember when they are your age?

Help shape the future of Adolescent Montessori Education in Canada

In the fall of 2008, several parents and Montessori administrators joined together to begin planning for the development of a land-based Montessori adolescent program right here in the GTA. After researching the "Erdkinder" concept and visiting the world-renowned Hershey Montessori Adolescent Program on the Farm, the group has been working tirelessly to bring this dream to fruition. Several parents leading this group have been working alongside a Montessori Advisory Group to outline what "Erdkinder" might mean here in the GTA in 2009. Additionally, the group has partnered with some experts in the field who have experience in planting farm-based Montessori programs. The group is seeking elementary teachers who have undertaken Montessori Adolescent training or who may be interested in taking the Adolescence training with the intention of one day teaching in this program.

If interested, please contact Annette Sang and Nikki Ide Cinnani, Directors of the Montessori Secondary School Canada Planning Group at montessoriapc@gmail.com

"The teachers must have the greatest respect for the young personality, realizing that in the soul of the adolescent, great values are hidden, and that in the minds of these boys and girls there lies all our hope of future progress and the judgment of ourselves and our times...if social progress is realized through the succession of the generations, then these children... will become more highly developed than their adult teachers."

Maria Montessori, "From Childhood to Adolescence"

Help and Salvation *by Mary Flewelling-Pinchen*

***“If help and salvation are to come, they can only come from the children,
for the children are the makers of men.”***

Maria Montessori

Montessori educators know this truth and are sustained by it. We feel privileged to share in the creative energies of our students who will ultimately shape the world of tomorrow. While Dr. Montessori's message of salvation refers to the future, I have come to believe that young children also provide an immediate and more personal salvation to those who are lucky enough to be influenced by the wisdom of their ways.

When I first began working in the casa classroom some 29 years ago, I immediately knew that something very special was happening to the children all around me. I am also sure that I had an unconscious awareness of a transformative power that was at work within me as well. Since I was an untrained assistant who had never worked with children before, I did not really understand or appreciate the marvelous forces that were shaping me as well as my students at that time. It was not until several years had passed that I began to consciously recognize the powerful gifts that young

children unknowingly extend to those around them. I have come to think of their offerings as part of the Montessori miracle that exists in the “here and now” rather than in the future.

Young children, as we know, do not understand the passage of time very well. In addition, they are highly ego-centric, controlled by the forces of nature that compel them to grow, develop, and achieve. As such, these little individuals have limited energy for the needs of others and live almost exclusively in the moment. Compare this existence with that of the average adult. We, as adults, are consumed with meeting the needs of those around us and we experience time largely as a “crunch”. We are often heard to say, “So much to do, so little time.” As we try to accomplish everything, we can easily be overwhelmed by feelings of exhaustion, frustration and dissatisfaction with our lives. As if this were not enough, we also allow ourselves to be haunted by the regrets of yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. In many ways, the

“here and now” does not exist for us. We are frustrated by the “blur” of the present because of our worries about the past and the future.

I now realize that during my career as a Montessori directress, I have had the good fortune to escape from this reality on a daily basis. I am, of course, referring to the time I spend with my students. If you are a Montessori directress, you may know of what I speak. Within the walls of the casa classroom, the outside world no longer prevails. Instead, a different world, the world of children, surrounds and takes hold of us. In this world, there is no past or future, there is only the here and now. The children move to a different drummer and we are called to follow suit. Presenting lessons, helping children engage in meaningful tasks and being available to assist when needed leaves no time or space for adult concerns. Accepting hugs, reassuring an upset child, bandaging a sore finger while listening and observing to

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Hope and Salvation (cont'd)

determine when we are needed are important tasks that require our all. During the time we share with our students, the rest of the world just slips away. The simple, small events of childhood become our reality. How fortunate for us!

The extent of salvation that has been available to me through my students was made very clear to me during the past year – my “Annus Horribilis”. At the beginning of 2008, my elderly mother became ill and was hospitalized. It soon became clear that she was dying. Daily trips to the hospital with my father after school each day became a harsh new reality. The loveliness of early childhood that surrounded me each morning contrasted sharply with the suffering and sadness that I viewed each afternoon as I watched my mother’s life slip slowly away. During this sad time, my 21 year old son let it be known that he would soon be a father. Unfortunately my son was not in a committed relationship and was in no way ready to be a father. The realization that my first grandchild would be coming into the world with two young and ill-prepared parents filled me with an overwhelming sadness. Two weeks after my mother passed away, little Isabel was born. I struggled to be a welcoming and supportive grandparent. At the same time,

my father’s dementia, compounded by his grief, increased and it was necessary to take on elder care responsibilities each day. Several months later, my daughter’s boyfriend was killed in a car accident. It really was a most difficult period of time for me and my family.



Through all of this, the first half of my day was spent in the company of my 3-6 year old companions. Many times, upon awakening in the morning, I did not know if I would be able to summon enough strength to get ready for school. It was a daily struggle to get out of bed and deal with my emotional demons and the demands of the day. But I somehow knew that, no matter how difficult it might be to dress and drive to work, it was my best chance for survival. I knew that by embracing the children’s house, by seeing the world through the eyes of the child, by living in the “here and now” for a little while, I would be helped to face the adult portion

of my day with greater grace, love and hope.

It is through my students that I continue to learn and experience the wisdom of living in the moment. Each day, the children show me that time really does consist of a multitude of simple, little moments that need to be noticed, savored, enjoyed and shared. For a little while, they push my “adult concerns” out of the way. My students remind me that the life well lived is the one that exists in the present. They invite me to notice their discoveries, understand their experiences and value their efforts. They remind me that the greatness of the human spirit and the unending energy for goodness resides in their present moments and must be



appreciated in the here and now. Selfishly, one of the reasons that I continue to go to school each day is to learn and re-learn this help and salvation from my students. For me it truly is a life well lived!

The Price of a Smile *by Sarah Enright*

Ask any teacher and they will tell you that one of the most important connections you can make for a child is with their parents. Children are observant beings and feel connected when their parents are comfortable with the school setting. Our job as Montessori educators is to prepare the environment, not only the physical environment but also the emotional and social environments, to support the growth of the whole child. How many teachers make a conscious effort to prepare the emotional and social environment of their classrooms, as well as within the whole school?

“Children smile on the average 400 times/day; Adults: 15 times/day. Ever wonder why?” -

Source Unknown-

During my many years of teaching, I would often talk with colleagues about making better connections with parents but never found the time to follow through on any of our grand ideas. As I became a more seasoned teacher and started to take on more administrative duties, I really began to see the importance of connecting with parents so they felt apart of the school community and their child's education. Parents arrive for drop off and pick up at different times so how do we make time to touch base with parents and make the personal connections we all so desire?

“The fact that I can plant a seed and it becomes a flower, share a bit of knowledge and it becomes another's, smile at someone and receive a smile in return, are to me continual spiritual exercises.” -Leo Buscaglia-

The easiest place to start is with a smile. Recently, I have become a Montessori parent and have a new perspective on connecting with other adults. The receptionist at my son's school welcomes each adult with a sunny smile and a cheery hello. I appreciate this warm welcome but have found that teachers are often too focused on other matters to extend the same courtesy. Many teachers would say they greet and address the parents of children in their classroom, however, can many teachers say they extend the same welcome to any other adults they see in the school?

“A warm smile is the universal language of kindness.” -

William A. Ward-

I have the privilege of visiting many different Montessori schools and I have noticed that most teachers do not make eye contact and say hello to strangers in the hallways. It is easy to argue the finer points of making connections but the reality is that the day is only 24 hours long and a teacher's time is usually taken up working with children, preparing the environment and giving lessons. I know if I were to ask any Montessori teacher, they would tell me that modeling appropriate greetings is an important component in our grace and courtesy lessons. If we are to teach our children the finer points of grace and courtesy in our society, should we not demonstrate making connections with everyone who crosses our path? In a world where children are over protected and taught to be cautious of strangers, the school environment

is a safe and comfortable arena for children to practice new social connections. Are we, as educators, taking every opportunity to connect with others and give our students the skills to become confident, competent, connected social beings?

“Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing.” -Mother Teresa-

Grace and courtesy is a unique part of the Montessori curriculum and what sets us apart from many other educational systems. We must always remember the unplanned teachable moments can be the most valuable and have the greatest impact upon a child. Something, as simple as a smile and a hello to a stranger, will have a positive impact on everyone involved.

“If I thought that a smile of mine, might linger the whole day through and lighten some heart with a heavier part, I'd not withhold it -- Would you?” -Source Unknown-

I challenge each teacher to examine themselves and make a commitment to try to make connections with all members of the school community. A smile does not cost you anything but will give you so much in return.

“The thing that goes the farthest towards making life worth while, That costs the least, and does the most, is just a pleasant smile.” - Wilbur D. Nesbit-

“Follow-ship” by Wendy Agnew

We North Americans tend to be a leadership-oriented culture. ‘Follow-ship’ is rarely trumpeted and I suppose that’s because the act of following has led humanity into several unpleasant troughs. Perhaps it’s the dialectic between leading and following that begs to be fleshed out in my mind. As a Montessori educator, I experience my keenest moments when I abdicate pinnacles of planning and crawl into the maze of child quest. But I am still amazed – coming out of those experiences – to find a life clogged by leading.

Maria Montessori, in *Education and Peace*, articulated a bold humility; “When I am with children, I am a nobody, and the greatest privilege I have when I approach them is to forget that I even exist, for this has enabled me to see things that one would miss if one were a somebody – little things, simple but very precious truths.” (Clio, 2002, 85)

Writing this article, and preparing for this conference, and living in these tenuous times, I wonder; what fosters a humility that allows us to follow tender green shoots of inquiry into a world of sense. Again, I look to Montessori, and find an invitation to immerse the collective self in a robust sense of the world. That, “All nature, in a word, is replete with poetry.” (Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, Fides, 1966, 200). And I think, perhaps, it is that poetry that helps manifest the magic between leading and following. I interpret Montessori’s humility as an expansion of self into mystery of other. Her vision of Cosmic Education still fills me with awe. Perhaps it’s a radical shift from

mechanism to muse, from master to mentor, that creates a wrinkle in the expected. One of my children once told me, “We love to go to the forest because it’s alive and when we’re in it, we feel alive.” So we go there, and begin to discover relationships – relationships I would not have expected:

As a casa directress, my full day children nudged me to live historical scenarios on the bosom of a prairie field near our school. We would do three-hour improvisations (a work-cycle of sorts) exploring roles of prehistoric tribes, making camps, fashioning jewelry from grass, simulating fishing trips and hunting expeditions, inventing language and ritualizing a relationship with death. These children (aged five and six) touched the inception of mathematics as they counted out precious stones as a way of recording how many gopher holes graced our territory. The stone became a standard of measurement for trees, feet, fingers... The thrown stone became an approximation of distance and our classroom materials took on new meaning, as refinements of the children’s primal innovations.

From Casa to Junior High, the students are consistent in their desire to follow the muse of that blue-green mentor – our natural earth.

I follow the winding path of the children’s discovery and arrive at the edge of wonder again and again and again. We begin a long-term liaison with a local farm and call it Project Centaur. We explore the world of Shakespeare

on the banks of an urban stream and create a movie. We simulate vision quests and masks to create visual literacies with place. We transcribe our visions of nature on walls from Mozambique to the University of Toronto. I abdicate the classroom for nature-framed teacher training in Iran.

In honoring nature/culture and to mitigate the ubiquitous consumerism that afflicts ‘first-world’ society we might find a way to follow our hearts and perhaps ignore temptations to swallow our planet.



Project Centaur – Kitchener 2007



The Tempest and Mural 2009



Graduation in the Forest – Tehran 2008

New Directresses Need to Learn More Than Just the Materials

by Mélanie Tremblay, Directress In Training

You have completed your Directress Certification. What comes next? Do you feel ready to enter the classroom? Did you practice enough with the material? Do you remember all the presentations?

Being a Montessori teacher involves many aspects. Dr. Maria Montessori tells us that the most important role for a teacher is to be the link between the child and the classroom materials. By guiding children and teaching them how to use the material in the environment and stepping back to observe, the teacher becomes no more than a connection between the child and his surroundings.

"In brief, the teacher's principle duty in the school may be described as follows: She should explain the use of the material. She is the main connecting link between the material that is the objects and the child."
- *Discovery of the Child: Clio Press, 1988 (reprinted 1996 edition) p. 151*

Dr. Montessori also recognized that directresses play many roles in the classroom. It is by identifying, defining and carrying out these secondary tasks confidently, that a good teacher becomes a great directress.

Directress as Caretaker

The directress is the primary caretaker of the classroom environment. She is responsible for setting up and maintaining the materials and ensuring that the equipment on the shelves is in good working condition. Daily, at the beginning and the ending of the

work period, it is her responsibility to make sure that the material is in order with no broken or missing pieces. She must also make certain that everything is replenished and pencils are sharpened. In cases where the teacher has an assistant, she must train her assistant well by giving her clear instructions. It is important to convey to an assistant the expectations of how the shelves are to look, the neatness of the classroom and the importance of order and perfection for the material. Children come into the class expecting order. Changing or rearranging a shelf can be stressful for children; the teacher should be aware that to make major changes is not recommendable during the school year. Initially, the directress (or assistant) will be the main caretaker, but, little by little, children will take over the role of caretakers, as they naturally want to help care for their environment. The directress then needs to step back and let the children become caretakers of the classroom. The directress' role becomes an 'invisible one', where the children do not see her replenishing the materials, dusting a shelf, etc. She must never redo a child's housekeeping in his presence.

Directress as a Facilitator

The directress becomes a facilitator when guiding children towards independence in their work. Children are free to choose work and often opt for something familiar and comfortable to ensure their success. With a hesitant child, the directress frequently needs to facilitate the transition towards

working with newly presented material and more challenging tasks. By utilizing various methods such as physical proximity or short verbal encouragement, a directress can guide an uncertain child through the completion of a challenging task and ensure his success. It is by successfully completing work that a child will gain the confidence that will lead to independence.

Directress as a Patient Observer

One of the most difficult ability to acquire for the new directress is learning to observe patiently. It is difficult for any adult to watch a child "struggle" with a task, but the directress needs to remember the importance of the 'struggle' in acquiring new skills. It is not a 'struggle' but a learning experience for the child. By interrupting a child's concentration, the directress ceases the learning process- the child has learned nothing.

"The teacher's skill in not interfering comes with practice, like everything else, but it never comes easily. It means rising to spiritual heights. True spirituality realizes that even to help can be a source of pride."
- *The Absorbent Mind: Dell Publishing, 1984: p. 274*

Directress as a Collaborator

Directresses with keen observation skills will quickly notice a child wandering aimlessly or disturbing other working children, but an experienced directress will wait a few minutes before inter-

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New Directresses... (cont'd)

vening. Sometimes other children will point the child towards productivity by inviting him/her to join in or by suggesting other work. If a child becomes destructive towards the material or others, it is the duty of the directress to redirect the child immediately towards productivity. This may be a good time to invite the child for a presentation or to give some subtle suggestions as to what work to take out.

Directress as an Assistor

The directress must be comfortable with all the materials and it is only by having handled them several times over that she will understand their difficulties as well as the frustrations and triumphs that the children feel when working with these materials. If the directress is aware of the connection between the child and the material, choosing when to intervene, sit back or present new activities is easier.

"To become acquainted with the material, a teacher should not just look at it, study it in a book, or learn its use through the explanations of another. Rather, she must exercise herself with it for a long time, trying in this way to evaluate through her own experience the difficulties of, or the interests inherent in, each piece of material that can be given to a child, trying to interpret, although imperfectly, the impressions which a child himself can get from it. Moreover, if a teacher has enough patience to repeat an exercise as often as a child, she can measure in herself the energy and endurance possessed by a child of a determined age. For this final purpose, the

teacher can grade the materials and thus judge the capacity of a child for a certain kind of activity at a given stage of his development . . ."
- *Discovery of the Child: Clío Press, 1988 (reprinted 1996 edition): p. 152-3*

Directress as Co-participant

Sometimes a child may be reluctant to work with others feeling unsure about his/her skills. Some may not possess the social skills to interact or instigate the dialogue needed to work with other children. The directress can step in with a group presentation that includes the child in question. This will help to initiate working with friends. After the presentation of the material, when the work is underway and the children are working well together, the directress steps aside. At other times, a non-reading child, may ask a teacher to participate as the reader. A good example of this is the Cultural Folders. Children enjoy having a teacher reading to them about the pictures. The directress must be aware that some children may become dependent on her.

Directress as Measurer

A good directress does not need to look at recordkeeping notes to know the child's progress in the classroom. She knows each child's development as well as which work has been shown in each area of the classroom and what presentation will come next for the children. Because the Montessori curriculum does not "test" to assess children's pro-

gress in the traditional way, the directress must be aware and alert, constantly scanning the class, assessing the children and deciding who needs assistance or guidance. This is how the Montessori directress keeps track of each child's progress. Any written recordkeeping helps the directress keep track of details, such as; which sandpaper letters a child is working on. Sometimes the recordkeeping helps the assistant to know the progress of the children.

What it All Means for New Directresses

As a new directress, you soon acquire the many roles you play in the classroom. Always be aware of the potential impact you may have on a child. The children scrutinize all your words and actions. It is the directress' responsibility to ensure fulfillment of the needs of the children. You must control the impulse to interfere when not needed and patiently observe and wait a few minutes before intervening. To become the best directress that you can be, you must not only learn the theory of teaching of how to use the material, but must handle, understand and be comfortable with the material. You must also learn how to observe and assess, to help children only when needed, sit back, and wait to encourage children's learning opportunities. A new directress must undergo an inner transformation that goes beyond books, theories and materials; only then can she effectively teach children in the Montessori way.

Cradling Literacy – Early Language and Literacy

by Aleta Berec, B.A., MCI

I recently attended, *Cradling Literacy*, a series of workshops for educators of young children from birth to age five. The workshop addressed the question, “What does a child need in his early years to support his growth into a literate adult?” As a Casa Directress at the Montessori Children’s Academy, Paris, ON, this workshop piqued my curiosity.

The content of *Cradling Literacy* was presented by Jane Flinders, and participants considered “... their own experiences, values, attitudes and belief systems regarding their work, profession... around language and literacy,” and child-centred approaches to meet the child’s communicative needs.

In Module 1, *A Framework for Early Language and Literacy*, Jane Flinders focused on the significance of stories (storytelling and books). Stories have a powerful role in supporting what Flinders termed ‘emotional literacy’. Flinders described emotional literacy as the ability to communicate and recognize feelings, cultivated by meaningful experiences. She explained storytelling stimulates emotional literacy through non-verbal communication (i.e. facial expression, gestures), the richness of a social experience (i.e. voice intonation, evoking emotions), and the experience of engaging in positive conversation. Participants considered childhood experiences regarding storytelling, and then compared this to a level of current interest as an adult. Many participants paralleled storytelling in childhood to current enjoyment of stories and books.

Flinders then challenged our viewpoints as educators regarding objectivity. She presented an activity titled, *The Lenses Through Which We See the World*, to contemplate how mutual respect is applied in daily routines, in schools and childcare settings, to communicate the value of cultural traditions amongst school members. Flinders discussed the positive messages a child or parent received from inclusion of multicultural events, and utilizing multiculturalism as an opportunity to communicate in the educational, school culture.

In Module 2, *Understanding Early Language and Literacy in Young Children*, Flinders advocated that inclusion is equally beneficial to the successes of bilingual children, in which English is an additional language. Because the skills needed to talk, read and write are interrelated, Flinders stated creating a bridge, between a new language and the value of the child’s contribution is accomplished through simple interactions. Acknowledging the child’s voice intonation (intent of meaning) and common facial expressions and gestures, learning key words of the child’s first language, maintaining dependable classroom routines, and providing small peer group activities for interaction are examples. Active listening supports the educator in this role to meet the child’s communicative needs, and is described in *Cradling Literacy* as opening “...the door to understanding and mutual respect.”

During this module, I considered the importance to the child of the

daily, morning greeting in the Casa classroom. One child greets his peers with a verbal greeting, eye contact, a handshake, and a short discussion when entering the classroom. Through this simple classroom interaction an experience rich in ‘emotional literacy’, active listening and meaningful, peer communication occurs.

Flinder’s presentation of Module 3, *Emergent Literacy Curriculum Building*, inter-relates the role of meaningful experiences with careful observation, purposeful intention of planning, and implementing activities. Flinders discussed scaffolding and the acronym BUILD to support the child during more challenging tasks.

Begin with the Child

Provide developmentally appropriate activities

Understand the Child

Family, community, beliefs, first language etc.

Involve the Child

Through meaningful interests and experiences

Let the Child Lead

Takes cues from the child to complete an activity

Delight the Child

Build confidence through fun

In Module 4, *Social-Emotional Literacy*, Flinders emphasized a literacy-rich environment includes much social interaction, through play (games and songs), props and role playing scenarios, print (picture or word signs), conversation, and communication between home and school. Flinders explained challenging behaviour

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Size Matters *by Mary Flewelling-Pinchen*

It would be easy to apply the adage "less is more" to many aspects of a good Montessori programme. Limited group instruction, less competition, fewer interruptions, a specifically defined range of didactic material, and less direction from the adult are all characteristic features of a well-run Montessori programme. However, I have learned that when it comes to the total number of students in a casa classroom, bigger really is better.

When I first graduated from my Montessori training programme, my first teaching assignment was in a very large casa classroom. The head directress and I were responsible for a total of 44 students between the ages of 2 ½ - 6 years. During the summer months leading up to that Septem-

ber, I was very nervous about what it was going to like working with so many children. Twenty-eight years later, I find myself in a very different scenario. The enrollment in my current casa classroom stands at 14. Never before have I had so few students. My public school teacher friends are very envious of my small class population. Some of the parents of my students also admit to being glad that the class size is so small. To be truthful, if you had asked me at the very beginning of my teaching career, to choose between a large or small class enrollment I might have chosen the latter. I now know better! My years of teaching in various casa classrooms have confirmed what Dr. Montessori's first casa dei bambini demonstrated. Creating a normalized Montessori class

with a large number of students is very achievable. In fact, I have grown to understand that a large number of students is actually a helpful factor in the development of a normalized casa classroom.

When one reads about the early classrooms that Dr. Montessori first established, we discover that these classrooms were home to a very large number of children. Upwards of 40 or more students worked alongside each other each day. This is likely many more than most casa classrooms accommodate today and probably more than most modern directresses can imagine themselves responsible for. And yet, we must remember it was with that number of students that Maria Montessori first observed the remarkable phenomenon of normalization. The

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Cradling Literacy (cont'd)

may represent a social-emotional challenge of the child, yet continue to serve as "...a function for the child." Decoding the scenarios in which the behaviours are observed may reveal strengths and weaknesses in the child's communicative abilities. Flinders reminded participants to provide opportunities for effective communication, giving the example of picture and word charts to describe feelings (i.e. happy, sad, confused, angry) to help the child recognize social-emotional experiences on his own terms.

The training provided in this workshop series presented the following formula for exploration and discussion.

Learning Goals + Individualization + Meaningful Connections = Purposeful Teaching Strategies

And during the workshops I contemplated the educator's role described by Flinders, as creating wholeness in the child's abilities to understand his world and be understood through language and literacy. This reminded me of Montessori's observations of the educator's role, as a guide for the

child to grow in this world, and as himself, contribute to its discovery and beauty.

For more information about this workshop series please contact:
Jane Flinders, Musical Motion
musicalmotion@rogers.com
Sharon Brooks, Kids Can Fly
sharon.brooks@sympatico.ca

This workshop series was possible, because of several individuals. Jane Flinders, the creator of Musical Motion, Sharon Brooks, the executive director of Kids Can Fly, and Dorothy and Bill Campbell.

Size Matters (cont'd)

children working in the classrooms she designed behaved in a manner that was previously unheard of. They displayed prolonged concentration, orderliness, self discipline and a spontaneous, self-directed love for learning. Since that time, Montessori directresses from around the world have confirmed that these desirable and sought-after traits are more easily achieved with a large group of 3-6 year olds than with a small group. The large Montessori casa classroom has remained the desired model. Let us examine the reasons why this is so.

First and foremost, the most obvious difference between the workings of large group of casa children versus a small group is the range of activity that occurs in the classroom at any given moment. When 20 – 30 students work together in the prepared environment, the natural bustle of varied activity dominates. How could it not? With this number of students, many materials from all areas of the classroom will be in use simultaneously throughout the entire work period. The wide variety of equipment that is used during the work period cannot help but generate curiosity and the desire to investigate. The variation of activity generates an enthusiasm for exploration and action. Opportunities for young explorers abound. In this environment, even children who are having some difficulty settling down to a task are likely to be drawn into some learning experience by the activities and conversations that surround them. In addition, children who may want to work with a particular material

that is already in use will be forced to make another choice. This will result in students selecting new tasks, asking for lessons with new material, or repeating familiar tasks that will further consolidate their skills. New and improved learning will be the result. Undoubtedly, spontaneous learning occurs far more frequently when many students of each age level are working alongside each other rather than just a few. In addition, it is much easier for casa children to become aware of the full range of exercises that are available to them when they have the opportunity to see many materials in use each and every day. In short, when many students work together in the casa classroom the learning environment is just more interesting and stimulating for everyone involved.

The well populated casa classroom not only exerts a positive influence on the actions of its students, but it also helps the adult assume the correct role in the casa classroom. When there are many students in a casa classroom, the directress will find it impossible to be involved with each and every activity that occurs. She will have to learn when her input is required and when she is able to leave matters alone. Her experiences will help her to more effectively understand how and when her students can manage successfully without her. Directresses of large classes also quickly recognize that older students are a great ally and asset. In a large classroom situation, there will be many opportunities for the older students to help their

younger classmates. As the directress grows comfortable in following rather than leading all of her students, they in turn develop greater self-reliance and independence. Students who realize that the directress is not always readily available to them naturally begin to rely on themselves and each other rather than the directress. They quickly become resourceful, confident and competent. All of these factors work together to foster the preferred child-centered Montessori learning environment.

It is true that a novice Montessori directress, in charge of many students, may at first feel overwhelmed by the amount of activity that surrounds her. She will likely struggle to “keep up” with all of the activities of her students. In doing so, she may, as Dr. Montessori once stated, “keep running from child to child, thus spreading the contagion of her own anxiety and wearisome lack of calm.” Dr. Montessori of course did not want the directress to feel solely responsible for everything that happened around her. Instead, she advised the directress to quietly leave most of her students alone to pursue their own learning, confident in the knowledge that they are their own best teachers. In a well populated classroom, the novice teacher will be forced to learn this truth quickly. In contrast, the young directress who is in charge of only a small group of children may never rise to this level of competency. Even if she does try to stay out of the way whenever possible,

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Size Matters (cont'd)

her mere presence will likely exert a stronger influence than is needed or desirable for a small group of children. The unhappy reality is that students in a small Montessori classroom are less likely to develop the same degree of self-directed learning or independence than they would in a large classroom situation.

In addition to considering the consequences of the teacher/student ratio, it is equally important to examine the social repercussions of a large number of casa children working together versus a small number. When fewer students are gathered together, there is obviously less opportunity for diverse social interaction and learning. If there are only 2 - 4 students of each age level, the opportunity for spontaneous, shared work and learning is reduced. This has a particularly significant impact on the 5 year olds who are always very eager to work together. In a small class situation, it may prove difficult for a 5-year old to find a friend with similar abilities who is available and interested in undertaking a collective task at a particular moment. Furthermore, if there are only a few older children in a class, collective tasks will always have to be shared by the same small group of students. This sometimes leads to power struggles, social dependency and competition. In contrast, when a greater number of children have the opportunity to work alongside each other every day, social interactions naturally increase and are more varied in nature. Children benefit from learning how to work effectively with many different individuals. Their social

skills will be enhanced from developing many diverse friendships rather than just a few. A large class will also reduce academic comparisons and competition. Children will feel freer to work at their own rate and they will be less aware and concerned about how they compare to their classmates when the number and variety of students is large.

The real workings of a large Montessori casa classroom are indeed complex and somewhat intimidating. Perhaps this is why many



parents and some teachers feel uneasy with the prospect of more than 25 students in a class. It is only after witnessing a number of 3-year cycles of learning that one is able to truly understand how a large normalized Montessori classroom develops and the significant benefits that it offers to its young participants.

Embracing the large Montessori classroom does indeed require an

initial leap of faith. Experienced Montessori educators, who have witnessed the miraculous outcomes of large Montessori classrooms, have an important message to share with the younger colleagues and parents that they work with each day. They must challenge these adults to consider what it is that we hope our children will gain from Montessori education. Are we working to give our students an academic head-start or are we striving to impart something less tangible but infinitely more valuable? If we are interested in giving our students superior academic knowledge, then a small student/teacher ratio will indeed be the most favourable classroom situation. If however, we are eager to help our students develop the intellectual traits that will sustain them for a lifetime of learning, then the larger casa classroom is what we must strive to provide. In doing so, we will ensure that our children emerge from the first plane of development with the true gifts of Montessori safely embodied in their very beings. How will we recognize these children? They will be the self-directed learners, the independent thinkers, the socially adept young people who are confident, resourceful and flexible in manner. In short, they will be our hope and salvation.

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Hershey Montessori Farm School

by Heide Aungst and David Kahn

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Brianna Sennott and James Hecker get a hearty welcome when they walk through the doors to start their school day at 7:15 a.m. Rather than sleepy hellos from fellow students in a classroom, they're greeted by the loud baas of hungry sheep and peppy braying of baby goats in the barn on their school's campus.

Soon, their biology and geometry teacher, Rachel McKinney, and two more students join them in the barn. McKinney sweeps the dusty floor, while James scoops feed from a bin, pouring it into the troughs in the animal pens.

This is McKinney's first stop of the day. Later in the morning, she'll accompany a group of students in hipwaders, watching from the edge as they take a deep, slushy stroll through a swamp, scooping up snails in nets while bullfrogs bellow in surround-sound.

Here in the barn, birds flutter among the wooden rafters, the resonance of their flapping wings drowned out by the sheep. As the morning sunlight streams through a crack in the door, Brianna takes a moment to sit among the fuzzy baby goats, letting them jump on her and affectionately nuzzle her face.

"They're more fun than puppies," James says of the kids born a few weeks before this spring morning.

Brianna, 14, of Chicago, and James, 15, of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, were ninth grade students at the Hershey Montessori Farm School in Huntsburg Township. (They have since graduated.) While other adolescents are sowing their wild oats, the kids here are actually sowing corn, beans, and tomatoes. You might ask how is farming an aid to education?

Opened in 2000, Hershey Montessori is one of a handful of farm schools in the United States, and the only boarding school in the world based on the Montessori philosophy. A model for adolescent learning formulated in 1926 by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, it calls for "first the education of the senses, then the education of the intellect." She called it "Erdkinder," which literally translates to "Children of The Earth."

Here, the kids are as likely to have dirt under their fingernails as geometry problems in their heads. "Work makes study better," says Montessori. Adolescents are recognized for their "noble work and noble characteristics." In Montessori's terms, the farm commu-

nity is all about responsibility, an implicit sense of justice, spirituality, empathy, solidarity, collaboration, physical work, creative self-expression, and social learning. In keeping with the words of Maria Montessori, the lessons to be learned are life lessons: "Social integration has occurred when the individual identifies himself with the group to which he belongs.

When this has happened, the individual thinks more about the success of the group than of his personal success."

About half of the 50 seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders at the Farm School are boarders drawn from as far away as Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and Mexico—and states from California to Connecticut. The rest come from surrounding communities in Ohio.

Despite its growing popularity, the school remains a well-kept secret, nestled on 97 acres off Route 528 in Geauga County's scenic Amish country. Just a small sign announces that it's there behind the dense trees.

A driveway winds through the woods to a red barn and a pony grazing in a lush green pasture with a split wood fence curling around the property. On this warm May day, the scene

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Hershey Montessori Farm School (cont'd)

looks as if an artist has painted it against a background of azure sky and fluffy cotton clouds.

But don't get the wrong idea, this isn't a school that trains kids to be farmers. And it's not a school for the gifted or disabled though it accepts both. And this program also has clear academic benchmarks in the humanities, science, mathematics, language arts, foreign language, vocational arts, the visual arts, theater, and music. But academics are contextualized by community activity and conscious social relations.

The Montessori Erdkinder's real intention is to set up the framework of a little community where the students help maintain an operating business, which incorporates every part of the farm. The main goal of the micro-economy is to impart a sense of independence through economic self-help.

"We're living in this little community that works just as a big community would work," says student Ximena Camarena-Lopez, 14, of Mexico City. "It's preparing us to go out to the world and be good people and be helpful to the rest of the world as much as we can."

Brianna and James lead to the 2,000-square-foot Bioshelter, which looks like an oddly futuristic house of glass behind the classic red barn. And it is.

Hundreds of plants, a sea of green with some flowers bursting forth in vibrant pinks and yellows, line the steamy interior. But this is more than a simple gardener's greenhouse, with solar panels and a composting area among its features. The Bioshelter is a complete indoor ecosystem.

James waters plants, while Brianna nips the tops off dozens of basil plants to get them ready for the weekend plant sale.

The students grow hundreds of starter garden vegetables and flowers from seed to sell at area farmer's markets and at the school's weekend plant sales each spring. They also use these plants in their own 18,000-square-foot garden, generating plenty of food to harvest and sell at fall markets and to can for themselves to eat throughout the winter.

By spring, the shelves in the commercial, 15-by-9 foot pantry in the basement of the main building are nearly depleted. Only some pickles and a few jars of honey and jams remain.

Raising and selling plants and produce is part of the Farm School's micro-economy. The students also make and sell their own maple syrup and honey from bees that they raise. They've even hand-built the hives in their large wood-working shop, located behind

the barn.

Just before the holidays, the shop turns into a crafts workshop to make wooden stools and Christmas wreaths, while the canning kitchen in the main building is transformed into a candle-making studio. Last year, the students also began selling Christmas trees that they harvested from a neighbor who agreed to share the crop.

The money raised from these entrepreneurial endeavors doesn't pay for pizza parties or field trips like a fundraiser at a typical school might. Instead, profits are poured back into other projects. So, for example, tree sale profits purchase gasoline for the tractor that is used to grow the plants that the students will then sell. The money is kept separate from the school budget and is handled by a student manager who balances the account and writes the checks.

In this micro-economy, students learn not only about biology through growing plants, or the skills needed to run a bed-and-breakfast, they also learn business management, math, finance, and communication skills. But their social life is now intensified by purpose and the real challenges of productivity and exchange.

Most of the kids here come from Montessori backgrounds and fit into the flow of finding projects, setting goals, and

Hershey Montessori Farm School (cont'd)

working independently to achieve them—the essence of Montessori. For those from a traditional classroom setting, the adjustment is greater.

Bryan Jones, 14, a ninth-grader, was conditioned by the structure of his public school education in Mentor, Ohio, from kindergarten through sixth grade and struggled with his new freedoms. "For the first couple of months, I was late on a lot of my assignments," he says. "I learned if I'm going to be in an environment that's open, I have to structure my time more."

Former student Kaitlin Guest—now a graduate of one of Cleveland's finest preparatory schools—attended Hershey Montessori School from the time she was two years old. As an eighth grader, she was among the inaugural group of students when the Farm School opened.

By the time she was in ninth grade, Kaitlin was the first manager of the Farm School's sugarbush, where the students tap maple trees each spring and make their own maple syrup.

"If there was one aspect of the farm that you really loved, you could totally immerse yourself in it and become the leader of it," Kaitlin says. "I thought that was so cool that at that age you could take over something that you love."

Graduates sum up the benefits of the farm school in their own words. At age 13 or 14, they have a very big picture of community life with high ideals.

Here at the Farm School we have two kinds of responsibilities; you are responsible for yourself and your own actions and the other one that you are responsible about for the whole community.

It is true that we do a lot of work but not every person does a lot of work. A couple people do a little work one day, then the next day a couple other people do a little work and after a week a lot of people do a little work but it results in fruitful benefits.

Especially if it's your roommate, the person who you have the conflict with, you're going to live with them and it's not that you can avoid them. I guess the one thing you learn is you can't avoid the problem, you're going to have to face it at some point.

Being a boarder here I have learned that I can hold myself together on my own without having anyone else's help. I can stand up for myself and other people, too, without feeling afraid that I'm going to be thought of differently. This is because everyone is at one point or another aware of who everyone is, and what they are, and how they found themselves here.

One of the objectives of the school is to help us students find an inner peace, because if you are peaceful you're also happy, and now that I am a happier person people respect me. People actually listen to me. I am a leader now. The school helped me become a leader.

These children of the earth are happy young adults. Their future dreams are shaped by happy memories experienced within the little community.

People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good sacred memory preserved from childhood [or adolescence] is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into life, one is safe to the end of one's days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may be the means of saving us. (Dostoyevsky)

Hiedi Angst is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to Cleveland Magazine.

David Kahn is a Montessori leader in the field of adolescent design, and is currently implementing Project 2012, with a million dollar grant from the Dekko Foundation, the Hershey Foundation and the Oppenheimer family. Executive Director of the North American Montessori Teachers' Association and the founding director (1998-2003) of the Hershey Montessori Farm School, Mr. Kahn seeks to establish a definitive model for Montessori Adolescent education from ages 12-18.



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