

# Educating the whole child

**TESNEEM COUPER, A  
TEACHER AT MONTESSORI  
@HOWICK PRIMARY,  
REFLECTS ON BEING A  
PARENT WATCHING HER  
DAUGHTER MOVE TO THE  
PRIMARY CLASS, AND  
REMINING HERSELF  
TO HAVE TRUST IN HER  
CHILD AS MONTESSORI  
IS INDEED 'AN EDUCATION  
FOR LIFE'.**



I used to think I was a pretty relaxed Mum. When parents would come talk to me about their six year old not working as hard as they did in preschool, I'd gently reassure them that it's normal, that they need time to settle and to just give them even more time - there's no rush. Sure enough their child would settle in eventually, find the thing that sparks them and one day it's like a switch has flipped and away they go!

Then, my child turned six and came to our 'big school'. To my surprise, I found myself despairing that she wasn't working as hard as she is capable of, work that she had done in preschool - she had no inclination to do anymore, and that she did nothing all day. As a mum I was suddenly wringing my hands about her learning; as a teacher I kept telling myself that there was nothing to worry about regarding her learning - otherwise her teacher would have talked to me.

The struggle and concern is real. So what did I do?

I had to step back and examine what attracted me to Montessori education, as a teacher and as a parent.

Why did I make the commitment to entrust my child's education to this specific philosophy and what has kept me coming back to the classroom for almost 20 years?

I keep coming back to this quote from *The Discovery of The Child*:

*"The education of even a small child, therefore, does not aim at preparing him for school; but for life."*

It's education for life. That's what I want for my child. I have always said that Montessori is a 'long game'. As parents and teachers, we don't get to see the benefits of this method of teaching and learning until the children are much further along in their educational journey. What we are doing (as teachers) can be compared to building a good solid foundation and a frame for a house. This process begins in the preschool classroom and carries on throughout the child's primary education. The real benefits of Montessori education are not apparent until the student reaches college and even university. "In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, for maybe twenty years."<sup>5</sup>

So how do we do this? It starts with viewing education holistically, which means that in the classroom, we aim to educate the whole child. This means that providing students with the

tools to help them in developing their independence, self-care and social skills are equally as important as 'traditional' academics (ie. maths and literacy).

Developing independence is a cornerstone of the Montessori Method, starting from birth through to adulthood. In each stage (0 - 6; 6 - 12; 12 - 18), the ways we encourage and guide the students towards independence is best suited to their developmental needs. When children are in preschool, the teachers give them lessons in practical life, which assist them in caring for themselves. For example, by using the Dressing Frames, they learn how to button and zip clothing and how to tie their own laces.

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They are presented with lessons in hand washing, caring for plants, and wiping tables – all these lessons and indirect aims which may relate to fine or gross motor skills, but just as importantly they teach the children how to independently care for themselves and their environment.

In the 6 – 12 class, the children are starting to move away from developing their physical independence, to refining their intellectual independence. At this age, the children have a thirst for knowledge – the questions (especially from six year olds) are never ending. The children want to know why things are the way they are – they want to take the information presented to them and to create their own understanding, ideas and opinions. Their developing sense of moral justice and fairness in this stage also ties into the need for independence. They are trying to ascertain what is right and wrong. This is why our roles as parents and teachers are so vital at this age. It's our job as adults to help them understand and guide them towards making good decisions, without making the decisions for them. Helping students to navigate social situations and how to relate to others, is just as much a part of their learning as learning the Essential Spelling Lists. As teachers, we help the children to do this in group

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settings, during regular class meetings or one-on-one, on an as needed basis (sometimes, it's needed quite often!) Since education is preparing them for life, we need to guide children in learning how to build their own confidence or solve problems and social issues with their peers. Most importantly, we help them to explore how best to react and make good choices in different situations – which are all inescapable parts of life.

As teachers, we continually encourage independence in the running and management of our classrooms. By giving students the freedom and responsibility to complete their given work, select their work, guide their learning and to care for the classroom – we are assisting them in their never ending quest for independence. We also nurture their independence by challenging them – we ask them difficult questions, and we can even give them work that's just a bit tricky to help them develop critical thinking skills, resilience and problem solving.

These are all key attributes in developing independence.

Another way we develop independence and educate the whole child is by using Practical Life activities. As in preschool Practical Life work is incredibly important, and often undervalued at the 6 – 12 level. We are continuing to give children the opportunity to care for themselves and the environment, but on a larger scale. The children are often involved in cooking, baking, cleaning or handwork. In the 6 – 12 class, all of these pieces of work are just as important as sitting down and writing an imaginative story or doing some multiplication questions.

In these real-life pursuits, there are often mathematics and literacy skills being used and consolidated, for example, when children are cooking, they are working with measurement, reading, understanding and following instructions and telling time. At the end of it not only have they learnt some skills that they can use outside of the classroom, they have something tangible to show for their work, aside from just copying words or equations into their books.

Handwork and art is often overlooked in classrooms as well, and could even be seen as less important than other curriculum areas. Maria Montessori felt that humankind's work was to create and to advance humanity, which is done by using our hands. “The skill of a man's hands is bound up with the development of his mind, and in the light of history we see it connected with the development of civilization ... Hence the development of manual skill keeps pace with mental development.”<sup>3</sup>



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Aside from the gratification of being able to create something (eg, a painting, sculpture, a musical piece, jumper, or quilt) once again, there are maths and literacy skills being used to decode instructions, measure and count – as well as critical thinking and visual or listening skills. Handwork, art and music are also greatly beneficial for children's fine motor development, particularly children who may struggle with handwriting. With the increased use of technology, children may not have as many opportunities to refine their fine motor skills.

Another key component of the Montessori Method of teaching and learning is Cosmic Education. This is the understanding that everything is an interrelated part of a whole. While mathematics and literacy are vital parts of Cosmic Education, it encompasses a great deal more than that. The children also learn Science, History and Geography. Within the study of History, comes an appreciation of music and art. It's imperative that children understand what came before

the here and now. Learning about the Earth's formation, how it works and its flora and fauna, as well as Astronomy and the Civilisations that came before us serve to create a sense of awe, wonder and appreciation for nature and humanity. Many of the materials used to present these lessons are based in reading – when the children are working with these materials, not only are they acquiring knowledge about the topic area (eg, parts of a flower) but they are analysing and evaluating what they have read to complete the activity. Like many of the lessons in a Montessori classroom, to the average observer or untrained teacher – the learning may be invisible, as it may not be copied down in a workbook, since that is not the aim of the lesson and may take away from the child's joy in learning for learning's sake.

So, as a parent what do you do when a child tells you that they've learnt nothing, or can't (won't) explain what they've done at school? As a parent, it sets off alarm bells, doesn't it? Justifiably so.

If you have concerns about your child and her learning, the first course of action is to always talk to her teacher. The classroom teacher has a broad view of what is going on in the classroom – what your child does and doesn't respond to; who she works well with, and who may not be the best partner for your child; the lessons she has had success with, struggled with and the next steps.

**“What do you do when a child tells you that they've learnt nothing, or can't (won't) explain what they've done at school?”**

A Montessori teacher is a trained observer. Through observing your child formally and informally, we gather a wealth of knowledge and information regarding his learning, behaviours and character. This in turn, guides our teaching, specifically tailored to the needs of each child. The very best way to ensure continued growth for your child is to be positively engaged with his learning within and outside of school. This means open, honest and clear communication with his teachers and supporting your child's learning at home. This could be by reading with him, taking him to places that he may find inspiring (eg, the museum) or by cooking and baking with him.

Montessori education in New Zealand is dynamic, exciting, and vastly different to the kind of schools that we attended as children. Maria Montessori said: "Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities."<sup>4</sup> Since we are educating children for life itself, the best service we can do for them is to help them realise and release their own potential. ■

**Read about Tesneem on page 32.**

