

Spotlight

ROOM FOR CHILDREN TO GROW, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

by Joe Zibell

Kathleen Reilly Zwahlen, founder and director of The Hunt Ridge Montessori School in Fairfield, describes it well. When a child arrives at her school, they come with “faces full of happy energy, coupled with the hopes and dreams of their parents.” By extension, a trust is shared with the Montessori teachers. “Each Montessori teacher desires to bring [children] along the path of exploration, discovery and learning, nurturing their ability to contribute to their class, their family and their community.”

Connecticut Parent Magazine annually recognizes and celebrates the important place Montessori education holds in our local communities by connecting with local educators, and focuses on the touchstones that make this philosophy stand out. And, one of the traits that stands out across the years is the all-encompassing view of the student, and the various ways that children are encouraged to develop a life-long love of learning.

“The teacher or directress/director in the Montessori classroom believes that the child is a vessel filled with potentiality waiting to be realized from birth,” says Mary Lou Cobb, founder and head of school of The Cobb School, Montessori in Simsbury. “The directress/director is the link between the child and the materials in the classroom; through observation we recognize the individual needs of the child and entire classroom and respond to them with presentations or changes in a routine. The directress/director recognizes [that] growth in the children only occurs when they have the freedom to act on their needs.”

Maureen Scudder, director of communications at The Cobb School, adds, “The child moves through the Montessori program growing more and more aware of himself or herself. The child learns how to choose, learns what he especially enjoys, what she’s particularly skilled at, and on and on.

“The importance of knowing oneself cannot be overstated. We often find that Montessori children

understand what makes them tick long before traditionally-educated children.”

A Classroom of Wonder and Exploration

Most of us are familiar with some of the general differences in a Montessori classroom. There is not the “all eyes on me” structure that many grew accustomed to in a public school setting, for example. However, there is a thoughtful intricacy to a Montessori classroom’s design that is a reflection of the core ideals behind the philosophy.

“The Montessori teacher, child and environment are seen as a learning triangle, with each a vital part of the whole,” says Dawn Niles, director of Circle of Friends Montessori in Chester, when asked how the design of the classroom fosters traits like accountability and responsibility. “The teacher thoughtfully prepares a classroom environment with materials and activities that entice her students to learn. While the teacher may guide her students, it is interacting with the environment that allows learning



Photo courtesy of The Cobb School, Montessori.

to occur.”

“Because the classroom is seen as ‘their space,’ they are eager to take responsibility for the care of the environment as well as the care of the members of the environment. It is a common occurrence to hear a Montessori student say, ‘Let me help!’” They take turns caring for the classroom pets and plants, they ensure that works are put back on the shelf where they belong and ready for their next friend, and they keep outdoor space neat and clean.”

Scudder emphasizes that connection

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between children being responsible for the quality of their classroom and learning. "The Primary classroom in particular is called 'the children's house,' but in reality an entire authentic Montessori school is just this: it is a children's house," she says. "The furniture is child-sized, unlike most furniture in families' homes. The tools and utensils, such as brooms, mops, peelers, aprons, bowls, etc., all fit the children's bodies and homes.

"Children in a Montessori environment understand that they are the keepers of their classroom and their community. This understanding translates to accountability and responsibility. They must care for themselves, their environment and their people in their small, immediate world and in the much larger world.

"With this approach, students take charge of their learning," Scudder concludes.

Facilitator in a Child-Centered Room

Zwahlen notes that the design of the classroom and the role of the classroom teacher are tied directly to the ideals first put forth by Dr. Maria Montessori.

"Maria Montessori called her classroom the 'Casa dei Bambini' ... 'The House of Children,'" says Zwahlen. "The children are absorbed in the happy undertakings of the day where everything is arranged for their well-being; it is 'their home.'

"Montessori teacher[s] carefully plans their classroom according to the needs of the children and the philosophy prepared by Dr. Montessori. [Teachers] work to create a sense of excitement, imagination and wonder! While the classroom is organized in a specific fashion, it is the role of a Montessori teacher to act as a guide for the children. It takes time and patience to create an environment where we help the children learn how to make good and appropriate choices in the classroom."

Courtney Reim, a Primary teacher at The Cobb School, acknowledges the important role that observation plays. "The role of the teacher in a Montessori school is unique," notes Reim. "The teacher, also referred to as the directress, director or guide, is trained to understand the needs and

characteristics of children as they pass from one plane of development to another. It is the teacher's job to prepare the classroom with concrete materials specifically designed for children at each plane (0-3; 3-6; 6-9; 9-12; 12-15; and 15-18).

"The teacher must observe the needs of the whole child and present lessons that will help the children reach their fullest potentials, academically, socially and emotionally," Reim adds.

Benefits to Last a Lifetime

All the educators contacted for this article acknowledged that the lessons learned and experiences shared inside the walls of a Montessori classroom resonate with meaning and enlightenment for years to come, enriching a child's educational path towards adolescence and beyond.

"From the time a child walks into a Montessori classroom, they are given the support required to become independent, lifelong learners," says Niles. "As we continually encourage children to take care of themselves and do things for themselves, their confidence grows exponentially. They are taught to be constantly aware of themselves as members of a community, thinking about how their words and actions affect themselves, their friends and their community.



Photo courtesy of Hunt Ridge Montessori School.

"Perhaps most importantly, as children are guided through the curriculum, based on their own developmental level and interest, an intrinsic love and excitement for learning grows that will serve Montessori students for years to come."



Photo courtesy of Circle of Friends Montessori School.

Scudder emphasizes the importance of academic skills, but also pointed out the life skills that a Montessori education helps develop. "The Montessori child also learns how to be a contributing member of a community, another skill that cannot be overrated," she says. "[Students] have both academic and practical life responsibilities. By the latter I mean the student must load the dishwasher, serve a snack, water the gardens and more. The academic piece of the Montessori puzzle is enormous, highly sophisticated and quite different from traditional education, but it still seems to make the most sense to the parent who is new to Montessori."

Cobb adds, "We offer the child the keys and aids to life, and then we step aside. Each child, whatever his or her age, craves freedom. In the Montessori classroom, we offer the child freedom within limits. The resulting relationship between the directress/director and the children in the classroom is one of mutual respect, love and the sharing of joy in personal accomplishment.

"The children are not motivated by external forces but from within, and the individual approach to a child's journey is a special gift the student and teacher both cherish," Cobb concludes.

Montessori, while a unique philosophy that has specific structures and traits that set it apart from other educational models, retains universal ideals, goals and a worldview that we can all appreciate and value.

Zwahlen concluded her communication by sharing a couple of "Montessori rules to live by" —

You can't hurry love, let your children learn at their own pace.

All children have it, Montessori children keep it. ♥