



Continuing parent education articles by Marnie Downs, Retired Primary Level Teacher.

***What your
Child
Brings
Home
in her
Backpack***

A Montessori education is unique in many ways, one of them being the way children are viewed and assessed. There are no report cards or grades, and, often, parents are wondering how to really evaluate their children's education, how to measure success or failure. Perhaps, we can look in their backpacks for more information, to see how they are doing, what new math skill or science project is in the making. Maybe, we can take a look at the spelling quiz that was returned to them that day and get a clue.

Yet, very often, the most important "learning" is invisible. The real work of the child is the creation of themselves. Now, I know that sounds kind of esoteric perhaps or unconventional in a time when schools seem to be obsessed with test scores and reading levels. And even though we are Montessorians, we, too, are extremely aware of reading levels and math abilities, etc. and strive to keep each and every child on task and on or above grade level in those essential academic skills. But when you stop and think about it, consider what a child really learns in a day at school and the little they really COULD bring home that would fit in their backpacks. Yes they will have in there that new math computation and yes, they will have in there that geography list to study for the upcoming test. But what is not in there is all that they hear, see, feel, and experience with their classmates. And all of this is education and of utmost importance as well. Everything is learning. Everything prepares us for the next possible approach to something we knew nothing about just a few moments ago...be it how to do that division problem or how to solve a dispute with a friend. Ultimately, much of what we learn that is of utmost help and value to living happily and with purpose is invisible.

Think about the things your child may have experienced in one day at school and which received no grade, yet it probably received some feedback directly or indirectly. A fight ensued on the playground and your child was the one who helped end the dispute. Or your child was the one who left the fight feeling defeated. Or who may have suddenly seen a whole new way of perceiving another child that opened his heart to the suffering of others. The possibilities for learning new things are endless in just one single moment. Consider the possibilities to help others in the type of classrooms we create at CMS. The children are free to move around and choose their place to work. They are free to choose what to work on (for the most part ... as long as they have had a lesson, and it is age appropriate) and have the freedom to choose their own behavior when something does not go their way. We all choose our own behaviors of course, but rarely in our lives have we been in an environment where social behaviors and social skills are actually TAUGHT every day, as part of a curriculum.

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cont.*

I was talking with a friend (whose children go to public school), and she was telling me about what they bring home from school that seems to be of prime interest to them...and it wasn't papers. The part of their day that always seems to interest them the most are the times when other kids get into trouble, have a fight, are made fun of and labeled as "bad" or "stupid" by their peers. I said immediately that it is the teacher's fault. She looked at me as if I was nuts. "Well," she said, "there are always those kinds of kids in every classroom." And with that we both offered up the names of the kids who were always in trouble when we were in fourth grade! I immediately remembered not only their names and what they looked like but also the kinds of things they did and then how they were disciplined and regarded by our teacher. And there is the clue. The teacher accepted them as "bad boys" and spoke to them in a disapproving tone of voice, at times sarcastic, always judgmental, and never kind. Thus, these children were labeled and scapegoated by the rest of the class. My friend said, "So what can a teacher do to keep this from happening?"

And I told her what we do at our school. First is in recognizing that no child ever acts "badly" for no reason whatsoever. They are getting something out of it, trying to meet a need. The teacher needs to take a close look at such children and immediately have compassion as her primary response. Secondly, she then begins to address such children with great respect and courtesy, while also, with a very clear kindness, establishing the rules of behavior and making it clear that she will try and be of help to this child in obeying them. It is also helpful, when the child does not obey the rules, that the teacher be reassuring, telling the child, "Don't worry. This will get better. It just takes practice. When I was your age this took me a long time too." Notice how this has just been depersonalized, no mention of the word YOU anywhere, it's all being treated very matter-of-factly. Thirdly, she speaks well of such children within hearing of others and she does this OFTEN. As in "John is really growing up beautifully, and I love the way he...." And "Did you see the way John walked across the room this morning? He could really help others remember that we walk here." Immediately, the entire class becomes aware that the teacher likes this child and also speaks highly of him. This immediately changes the attitude of the other children about the kids who do not obey, behave, and relate well, etc. No more scapegoating. I have often heard a child who had been unkind be one of the first to repeat what he heard the teacher say and speak kindly about the child, as in, "Hey, Betty is young and she is growing. It takes time." This also increases the security of all of the other children as they are now reassured that they will be treated with the same respect and also given time to grow and change themselves. And notice what a huge lesson in life the entire class just got. None of it is on a piece of paper. Maybe not even "remembered" enough to actually talk about. But a huge lesson about how to treat other people that is absorbed, and that will last a lifetime.

Since my friend's children are in public school, I did not talk about one other main ingredient in this scenario. The Montessori materials and curriculum. The three ages in a classroom. The fascination and thrill the children experience every single day in learning all sorts of things in an exciting, sensorial way. I sense from listening to her that we seem to have fewer "troubled" children that require constant attention. This is not necessarily so. But what we do have is a curriculum that is so exciting and challenging to the children that, there isn't a whole lot of time or interest really in antisocial behavior. There will always be troubled kids. The way we deal with this seems to fit right in to our ability to address the WHOLE child, her academic AND emotional needs simultaneously. Quite a feat! So very Montessori!

*One
Teacher,
One
Assistant*

One of the questions most often asked in parent study groups, during chats with parents, or even in social occasions at school is “Why is there only ONE teacher in a classroom of 29 (could be up to 3) children? How can one person teach every child every piece of material for all those subjects? Isn’t it true that kids need lots of one on one to really reach their maximum potential?” I love this question. It brings me an opportunity to wax poetic about what Montessori really understood and therefore designed for the intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual development of the child. Here goes!

It is true that there is only one “teacher” in a Montessori classroom, one trained Montessorian who, therefore, has the credentials to teach all of the materials. Montessori designed it specifically so that the teacher would be outnumbered by the children! She knew that adults tend to try and over-direct and control children and she knew that children have many ways of learning, only one of them being directly with an adult. So in a Montessori classroom there are three ways a child may get a lesson on an age appropriate piece of material: 1. Directly with the teacher. 2. Watching the teacher giving a lesson to another child. 3. Being taught by another child. Therefore, it is not necessary for every child to have a lesson on every piece of material with the teacher. It is imperative, however, that the teacher be very aware of who knows what, who has had a lesson on what, as well as how successfully the lesson “took.” I remember watching a child give a lesson on a new piece of material to a friend, and then watched the two do the work together. It is necessary to discern just how well the “new” student is doing, if any steps are left out of the “lesson.” and to re-present the material at a later time in the near future. Some children learn much, much better from a peer, are more open and interested with a friend teaching them. The teacher just needs to have eyes in the back of her head to always know exactly what is going on with each child! And, for the most part, Montessori trained teachers have that ability!!!

Children do not need “one-on-one” with an adult to reach their maximum potential as learners. What they need is a very stimulating environment that is expressly created with their level of development in mind. They need someone who is constantly enlivening their environment with the details that attract their attention and that offers various ways of learning something that keeps them interested and happy actually. The materials are designed in such a way that there might be three different things on the shelf that teach the same skill (be it in math or science or language, etc.), thus offering a variety of possible ways to learn something. It ensures repetition and also ensures interest! And keep in mind that the children are free to move around the room all day long, ensuring them of the stimulation of each other’s learning as well as the freedom to watch. Children often learn a huge amount just by watching, enabling them to become familiar with the work long before they actually do it themselves. Some children are much less hesitant if given this time to watch, listen, see how something is done by another.

One more thing about there being just one teacher in a class of so many children. Remember that a Montessori approach is always considering the WHOLE child. There is so much I personally love about the Montessori method, but this is the foundation, the cornerstone, actually. A child is not in school to just get the three Rs...she is there to become her best self in every way, to be stimulated and helped to see that ALL of life is really about learning. She is learning how to hang up her coat and not leave it on the floor (learning respect for her things and therefore her world), learning how to help another child in need, learning self control when things don’t go her way (as they often won’t in her daily world), learning patience and kindness and respect, and the list is endless. The classroom is truly a microcosm of the world, a little society presenting all sorts of possible opportunities for learning new things every single day, among them being what the materials teach...and so very much more!