

Montessori Education Makes a Difference : a mother / teacher perspective

By: Dr. Lata Cherath [□]

The day was September 11, the setting entirely different. It was in my Science classroom at Princeton Montessori School and we were having a discussion about changes in the states of matter.

“Ice melts at 0°C, and table salt at 800°C. Wow! that is high,” says one of my students.

“Can you think of another metal that melts at a higher temperature”, I ask. Silence prevails.

“Think back to an unfortunate incident that occurred in our country a year ago, the collapse of the Twin Towers. Why did they collapse?” I ask gently prodding them along.

“Oh! Yes I get it... the steel beams melted at 1450°C”, says a 12 year old who is an avid reader of the New York Times and would remember every such excruciating detail.

“That is right,” I say, and the discussion then veers to the properties of steel and other alloys.

I tell them that steel is a man-made element and we talk about the advantages of synthetic elements. We started with a discussion on solids and liquids but by the time class was over, we had introduced natural elements, synthetic elements and even a brief overview of the periodic table. These impromptu discussions often happen in my middle school classroom. The subject matter for the day is used as a launching pad for discussions on more current and interesting topics.

The insights and the opinions that the students share are often refreshingly different from the adult perspective and lead to many interesting debates and lively discussions. They have no fear when offering their opinions. The language used is always positive and they learn important life lessons: to tolerate opinions different from theirs, to accept people different from them, to cooperate when working as a team, to pull up the slacker by raising the bar and always, always to treat each other with kindness and respect.

As I watch the middle school students do all this, I realize that the roots of their behavior must have been planted much earlier. Their love for learning that has now metamorphosed into critical thinking and the ability to abstract was instilled by the teachers that came before. Somewhere along the way, during the “early childhood years” (ages 3 – 6) at the Montessori, they have been shown the peace table and asked to sit at it and resolve conflicts. As they grew up, perhaps they sit at bigger tables, but they still do it to resolve their issues and iron out their differences..

I did not have to look too far to know that this was indeed the case. Besides being a teacher at Princeton Montessori School, I am also a mother of two children, ages 7 and 4, who attend the Elementary and Early Childhood programs over here. I have seen my children flourish in an environment where they were treated with dignity and respect and encouraged to be independent and self disciplined.

It was only last week that my 7 year old asked me “How can they do that? What will happen to all those animals if they destroy the forest?” She looked a bit distraught as she watched the bulldozer tearing down the trees in the wooded lot behind our house.

That was a favorite haunt of ours. We would often wander over to see families of deer, rabbits, gophers and even an occasional red fox. I tried to explain to her that the builders had bought the land from the township and were planning to build houses. She wasn’t too happy with my statement and continued to talk about the unfairness of the situation as we went for a walk.

It was getting dark as I sighted the first star and pointed it out to her and told her we could wish on it. Both of us closed our eyes as we made our wishes. After a minute or so, she asked me, “Do you want to hear what I wished for?”

“Sure”, I answered.

“Well, I wished that people would stop cutting down trees and preserve the animals’ homes and keep our planet beautiful.”

You could have knocked me down with a feather. This little being who would beg me for Barbie and Diva star dolls and the latest trends in hair clips... whose Christmas lists were a mile long...was now making a wish for the betterment of the world at large? When did this transition take place? Where had she heard about cutting down of trees leading to destruction of planet?

She later told me that in her Reading Group at school, they were discussing about the rain forests being destroyed and the consequent disruption of the food web. Her breadth of knowledge and passion for the subject made me proud.

I see this fervor in her all the time. She is in love with what she learns... she is not afraid to voice her thoughts on any subject. She believes her 7-year old opinions actually matter and is valued by the community. No one has ever told her otherwise. No matter what she brings to the table for discussion, she is confident that a gentle ear will receive it, and help her separate the chaff from the grain. She has been guided to resources such as books and encyclopedias but has not yet been informed that they are the ultimate authority. Consequently, her brain is forever working.... exploring endless possibilities, figuring out new ways of connecting things together and loving the wealth of information that she is acquiring.

She is excited about sharing her treasure trove of knowledge and each day as she uncovers yet another secret, I am educated in the process. During our morning commute to school, when I make a remark about the car behind me that had been tailgating for about 500 feet, she tells me a story about how the “foot” came to be used as a standard for measurement. Funny, how even after the many years of rigorous Science training that I have had, I was unaware of this interesting snippet. Maybe none of my teachers thought it was important enough to personalize a fact or give it a human dimension. Seeing her eyes light up as she tells me this story, I realize the truth of the statement that you learn more from your children than you can ever teach.

Often I think that all that I want to do as an educator and as a parent is to light this candle in the child, ignite their love for learning and then step back and watch the process unfold. The learning happens provided you give them the right environment. And, I find the right environment here at the Montessori school.

When I am asked what is it about Montessori education that appeals to me the most, my answer most often is “where do I begin?” It is in the intangibles.... in the manner in which the children are treated - with dignity and respect. The child is never afraid of approaching an adult within the community, the child has never been treated disrespectfully, has never been spoken to condescendingly or patronizingly. The teachers in this Montessori school ensure that while they promote independence in the children and encourage them to do things on their own, they are also guaranteed to be successful. A child is never set up for failure. Here is a place where the child feels comfortable, safe and secure. What child would not thrive in such an environment?

Alongwith the curriculum come lessons in character development as well. And these are most definitely lessons that have to be taught. The teachers believe that that the best way to inculcate good values and self discipline is by being consistent, modeling the right behavior and consciously teaching the children what is the correct thing to do.

.I remember when my daughter was 6 years old, and in her first year of elementary school. It was a dark, dreary day and they were having indoor recess. The whole class sat around in a circle as they played a call-and-response game. A student would call the name of another student and would ask a question. The student whose name was called would respond and would then call out another student’s name.

After school on our way home my daughter tells me, “Mommy, today when we were playing the call-and-response game in class, Mrs. Stolzer got my attention and indicated to me with her eyes that she wanted me to call out to one of the new students, so I did not get to call on Celine”.

“That was such a nice thing you did”, I said, “Didn’t that make you feel good?”

She paused for a moment in thought and then said, “I guess, it was nice to see a sad face become happy and smiling”.

“You are so fortunate to have teachers who teach you to how to make sad faces happy”, I tell her.

Almost a year later, one day my daughter informs me with much pride and joy that a middle schooler came and helped her that day. When I asked her what happened, she told me that she was late getting out for recess, and by the time she got out everyone was playing in little groups. As she stood around looking a bit unsure and wondering which group she could join, Sam, a middle schooler walked up to her and asked her what the matter was. She said she did not have anyone to play with.

Sam laughed and said, “Oh! Is that all? I can help you find some-one to play with” and he guides her to a group of laughing, happy kids and gently talks to one of the girls. The group stops their

game for a moment as arrangements are made to include a new player and my daughter ends up having what she describes as the “best game of her life”.

After I listen to her story, I tell her, “Maybe, when Sam was in Elementary, there was a Mrs. Stolzer who taught him lessons in empathy and compassion and taught him how to make a sad face happy”.

My daughter looks at me quizzically, as I pull her close to me and hug her. She doesn’t know why my eyes well up, but I had just witnessed a process come full circle. Now, if someone asks me, why I have my children in a Montessori school, I think I will have an answer.

□ I teach Science and Math to the middle school students at the Princeton Montessori School. I attended Montessori teacher training courses at the Princeton Center for Teacher Education, in Princeton, New Jersey.