

From Student to Teacher in the Montessori Tradition

By: Anne Marie Cusack

I studied my Montessori Elementary history album and the lesson I needed to present to my training class on the following day: Centrifugal Force. I reviewed it over and over. I marveled at it in shock. It couldn't be! It couldn't be that the pivotal moment of the lesson involved me, the teacher, letting go of a string attached to a bucket soaring high above my head in a circle. The bucket would go flying. Perhaps you are thinking that my surprise resulted from the danger of a flying bucket near a group of children (I did have this concern). But the aspect of the lesson that me such a start was a flashback to a day in 1983 when my own teacher swung the bucket for my 6-9 Montessori class at Princeton Montessori School. I was 9 years old.

We went out to the grassy area near the school building, not the playground we knew well but the big field we saw the caretaker mow once in awhile from a distance. Our teacher flung the water-filled bucket above her head; looping it into a circle until-oops- she let go of the string and off went the bucket. It took to the air, landing in the only tree nearby-a tree too high to climb.

Now the teacher myself, I read the lesson repeatedly, letting my misconceptions of childhood crumble beneath the truth of my adult knowledge: letting go of the string was not a mistake; in fact, it is the crux of the lesson.

The Montessori child who experiences the materials and method of Montessori at a young age, and then again as a teacher, has a rare opportunity. Stephanie Harle, a 3-6 Montessori teacher, attended Princeton Montessori School from ages 3 to 9 (1973-79). She explains,

Going back and getting the adult concepts [in training] was incredible. The binomial cube blew me away. To come full circle and get an adult perspective on what I saw through the eyes of a child was amazing. It really helped me get a full appreciation for the materials and the philosophy.

Memories that previously lived in Stephanie's mind only as disconnected "visual images" took on new purpose and meaning during training.

A Montessori teacher who was once a Montessori student relates to the materials in a familiar way, as if with old friends. I feel a sense of attachment to and fondness for the materials I worked with as a child; they are extensions of myself. As a teacher, although I enjoy and appreciate other materials, they do not evoke the same feelings of comfort and nostalgia.

When I teach a particular lesson, the emotions that the material bring up for me inform the way I present the exercise to the children. One example is an elementary material that has the potential to be a teacher's nightmare: test tube division. Learning test tube division as a teacher brought back my emotional memories from childhood. As a 9-year-old dividing with test tubes, I looked forward to adding more division figures to the long strip of paper where I recorded my calculations. The day I completed my work up to a divisor of 9, I beamed with pride. I know that not all of my students will feel the passion I did for this exercise, but being connected to it in this unique way inspires my teaching.

While memories from my elementary years inform my conscious thoughts about teaching, less available memories from my birth-to-6 years inform my subconscious. Exposure to the Montessori classroom as a preschool child uniquely prepares a person to teach in a Montessori environment. As a teacher, Stephanie explains, memory of the Montessori environment and philosophy “is already there. I believe everything you experience is in there and when you are in that ‘déjà vu’ phase, it comes back from your subconscious.” This inchoate memory is the manifestation of Montessori’s “absorbent mind.”

Ginny Cusack from the Princeton Center for Teacher Education (PCTE) comments:

The thing I notice the most about these people [Montessori children who become Montessori teachers] is that they have some of the approaches innate within them. They have been treated the Montessori way, so in some ways it is organic to them.

Joy Turner, founder of Montessori Western Teacher Training Program (MWTTP) and editor of *Montessori Life*, concurs: “The training seems somewhat easier for them- as one might expect!”

Anna Perry, director of Seton Montessori School and the child of two Montessorians, visits teachers in their schools as part of her work with the Montessori Education Centers Associated (MECA). “I’ve been to visit our student teachers,” she said, “and with some, before I knew their background, simply from watching them work I could guess that they’d once been children in Montessori classrooms.”

For me, it does feel natural to conduct myself in my classroom with quiet respect for the children’s work and to model this respect. To this day, a Montessori classroom is the place I can be most productive with my own work.

Since the Montessori method is so instrumental in how the child grows, for former Montessori children who undertake Montessori teacher education, the program becomes a process not only of learning to teach, but also of “soul searching,” as Stephanie noticed. “Some of my training involved finding out why I am who I am,” she says. “I have a loyalty to my work and an independence that stem from my Montessori background. I may not have connected that without my training.” The way a child is treated shapes that she becomes to the extent that the environment affects human growth and development. Consequently, in learning the Montessori philosophy as an adult, a Montessori child explores the forces that formed her.

“In training, I heard the philosophy at two different levels,” says Anna. “On one level I heard the philosophy as a teacher and an administrator, and on the other as a person examining my own development. How we perceive ourselves as people is directly connect to the philosophy.”

While Montessori children who become teachers have a deep connection to the philosophy and the method, becoming a trained and experienced Montessori teacher requires dedication and practice in addition to passion and instinct. “Young people today have so many career options, and they are still choosing to be Montessori teachers,” Anna observes. Some 3 to 5% of MWTTP students and about 1 per year at PCTE attended a Montessori school as children.

Why do they become Montessori teachers? Perhaps it is to “be of service to society,” as Joy ventures. Perhaps it is to be with children; but perhaps it is in some way a

natural step, a coming home. For Anna, “it just made sense.” For Stephanie, once she took a job in a Montessori school, she never considered teaching with another method. In the Montessori classroom, she says, “I was comfortable right away.”

Following 4 years of teaching in Montessori schools, ANNE MAIE CUSACK currently gives study skills workshops at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, while pursuing her interest in journalism.