

The Magic of Montessori

By Kathy Carey, MAT

When I was 4 years old, my mother took me to Villa Teresa, a Catholic day and boarding school serving students kindergarten through fifth grade. I remember the scene vividly: My mother and I faced a nun dressed all in black, who seemed to me to be a giant. When the Sister inquired about my age, my mother replied, “Yes, she is young, but she will do as directed.” The next day, I began my formal education in a class of 50 children. We sat at assigned places at two long parallel tables, allowed to move only with permission of the teacher—this included getting up to go to the bathroom. Everyone participated in the same activity, whether it was drawing, working with clay, or listening to a story. At rest time, we sat with our heads on our arms, eyes shut.

In sixth grade, my parents transferred me to another Catholic school, more progressive and challenging. High school was also Catholic, followed by college, when I was admitted to a competitive (and yes, still Catholic) women’s college in Washington, D.C. There I learned how to manage the demands of rigorous academic requirements, with exacting professors who treated us like adults.

After several years on the East Coast, I decided it was time to go to graduate school. I started a program in political science at the University of Oklahoma, but, as the only female, I was not tough enough to deal with the comments that I did not belong there. I was deflated but not totally discouraged. A friend suggested I check out a program at Oklahoma City University—a master’s degree in early childhood education with an emphasis on Montessori education. I knew nothing about Montessori, so visited a local Montessori school that was part of a private prep school. The atmosphere was neither quiet nor noisy but had a pleasant “hum” of activity. Children functioned as individuals, choosing work, engaging with teachers as well as classmates, and joining small group work at the end of the session—so different from my own early childhood experiences.

Drawn in by this new and interesting method of education, I enrolled and completed the master’s degree program. And since then, my years teaching children have confirmed all that I had encountered in Montessori’s books: the importance of following the child; careful, detailed preparation of the environment every day; guiding each child based on detailed observations; and, especially, “waiting for the child who is not yet there.” (Waiting does not mean doing nothing; it means observing and interacting without pressure, an approach developed only after much experience.)

Parents visiting a Montessori school the first time are attracted to the colorful materials, asking “How does this work?” or “What is this for?” Their interest often mirrors their children’s. Recently, at a parent meeting, a father of a 5-year-old student asked about the “cube” his son talked about so much. I gave him the presentation of the Binomial Cube and



encouraged him to try it. After a brief struggle, he asked if his son could really do this without help. On his third try, he mastered the cube!

Parents understand the importance of reading, writing, and mathematics. How these are presented in a Montessori environment, and how these skills are developed, are often less clear. The concept that each child is to develop himself/herself in this uniquely “prepared” environment is new to many parents. It is important to understand that the “learning” is not in the materials but rather in the interaction with the materials, and in the child’s ability to extract learning from these interactions to use in the classroom for further learning. Every experienced Montessori teacher recognizes when this happens and listens carefully to the child’s prideful explanation of his or her conquest, asking only a question or two to allow the child more time to share the outcome.

Many parents only experience the Montessori Method through their children, so the classroom and how it functions may seem mysterious. Any opportunity to experience Montessori firsthand—such as during school open houses or other open classroom times—is extremely valuable. Use these chances to explore the Montessori classroom, ask questions of teachers, and engage with the materials. It’ll be worth a hundred lectures.

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