What is Montessori Anyway?

By Fran West (Primary I Guide)

If it hasn’t happened to you yet, it inevitably will. A well meaning neighbor, friend, or family member will ask you the seemingly innocent question... “So, what is Montessori, anyway?” In my nine years of being part of a Montessori community as a parent and teacher, the question continues to give me pause. The stammering is partially because I suspect I am either on trial or I have two minutes to describe a complex philosophy and methodology. I am fascinated by the many preconceived notions people often have about the Montessori approach. It seems when people haven’t heard of it they ask, “Is it a religious school?” When people are somewhat familiar with the name they ask, “Is it a school where children do whatever they want?” Either way, friends and family can often have strong opinions about our educational choice and are more than happy to share them with us.

I believe the question is a difficult one because the approach is like a diamond. There are so many facets that make it shine. Montessorians know this, and they see the diamond in its entirety. How can I share my enthusiasm about children being self directed and responsible without also discussing freedom of choice and independence? How can I discuss independence without also mentioning the importance of the prepared environment and normalization? How can I explain the prepared environment without speaking of observation, order, control of error, sensitive periods and the beautiful didactic materials? And, I am hesitant to explain the materials without using words like ‘fullest human potential’, ‘planes of development’ and ‘cosmic education’. And finally, this educational approach bears the name of the courageous individual who dedicated her life to helping children, and who had a new, peaceful vision for humanity. Dr. Montessori’s work is best appreciated in the context of her life.

We all have our unique story of how we stumbled across this diamond. We are all growing in our understanding of what Montessori ‘is’, and how we articulate our experience will change. While not everyone will embrace this approach, most can agree whole heartedly that a place where children have a love of learning must be a good place to be no matter what it’s called.

Stay tuned to “M News” for more discussion of “What IS Montessori anyway?”

The Primary program is rich in language activities.

Upcoming EVENTS

- September 10th - 6 pm
  Parent Night
  Mountaineer Montessori

- September 16th - 6 pm
  Board Meeting
  Mountaineer Montessori

- September 29th - 1pm
  Sunday Funday
  University of Charleston

Thank you’s:

- Chad Cordell for all his beautiful work on our environment this summer
- Ellen Beal of Ellen’s Ice Cream for generously donating the ice cream for our ice cream social
- Sally Jones, Hana Jones, Sheri O’Neal, Pelagia Tomara and Dimitris Mihailidis for all of their help with the Ice Cream Social
- Shelly Winowich and Karen Kelly for their summer work preparing the library
- Kathryn Rhoads and Fran West for their summer work in arranging our two Primary environments
- Alisa Abdalla, Amy Hill, Lee Roush, and Shelly Winowich for their work in planning our first fundraiser, Sunday Funday
- Eric Abdalla for installing new ceiling lights
- Jennifer Carriger for helping with arrival during our first week, even on her days off

Office Notes
The Mountaineer Montessori School’s Plus Program is pleased to welcome our new assistant, Gloria Lopez. As our program grows by leaps and bounds, she is a very welcome addition.

So far this year, children have been enjoying our wonderful playground, along with other outdoor activities such as hula-hoops, hopscotch, jump rope, monkey bars and sliding. Indoor activities include arts and crafts such as knitting, weaving, drawing, beading and other creative activities. Both read-aloud and individual silent reading provide pleasure and encourage academic success. Playing games and doing puzzles enhance vocabulary and counting skills and lead to better strategy skills, good sportsmanship, and improved critical thinking skills. Legos and building blocks improve spatial skills and enhance imagination. Creative endeavors in the Plus Program include puppet shows, charades and cooking. These things build self-confidence, collaborative working skills, and respect for self, others and the environment.

As you can see, there are many things going on in our Plus Program every day. All of these things are central to the Montessori philosophy and are the foundation of our Plus Program as well.
JUNIOR ELEMENTARY

Enjoying the harvest

A late summer harvest of arugula provided a special treat of homegrown salad for the Junior Elementary class this week. The children first went outside to do some field studies of the herbs, flowers and vegetables that they planted last spring.

As part of their Botany studies, the students identified the different qualities of the plants. “They observed the stem and leaf structure of each plant,” said Amanda Cox. “It was wonderful to hear how they were able to describe and name each aspect of the plant, including the texture and shape of the leaves.” The children also did detailed sketches of the plants and wrote descriptions of them.

Going outside in order to experience the world through the senses is an important part of the Jr. Elementary class at Mountaineer Montessori. The children are at a place in their development where they want to understand their place in the world around them. They want to know why plants grow, where food comes from and what role they play as humans in the relationship between the natural world and the needs of man. They are building their identity in their own community based on their needs and the resources that surround them. As they develop this heightened awareness of their place in the world, they begin to want to build their own identity in their local community.

Last year when they planted the seeds, the children were excited to till and amend the soil. They took turns cultivating an herb garden along the side of the main building. They also replanted some wildflowers and bulbs that will blossom this coming spring. Eventually they designed a vegetable garden in the back of the building. Some of the seeds for each garden were germinated in the window in the library where the morning light is rich and strong.

The salad making activity this week provided many happy children with a delicious lesson. There was plenty of arugula salad for everyone to share. “It tastes good!” some of them exclaimed. “It’s a little bit spicy, but I like it!”

ADVANCED ELEMENTARY

Words to live by

The school year is off to a great start in Advanced Elementary. We have been doing lots of activities to get to know each other and to learn how to be a caring and supportive community.

One of our first activities was to develop Guidelines to help us create the “perfect” year.

We started by answering the question: If, on the last day of this school year, you could say it was a wonderful one… possibly even the best ever for everyone, what would that look like? What would it sound like? What kinds of things would have happened to make it the best year ever?

After a brainstorming session, we found that all of our ideas fit into four categories: having fun, learning new things, doing community service, and being kind to one another.

Students got into groups to come up with more specific activities and communications that demonstrate these four main concepts. Then, they came up with a statement for each guideline. I must say, I am impressed and proud to be a part of this Advanced Elementary community. The guidelines they came up with are as follows.

1. We will have fun because it helps us be happy, healthy people
2. We will be kind to each other because everyone loves that happy feeling when someone does something nice.
3. We will do community services and clubs outside of school because we want to feel involved.
4. We will learn new things because it will help us progress in life, and make us feel confident.

Finally, students made a poster with these guidelines for us to hang in our room. All students signed their names to show their commitment to our strong community.

With this kind of start, I have no doubt 2013-2014 will be the “perfect” year!