

What do children really get out of Montessori?

By Tim Seldin

Today many people speak about education as if it were a competition or a race. Parents are constantly given messages from the media, our schools, and often other parents that cause us to worry that our children will not live up to standards set by people who think of education in terms usually reserved for high-pressure sales organizations. I am often left puzzled by the fact that so many of us accept this without question. **Life is a journey, not a race!**

Sometimes, as parents, our love and wish to protect and constantly watch over our children's educational progress keeps us from truly seeing and appreciating them as the people that they are today, and the people that they are becoming.

One thing that Montessori teaches us is to stop and watch children carefully, to be with them in the moment, and to take pleasure in simply bearing witness to the miracle of their growth and development. Sometimes, in the rush of our highly scheduled lives, we forget to make time to really 'see' how our children's minds and personalities are unfolding right before our eyes.

Montessori is often described as an "education for life." When we try to define what children take away from their years in Montessori, we need to expand our vision to include more than just the basic academic skills. Normally, Americans think of a school as a place where one generation passes down basic skills and culture to the next. From this perspective, a school only exists to cover a curriculum, not to develop character and self-esteem.

But, in all too many traditional and highly competitive schools, students memorize facts and concepts with little understanding, only to quickly forget them when exams are over. Studies show that many bright students are passive learners. They coast through school, earning high grades but rarely pushing themselves to read material that hasn't been assigned, ask probing questions, challenge their teacher's cherished opinions, or think for themselves. They typically want teachers to hand them the 'right' answer. The problem isn't with today's children but with today's schools. Children are as gifted, curious, and creative as they ever were, when they're working on something that captures their interest and which they have voluntarily chosen to explore.

Montessori schools work to develop culturally literate children and nurture their fragile sparks of curiosity, creativity, and intelligence. We have a

very different set of priorities from traditional schools and a very low regard for mindless memorization and superficial learning.

Montessori students may not memorize as many facts as students in some adult-centered and highly competitive schools, but they do tend to become self-confident, independent thinkers who learn because they are interested in the world and enthusiastic about life, not simply to get a good grade.

Montessori believed that there was more to life than simply the pursuit of wealth and power. To her, finding one's place in the world, work that is meaningful and fulfilling, and developing the inner peace and depth of soul that allows us to love are the most important goals in life.

Helen Keller, inspired by Montessori, wrote:

"I believe that every child has hidden away somewhere in his being noble capacities which may be quickened and developed if we go about it in the right way, but we shall never properly develop the higher nature of our little ones while we continue to fill their minds with the so-called basics. Mathematics will never make them loving, nor will accurate knowledge of the size and shape of the world help them to appreciate its beauties. Let us lead them during the first years to find their greatest pleasure in nature. Let them run in the fields, lean about animals, and observe real things. Children will educate themselves under the right conditions. They require guidance and sympathy far more than instruction."

To reduce these principles to the most simplistic form, Dr. Montessori proposed that we could make peace by healing the wounds of the human heart and by producing a child who is independent, at peace with herself, and secure. Dr. Montessori envisioned her movement as essentially leading to a reconstruction of society.

Montessori schools are different, but it isn't just because of the materials that are used in the classrooms. Look beyond the pink towers and golden beads, and you'll discover that the classroom is a place where children really want to be—because it feels a lot like home.