

## LESSONS LEARNED

*(Editor's note: As Lincoln Montessori's directors celebrate over forty years of teaching in Montessori Schools, they reflect here on how, after four decades of working with children, there are still lessons to be learned from them.)*

It might be thought that Montessori teachers who have been active in the classroom since the 1960s would not have much more to learn about their work and indeed might have all the answers! But not so! In our recent conversations about the classroom, the children and parent conferences, Larry and I had to acknowledge, yet again, that there are always new and challenging lessons we learn as we continue to work in Montessori.

Take for example the classroom. Visitors to Montessori classrooms whether in Tokyo, London or San Francisco would instantly recognize the same materials, the Pink Tower, the Cylinder Blocks or the Metal Insets on the shelves. The didactic Montessori materials designed by Maria Montessori are recognizable anywhere. One might well ask, what can be learned from using the same tools to present lessons for 40 years?

I watched a new child struggle with the hand washing exercise the other day. She got through the process, but not without splashed and spilled water on the table, the floor and on her cuffs. That same day, the third year student who had brought the snack, washed his hands at the same table before preparing the food. He completed the process with a minimum of effort and no mess. I was again reminded that through practice and repetition the mess and disorder of the beginner will eventually be replaced by the skill of the experienced child.

The classroom also teaches me in that every child who approaches the material brings to the exercise his/her own temperament, level of coordination, interest and skill. As a classroom director, I must use the classroom differently for each individual and consequently my knowledge of the materials and the philosophy behind each piece requires me to adapt and accommodate to different learning styles and personalities. The tools and their purpose may remain static, but what the children and I bring to them is always changing.

It is the same with the staff. Children relate differently to the different staff members. Each adult observes the children from his/her own perspective. By talking with and listening to other staff members, I frequently gain new insights into the children and their behavior or into the

materials. I might learn that the beautiful arrangement I set up for water pouring, despite its aesthetic appeal, is dysfunctional, because the adult in that part of the room points out to me that everyone knocks over the poorly balanced containers. Another pair of eyes and another perspective makes me aware of things I have failed to notice and thus provide me with new ideas to consider or new ways to approach things.

When I consider the children, there are personality types about whom I can generalize and behaviours that I can rationalize. Quite, enthusiastic, apprehensive or angry children do fit into categories, but no two children are alike even if they are both quiet by nature. Each person is an individual and each requires me to discover who (s)he is and to make my presentations in particular ways that will fulfil his/her needs. Just as the classroom and the materials require me to stay alert so do the children for while Annie may grade the Pink Tower perfectly on the first or second attempt Anne may only be capable of piling the blocks together at random. Each girl teaches me about her ability to discriminate visually, her eye-hand co-ordination, her sense of order etc. etc. and on the basis of that information I have to shape my approach to each individual child. Each presentation is as new to me as it is to the person to whom it is being made.

Parent conferences are just over at LMS and here again we were both reminded of how much we learn from parents about their children. We know that at conferences parents are anxious to learn more about their children but a parent's shared insights into situations and times of day when we have no contact with their children often spark new ideas for presentations. Comments from a Mom or a Dad cause us to reflect on what we are doing, how we are approaching a child or perhaps how a particular mannerism or behavior might be buoyed up or discouraged. We learn from the dialogue with parents, listening and sharing with them how best to make a match between child and school, one that will help a child to overcome a difficulty or circumvent an inappropriate behavior. There is much to learn about what each child needs.

So, even after 40 years, we do not have all the answers. We do not know what tomorrow's new child will bring to us. As a result, it is quite possible to do the same thing with interest for 40 years, because there is always something new to be learned as each child crosses the threshold every day at LMS.