

# Montessori from My Perspective

*By Mary Ellen Kordas*

*February, 2014*

I will never forget my first visit to a Montessori classroom when my son was 3-years old. I could literally feel the enormous respect for the children displayed in the beauty of the environment and the conscientious attention to detail. Small vases of flowers were on the tables, tastefully chosen works of art hung at the children's eye level and the children were happily and calmly working both independently and collaboratively. I didn't understand how this "method" worked, but I knew it was the answer to my long journey to find a school for my son. At the time, I didn't know it was going to also change my life!

Montessori classrooms are prepared environments for children of multi-ages, meeting their unique and varied needs. The furniture is appropriately sized, the materials available on low shelves for easy access to the children and the layout of the room is warm and inviting. This preparation gives the children what they so deserve, which is the freedom to find work that has a range of ability levels from very sensory materials and practical living skills to complex language, mathematics, and cultural explorations. There is never a shortage of materials to engage any child. The mixed age range in the classroom allows the children to be both student and mentor. The younger children look up to their older friends modeling on their mature behavior and excellent language and motor skills. The older children have the opportunity to teach their younger classmates both through use of classroom materials and from their broader understanding of social cues. Nothing in the classroom is put there by chance. Each guide (teacher) is a keen observer who recognizes opportunities to introduce new work to a child ready for just that lesson. The magic is in the match! Each guide leads a child to maximize his or her potential socially, physically, and cognitively.

Current thinking indicates that Montessori is an incredible experience for the very young child and it is, but can those same concepts of independent, hands-on learning be applied to an elementary and middle school level? The simple answer is yes! Montessori children become vested in becoming competent, confident individuals who want to make a difference in the world. They learn to become friends and supporters of their classmates in a calm, yet vibrant, setting. There is a great deal of research indicating that children who are participants in their educational journey will be more creative in their careers and have a sense of belonging becoming global citizens. Many researchers are now aware of what a difference a Montessori education makes. Montessori children learn to collaborate, to think independently, and to pride themselves on work well done.

The Montessori children that I had the honor of knowing in my long and most satisfying career as head of school became partners in their educational journey. They became active participants in their education, not passive receptacles of information. How much more satisfying to feel a part of the learning process.

A high school honors English teacher came to visit me one day and asked if she could observe our students. I asked why and she told me that she had 8 of our graduated

students in her honors class and they were different than the other students. I was intrigued and asked for more. She told me that they went beyond what was required in the work. They kept asking for more depth, but she also recounted how respectful they were with the other students and interacted with her as a collaborator. They set an example and raised the bar in the class.

One always wonders what makes the difference in the life of a child. I believe I found one thing that makes a difference—Montessori.

*Mary Ellen Kordas is a former Montessori school head and current treasurer of the American Montessori Society Board of Directors. She is also on the leadership Faculty at Seton Montessori Institute, Chicago; and CMTE/NY, but most important she is the grandmother to two students at Kinderhouse Montessori School, San Diego, CA.*