

“We believe in children’s potential”



Barbara Isaacs reflects on the spontaneous learning that can arise from engaging environments...

Last issue I wrote about learning as an emotional experience. Many prospective students are interested in the Montessori approach because they make an emotional connection with Montessori’s ideas about children, as expressed in her writing, for example, “No one can be free unless he is independent.”

Often these students respond to the respect afforded to the child and the trust in his/her ability to engage in spontaneous learning and take advantage of the freedoms within the learning environment. I cannot help but think how beneficial it would be if some of this approach could be applied in primary and secondary education. Building on children’s natural desire to engage and learn, and encouraging and celebrating achievement rather than highlighting what they cannot do, would certainly contribute to their confidence and belief in their abilities. This approach could potentially encourage positive attitudes to lifelong learning, too.

In recent research conducted by Sugata Mitra, explained in his ‘Build a School in the Cloud’ TED Talk (viewable at ow.ly/ziQ5X), the learning potential of children in hard-to-reach communities in India and other parts of the world was investigated. By introducing a computer into communities and letting children explore ‘what the machine does’, children not only cracked how the computer worked but also discovered the learning opportunities it offered to them. When they got stuck, Mitra, rather than explaining himself, introduced ‘grannies’ - older women who had no idea how to operate the computer, but who encouraged the children in their search for answers. This experiment demonstrated that the belief of another person in the potential capabilities of the children was a powerful motivating force in encouraging them to find the solutions for themselves.

Such an approach engages all aspects of learning - physical, cognitive, emotional and social - relayed by the children’s capacity to communicate and share their discoveries with each other. The children’s collaborative inquiry and time to explore led them to the answers.

The same belief in children’s potential to learn is expressed in the Montessori

approach, where the key principle urges adults to follow children, giving them a voice and enabling them to lead their own learning (see *The 1946 London Lectures* by Maria Montessori).

Collaborative learning

Interestingly, in a recent issue of the *Times Educational Supplement*, I came across an article by William Stuart that celebrated the achievements of the London Challenge, a project introduced in London 10 years ago, aimed at improving the achievements of London teenagers attending secondary education. Its purpose was to encourage the sharing of expertise and to develop a collaborative spirit within the capital’s schools. The project was led by Sir Tim Brighouse, a wise elder, who earned respect whilst leading the Birmingham Education Authority several decades ago. He took a personal interest in the schools with whom he worked, establishing relationships with them, writing personal letters, recognising and celebrating their achievements and using emotionally rich language such as “brilliant”, “amazing” and so on.

His approach spurred the schools to work together and the results are exceptional.

The *TES* article postulated that London schools are now amongst the best in the world. There is no doubt that the emotional links between the staff of the schools and Tim Brighouse provided the motivation for the collaborative spirit that is at the heart of this success.

So, to return to our students, their emotional engagement is often linked with their own school experiences and their desire to be part of a movement that treats the child as an equal - with respectful consideration for each individual and his/her enormous potential. The possibility of contributing to the unfolding of each child and learning from him/her motivates our students in their work with young children. It also offers the emotional base essential for each one of us who is engaged in early years education. We help to open the door for these young spirits as they start their learning journeys. What a privilege to be at the start of this unfolding.

In a recent evaluation of her studies, one of the students wrote, “I have looked forward to coming every week; every element has been extremely enjoyable, informative and inspiring.” This testament demonstrates that this student was engaged in every aspect of her learning and that her life has been enriched by her own learning experience. The academic team at MCI is working towards sustaining the same level of engagement as our students embark this September on the revised course, incorporating the Early Years Educator criteria and introducing a new virtual learning environment. The aim of these developments is to create an international community of learners who benefit from the intellect of Dr Montessori and the technology of the 21st century, and who can share their learning and experiences with each other.



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Montessori Centre International has announced new ‘Diploma in Montessori pedagogy - Birth to seven (Early Years Educator)’ qualifications, due to launch September 2014. For further information, visit montessori.org.uk/mci_training