

**Michelle Wisbey** is principal of four outstanding Montessori pre-schools. *TN* paid her a visit and spoke to her about her and her team's approach to early years education...

# Care FROM THE Community

**O**ne hundred and four years have passed since Maria Montessori opened the doors to her Casa dei Bambini in Rome, but the educational philosophy that she developed through her work there has more than stood the test of time.

Few places in the UK demonstrate the legacy of Montessori's research better than

the village of Stebbing in Essex, home to Stebbing Primary: the first fully accredited Montessori state primary school in the country. But for many children the Montessori influence at Stebbing begins long before they start Reception class, at Maynard Montessori – an 'outstanding' pre-school, situated to the rear of the primary school's grounds in a purpose-built classroom and outdoor area.

The setting, which has the capacity to cater for 30 children at any one time (it has close to 60 on roll), has also received awards from the Pre-School Learning Alliance and, like Stebbing is accredited by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board (MEAB).

The story of the setting's success is also the story of three other Montessori nurseries, operating under the banner of Play to Learn

## 1. Inspirational early years



**1** "I've been working here since January, and I am doing my Level 4 diploma with Michelle. I'd not heard of Montessori until I was looking for a pre-school place for my son. I went to Michelle's pre-school at Westwood, and was bowled over by the way the children were throughout the day. My study has all come about on the back of seeing Montessori at Westwood and Maynard. It really captured my imagination."

Susie Foord, Teaching Assistant

Ltd and the guiding hand of its principal, Michelle Wisbey. "I had one nursery originally, which I started 15 years ago in a converted barn," explains Michelle. "It wasn't an ideal location, and a lot of the children we had went on to Stebbing Primary. One of them was the chair of governor's child, and she came to me one day and asked if I'd be interested in working in the primary school. I didn't want to be employed by the school, but I suggested putting a nursery in the school's grounds and working in partnership – and that's what we did.

"We knew we wanted it to be a charity," she continues; "we wanted to be giving something back to the community, and which would be



I think we're a **happy** team working in a **warm** environment – and that shows in our relationship with the **children** and the **parents**

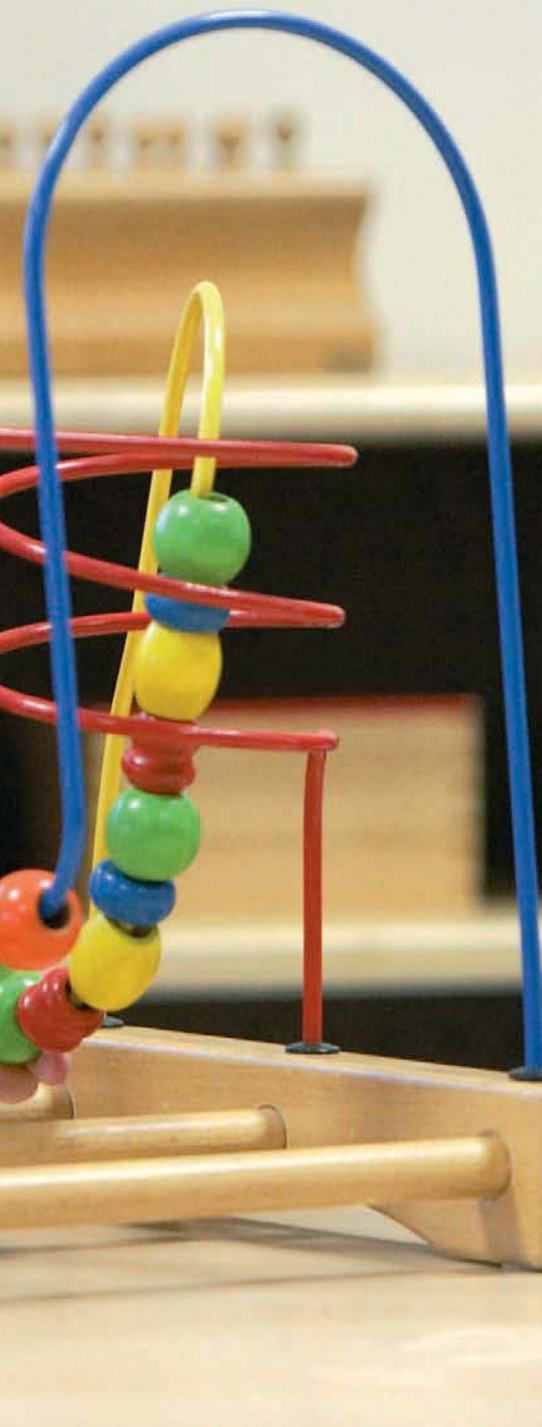
JAYNE REIJS, TEACHER

available to all. But I didn't want to go down the route of a committee-led pre-school where you have the problem of continual parental turnover. We spoke to the school and others we thought might be interested in becoming trustees, and presented it as a long-term commitment to local children, an opportunity to work with us to create something to meet their needs."

It's a model that has proved so successful that Michelle followed the same formula when she was invited to set up further nurseries,

two of which – St Thomas More in Saffron Waldon and Fitch Green – are also situated on primary school grounds. Each of the four settings, all of which have received 'outstanding' reports from Ofsted, is run as an independent charity, with Michelle employed by boards of trustees drawn from the local community. Those who have assumed responsibility include parents and teaching staff, providing continuity and a solid foundation for Michelle and her teams to do their work – and for the children to prosper: "I have lots of support," Michelle agrees; "all the heads I work with are fantastic. I can go into them at any time and say 'This is happening, that's happening – how can we deal with it?'. And for the children, it means being part of the whole community, not just a pre-school in the village run by parents only interested in their children. They're being looked after and overseen by people who really, genuinely care about all the children in their community. That's important."

Nowhere is this genuine care more evident than on the ground at Maynard itself. Joint managers Becky Bird and Claire Woosey head-up a well- and diversely-qualified team whose enthusiasm, even outside on a freezing, grey, January morning, is clear to





## 2 An enabling environment

see. "It's very important to me that I have staff who are very well-qualified, well-respected and empowered," explains Michelle. "I'm very lucky; I hardly lose any staff, our turnover is virtually zero. If they leave it's generally to have a baby or to retire, and, actually, most of those that leave to have a baby come back. There were two over at Westwood [Michelle's other nursery at Little Sampford] on maternity leave who were desperate to come back, so we've opened up a baby room!

"Because of that the staff are like a big family – they all know each other well, and most of the team here are the staff who came over from the original nursery, so some of them have been together for 13 or 14 years, and even longer."

The team ethic is evident in the planning and preparation that goes on before the children arrive and after they leave, as well as amidst the hubbub of a working Montessori nursery: "Within the staff body in the classroom and in meetings, everybody works together," Michelle confirms. "Everybody has the same amount of responsibility as the person next to them to ensure the needs of the children are being met. I like to see everybody treated as equal – no decision is made and just told."

This egalitarian philosophy is backed up by a commitment to providing training that ensures staff have a broad base of skills to call upon. "Staff members can do whatever

2 After two years using Stebbing Primary's stage as a nursery, Maynard secured Sure Start funding to finance a dedicated home. "We had a big say in how it was designed and laid out," says Michelle. "And we made all the builders and brick-layers work on their knees for a certain amount of time so they got an understanding of what the children would see!"



3 Children at Maynard enjoy a close relationship with those at Stebbing Primary and a smooth transition to Reception. "We do joint assemblies and work with the Reception class," explains Michelle. "Our children are used to being part of the school and mixing with the older children – there really isn't too much of a transition to make."



## 3 Onwards & upwards

## 4 The great outdoors

Outside the classroom, the children have the run of an area of artificial grass, designed to be suitable for play in all weathers. A hill – perfect for rolling (or even 'snowboarding'!) down – a sandpit and a seating area are also available, as is the primary school's field when more space is required.

training they want," says Michelle. "We offer Montessori first and foremost – I'm a qualified Montessori trainer, so we do a lot in-house. But we access lots of Essex early years CPD training through the Pre-School Learning Alliance too. A nice mix of qualifications brings with it a nice mix of knowledge and that's really important."

Michelle is keen to point out, however, that 'pieces of paper' aren't the be-all-and-end-all of good early years practice: "Some people don't want to do formal qualifications," she

adds. "If that's the case, I ask them to do as much Montessori CPD as they can – and we also support sharing of practice: staff visiting the other nurseries to see how they work, team meetings that bring everybody together. But we pride ourselves on recognising the children who are in the nursery, and as long as a member of staff can do that and respect each individual child for who they are, then they've got it. No amount of paper can give them that skill."

The Montessori approach employed at Maynard is immediately apparent: the calm, clean environment, painted in neutral colours interrupted by only the occasional, considered wall display; the child-centred learning facilitated by staff who observe rather than direct; the easily accessible resources and recognisable Montessori materials. But Michelle points out that the Montessori way of doing things is not so much a departure from



**I've worked here for three years. It's such a great team of people, a good strong supportive team. Everybody has strengths that they bring from different areas**

HELEN BROOKS, CREATIVE COORDINATOR

## 5. Authentic experiences



6 “We have an open door policy; so parents can come in whenever they like, to watch what the children are doing, to be part of the nursery,” Michelle says. “Because we have parents as trustees they also input into all the policy writing. Here, at the moment, the charity are setting up a fund to support those that really can’t afford any money towards fees, and parents are working on putting together the relevant documents.”

## 6. Parental relationships



5 In keeping with the Montessori method, children can access what they want, when they want, before replacing it or cleaning up after

themselves. At lunch time, the children use real glasses and china plates – there’s no plastic to be seen.

the norm as in years gone by: “If you’d asked me to name differences in our practice seven years ago I could have said this, this, this and this, and nobody else does this, this and this,” she says. “But actually, Maria Montessori could have written a lot of the EYFS. Ten years ago we would have been one of the only nurseries in the area to do free-flow, inside and outside whatever the weather, whatever the time; one of the only nurseries to do free snack-time. But I think things like that are becoming more common practice, which is great.

“I think there’s still a huge amount of danger in people taking the Development Matters and saying, ‘Right, they should be hopping!’ and using it as a tick-box,” she qualifies. “That’s what it’s got to come away from. It should be a story of a child’s journey. We shouldn’t even be looking at the EYFS until we’ve created a child’s journey and

drawn the story of what they’re doing developmentally, and then all we should be doing is mapping it to see if there are any dire developmental needs.”

These unique journeys are charted by staff at Maynard in a process that incorporates the child-centred approach prevalent throughout their practice whilst capturing accurately moments of import that enable the team and parents to follow a child’s progress. “We have learning journey books that the children write in,” says Michelle. “We take photos during the day and stick them into the book to go home with parents, and we ask parents to feed into them too. We also use a computer program called KeepTrack which maps activities directly to the EYFS. We can import observations into it and then show parents as and when they want to have a look.

“What we try to do as much as possible,” she continues, “is to instil into the staff that

they’re here to work with the children: you make observations, but it’s not about the number of observations you make in a day; it’s about making one or two really significant observations that tell a story about a child’s journey.”

It’s a way of working that sums up the Maynard, and the Montessori, core belief: that every child is an individual, best served not by being ‘taught’ but by being allowed to learn. But whatever Michelle and her team’s opinions on the relative pros and cons of the EYFS, it’s clear that the manner in which they’re implementing its statutory requirements is more than satisfying the Ofsted inspectors. “They get what we’re doing,” Michelle says; “I’ve never changed anything. They come in and see us as we are, and they seem to respect what we do. We can’t go wrong, really – we’re meeting children’s needs.”