

InFocus:



Why do Montessori teachers love their job?

by Ana Pickering

Many people choose Montessori education for their children. Others choose Montessori as their profession. What attracts people to Montessori teaching and why do they enjoy this job so much?

In New Zealand and Australia, people wishing to lead a Montessori early childhood centre need to have both a Montessori teaching qualification and a three-four year degree or diploma in early childhood.

Why would anyone go to all that trouble and expense? What is it about Montessori that captures the interest and hearts of Montessori teachers?

Becoming a Montessori teacher requires the ability to view children in a different way, to help children by following their interests and developmental needs and facilitating hands-on experiences that enable the young child to understand the world. The work is satisfying and joyful.

Four Montessori early childhood teachers share why they have chosen a career in Montessori teaching.

Mamira Ali, Head Teacher, Montessori School House, Hamilton, New Zealand.

What I enjoy most about being a Montessori teacher is being able to discover the child's interests and to support these in the classroom. It is so exciting to be able to help each child develop their personal and social skills within the

group of children. I attended a Montessori school when I was a child and my aunt did a Montessori course in 1984. These experiences encouraged me to choose Montessori as a career and I did my Montessori diploma in Pakistan. I have been a Montessori teacher for almost nine years and moved to New Zealand in 2008. I will be starting my early childhood diploma soon and also want to do some advanced Montessori teacher training.

I think the sense of belonging, independence, respect and learning is much deeper and more integrated in our Montessori philosophy. We truly create a community where these values are evident each day. If you have a passion for teaching and want make difference in a child's life and develop his love for learning, you will see it happen every day at a Montessori community.

Children really do take learning from their Montessori community into their lives. I never forget a mother telling me that as she was clearing the dinner table, she tried to pick her three-year-old daughter's plate. The child said, "It's my work, I'll do it myself." When the mother asked where she learnt this, the child replied, "That's how we do it at Montessori and that's the proper way."

Every day I look forward to seeing the children and providing more opportunities for them to gain knowledge. I find my job so satisfying because I can share my knowledge with our teaching team and the children. I think if a child takes one positive thing from me every day, I am contributing towards making a better person for the future.

"It is not enough for the teacher to love the child. She must first love and understand the universe. She must prepare herself."

Dr Maria Montessori

Wendy Brown, Head Teacher, New Plymouth Montessori School, New Plymouth, New Zealand

There are so many things I enjoy about being a Montessori teacher; the enthusiasm and energy of the children, their thirst for experiences and understanding and the role I play in fostering that. When you walk in the door in the morning you never know, exactly what the day will hold. I have a huge sense of achievement in working out how to deal with challenges, especially when strategies put in place are successful.

I first heard about Montessori about 28 years ago, when my sister took me along to a Montessori information evening. I listened to a young Irish woman talking about a method of education that fostered independence and responsibility and found the evening really interesting but, having no children at this time, my interest was limited.

Years later when I had two young boys, my sister gave me a copy of *The Absorbent Mind* by Dr Montessori to read. I loved the book; as I read it I recognised my oldest child, then four and half years old, in what I was reading and I really felt a connection. However it wasn't until about five years later that I became involved with Montessori as a teacher. I worked as assistant teacher under four different head teachers and began my Apherfield Montessori diploma. Next year I will be working and studying part-time as I do my early childhood teaching diploma.

In our Montessori school we get to know our children and families very closely. We work more with the individual child rather than the whole group and tailor the programme to meet the needs of the individual child. I think this can make the work more challenging for teachers as the responsibility to 'see' all the children is greater. I love working with a team of women who are supportive and enthusiastic. On days that have seemed overly challenging we can all reflect on what happened and recall the positives together.

Would I ever want to do anything else? This is a question I asked myself this year when making the decision about starting study for my early childhood diploma. The answer was no - I love working with children and families and I firmly believe in the Montessori philosophy.

My 'aha' moments are usually those moments when I observe the development of confidence and independence. Those times when I see a child notice a dirty mark on a wall and get the tools to clean it, or the child that tells me something interesting and then announces, "I want to write about that!"



Wendy Brown

Recently I just happened to be sitting near the painting area when I noticed a girl walk past. As she looked at the easel she said to herself, "Someone forgot to clean it; I'll scrub it." When she had the easel clean she noticed paint splashes on the table nearby and set to cleaning that too. She cleaned to make her environment neat and orderly. She didn't need help, company, direction or acknowledgement; she had the confidence to know that she could take care of it herself.

Seeing that kind of capability in a young child is so rewarding.

Karen Calton, Head Teacher, Wa Ora Montessori School, Lower Hutt, New Zealand

I like being a Montessori teacher because I get great satisfaction in sharing in the transformation of a quiet, shy, three-year-old into a confident articulate and knowledgeable six-year-old. I love being with the children and experiencing the world from their point of view. I never tire of hearing the funny things they say to us.

Before I became a parent, I researched many educational approaches and discovered that Dr Montessori's philosophy fitted well with me. When my daughter was one year old we enrolled her at Wa Ora Montessori School. Our daughter was in Montessori for more than nine years and my son is currently in a Montessori 9-12 class.

My professional path to becoming a Montessori teacher started as a parent volunteer and years of involvement on the PTA. The next step was becoming an assistant in the

Montessori classroom and then starting my three-year early childhood diploma. I completed my early childhood diploma on a Thursday and on the following Saturday, I flew to Connecticut in the USA to begin my Montessori teaching diploma. I spent three years doing my Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Diploma, leaving my family behind for a couple of months each year. I have now been the head teacher in my classroom for two years.

Being a Montessori teacher is very different from other early childhood teachers. Firstly there is so much to learn; in order to offer the children a rich learning experience we need to have a deep understanding of the Montessori curriculum, like knowing the difference between a spatulate and a cordate leaf, being able to name every country in Europe or being able to identify shapes like an acute-angled isosceles triangles and how and when to introduce the young child to all these interesting concepts about the world. When you are a Montessori teacher you never stop learning.

I think the hardest thing for me to learn when I began in



a Montessori classroom was to not 'help' the children. I used to jump in to help tie their laces or want to chat to them while they were working. Montessori teachers focus on enabling the children to develop their independence. A Montessori child, at six, can make a cup of tea, tie their shoe laces; can cook, clean, dust and polish. They can wash dishes, do the ironing, set the table, wash clothes, empty the dishwasher and fold up the washing. They are confident at speaking in front of the class and are very caring towards each other. I love watching the five-year-olds pumped with pride after they have mastered the bow dressing frame, waiting for a child to choose flower arranging or painting so they can offer to tie up their apron.

Every day has exciting moments. Last week I watched as a boy proudly placed his phonetic words in his new reading folder. A five-year-old girl came over and said to him "Wow, you've got a reading folder! You're a reader like me." His face just lit up.

Two five year olds and a four-year-old boy have been learning the names of all the continents, all the states of Australia, all the islands in Oceania, countries of North America, South America, Europe and now have started on Africa. They were recently studying images and objects from Europe including a picture of the Coliseum; we discussed where it was and its purpose when one of the boys commented that it was made up of Roman Arches. Next thing the boys had the Roman Arch materials off the shelf, and built it to make it look like ruins. I had seen that picture many times but had never seen it through the eyes of a five-year-old. It was magic.

Samantha Morrison, Thames Montessori, Thames, New Zealand

When I was leaving school I knew that I wanted to work with young children. My mum mentioned Montessori to me as she had been keen on sending my younger brother to a Montessori school when he was a preschooler. The Maria Montessori Institute was just down the road from where I lived in London. A visit to an Open Evening and a chat with the staff there left me enthused about the Montessori approach to education and eager to do the training. I graduated with an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) diploma for 3-6 year olds and have since worked in

3-6 classes in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. I have also had a couple of years' experience working in 6-12 classes.

I love being a Montessori teacher because every day is different. Teaching in a Montessori class is certainly never hum-drum or monotonous. I love being party to those moments when 'the penny drops' for a child. It is also important to me to be working in an environment that fosters the children's social consciences, where they genuinely get along with each other, spontaneously helping and sharing without being pushed to do so by an adult.

I think it is fair to say that all early childhood teachers aim to foster a love of learning, social awareness and a happy self-confidence in the children in their care. It is the method of achieving these goals that makes Montessori different. Visitors from other teaching backgrounds and parents usually comment on the peacefulness and ordered nature of our Montessori classroom in comparison to other centres. They are also startled to see young children taking responsibility for cleaning and tidying up and caring for each other. The focus on individual work rather than continuous group activities also seems to be a common difference between Montessori and other early childhood centres.

I have had so many exciting moments with children in Montessori it is hard to single one out! I recently observed a new child, who had very little experience of working independently and had been flitting from one thing to another, suddenly have a couple of minutes of absolute absorption and concentration when trying to build the Pink Tower. The concentrated, calm look on her face as she repeated her construction several times, oblivious to what was going on around her, said it all.

I definitely would recommend a career in Montessori for anyone who is passionate about education and would advise them to observe in a Montessori class to see it all in action.

As told to Ana Pickering.

Thanks to Karen Calton, Mamira Ali, Wendy Brown and Samantha Morrison.

