



# National Newsletter

May / June 2009

Newsletter for Parents of SAMA Member Schools

Excerpts from an address by Sam Streak, SAMA President, to the parents of Hermanus Montessori School

People mistakenly think of Dr Maria Montessori as only an educator, or preschool teacher. In fact she was first and foremost a scientist, an anthropologist and an astute observer of human development. Being a medical doctor and anthropologist, Maria Montessori's view of children was different. It was necessary for her to think of children within the context of a developing world. It was necessary to offer a global and holistic view of life. Maria Montessori's observations had at their core an understanding of human development and an appreciation of children as global citizens.

Her work takes into account every level of human development from birth to adulthood and an understanding of the various lines of development that unfold with the human organism at both an individual and a collective level. Montessori was concerned not only with the development of the individual, for each child to reach their full potential but she also understood that it was essential for human beings to contribute through meaningful work and service as a part of every aspect of life.

Imagine for a moment your own life – are you engaging in meaningful work and contributing to your community through service? This is what your children are learning to do each day in a Montessori school.

Maria Montessori's thoughts and approaches always held that big picture in mind and it is that big picture she wanted to live out in practice, not just theory.

Ken Wilber, an American philosopher, said recently, "Don't just think differently; practice diligently!" and that is what Montessori did – develop a practice based on natural human development. Montessori understood what the necessary building blocks were for successful development. She was aware of the patterns in us all and found a way to capture the essence and creativity of those patterns through the prepared environment and prepared adult.

There is no doubt that Maria Montessori pondered the future of humanity – as many of us do today. During World War 2, Maria Montessori and her son were under house arrest in India for an extended period of time and this was when much of her prolific writing and the development of her work at a deeper level emerged – at a time in history when she saw the worst human beings had to offer. Her work led to her being nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize. Her work rests on a strong foundation of moral, ethical and social development.

When you choose Montessori education, you are embracing a way of looking at life that will challenge you. It will challenge you to be proactive and aware of every sphere of your life and the lives of your children. It does not allow any of us to be passive observers and bystanders in our children's development. A fundamental tenet of Montessori education is that we are active observers responding to what is there. We need to choose to engage in the world as actively, as compassionately, as deeply and as empathically as we can – practically and every day.

Just as Maria Montessori was able to abstract maths concepts into concrete materials, it is necessary for us to abstract the philosophies into concrete, everyday living.

Montessori's work fits seamlessly into cutting edge social theories on human development. The work of Ken Wilber, creator and architect of Integral Theory, is a case in point. The Integral Vision has at its heart a perspective that incorporates many different points of view and that honours their contribution to our understanding of ourselves and the world. It acknowledges the biological or body, the personal or psychological, the cultural and the social fibres of our being. It is by nature integrative, inclusive, comprehensive and balanced. As is Montessori Education.

Montessori's work is based on the reality of who are as human beings and is therefore a timeless approach. In fact, it was way before its time! As Montessorians, we acknowledge that we all start at the same point, with essentially the same human challenges. How far we go on the path of life depends entirely on the path itself and those with whom we walk. Our hope is for the healthy unfolding of every human being, within their culture and society.

Maria Montessori believed that deep concentration was essential for helping children develop themselves fully and that deep concentration comes about through working with their hands, and with materials. Our environments are arranged to meet this need and are precise, organised and ordered. In a world where impulse control is severely lacking and chaos seems to be the norm, an authentic Montessori environment offers children the equal opportunity to follow an accurate path of development.

Key concepts within an authentic Montessori environment include having the freedom to make constructive choices; that our work is based on discovery learning and by implication, intrinsic problem solving abilities. It is about collaborative learning and a deep appreciation for the fact that freedom comes with a responsibility to oneself and one's society.

Maria Montessori said, "Do not erase the designs the child makes within the soft wax of his inner life." For me, providing a child with an environment, both at home and at school, that allows him to express himself constructively and creatively, while contributing to his society, is the most selfless act of love a parent can perform. It is by no means the easy road – it is without doubt the road less travelled...for now.

As parents and teachers we are all faced with criticisms, challenges and ignorance when it comes to others understanding our decision to walk the path of Montessori education. And that is OK. We do not need to convert the world – our responsibility is only to the children in our lives, here and now. What we do need is to trust our commitment and the deep knowing that we are giving our children the very best.

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