



Exploring 3D shapes using paint.



Using the golden beads has enabled Siji to explore numbers up to 1000.

# Gorton five years on

**Barbara Isaacs** and **Kat Price** reflect on the achievements of introducing the Montessori approach to Gorton Mount Primary School, Manchester and what it has meant for the children, staff and the school.

**U**nder the leadership of Carol Powell and with the financial commitment to support the project by the Montessori St. Nicholas Charity, the first group of Montessori teachers and trainers arrived at the school during 2005/6. The nursery and reception classes were painted and refurbished and intensive training was given to the teachers as children and parents were welcomed to the first Montessori classrooms at Gorton Mount Primary School.

To introduce a new philosophy and methodology to an already established school is never easy, but the project was embraced with enthusiasm, energy and a real commitment to make it succeed because the Montessori ethos fitted well within the school's aims and complemented their commitment to support children's emotional literacy. Everyone understood that learning is based on mutual respect and that trust and well-being need to be fostered if children are to enjoy learning. These qualities are at the heart of Gorton Mount's everyday life and key to the leadership of the school.

The school's long term commitment to the Montessori approach is evident in their systematic training of staff which started in 2006 with the support of Montessori Centre International trainers. Gradually Montessori practice was embedded into everyday life of the school with all 120 places available for children in the nursery and reception classes all supported by Montessori trained staff.



Sorting objects according to their final letter sound.

**The Montessori approach was introduced into Year One last September and the following reflection by Kat Price offers an insight into what it has meant to her as a teacher and to the children in her class.**

"After working as a teaching assistant, gaining a post graduate certificate in education and working for three years as a qualified teacher at Gorton, I thought I knew something about education. Then I met Barbara Isaacs and realised that I had plenty still to learn. Gorton Mount is a large state primary school in Manchester. We have huge, well documented deprivation factors and a very high mobility rate. Children come to us from a great variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and all classrooms have a substantial

number of children in the early stages of acquiring English. The children at our school needed more than the government and local authorities had to offer so five years ago Carol Powell sought to improve learning and teaching with the help of Maria Montessori's principles and her legacy.

I began my Montessori training two years ago, which I now view as a rebirth into teaching. Things have changed in my classroom and my role in school is not just 'teacher', but facilitator, observer, student, trainer



*Above left: Sandpaper numbers are a fantastic way for children like Anglia to learn the English number names. Above right: Using our bodies to make shapes in P.E.*



and caretaker of the environment. Everybody in my class is on a learning journey and reflection upon the children's work and upon my own work has been a crucial element in improving my own practice.

So, what did I learn from the training? First of all it is important to clarify that I don't believe the course alone is the key to great teaching, but it is a fantastic starting point. I have had conversations with many teachers who are not Montessori trained but have the core philosophies in their hearts and in their practice. However it is my belief that primary teacher training in the UK seems to be back to front. We claim to be child-centred and use differentiation as evidence for this but I found in my previous teaching life that planning and preparation was all about me. I would plan what I was going to say (i.e. what knowledge I would impart), which questions I would ask, which differentiated worksheets I would need to copy, and how I would assess pupil progress against the uniform lesson objective. I was organised and efficient. I liked the children and thought that they liked my lessons, and I believed I was doing a good job. But I never really thought about what the children's experience of school actually was until I started learning about the Montessori Method. And I certainly did not view the children as already competent individuals, which of course they certainly are.

By allowing the children to choose their own activities instead of constant prescriptive lessons I began to get to know them better. It sounds obvious but I began to see where each child's strengths and preferences lay. I could see the children enjoying themselves, being active in the classroom and learning through play. As teachers we often place unreasonable expectations on the children because it is better for us. For example, a few years ago it was my greatest desire to get all the children sitting simultaneously at their tables

completing worksheets in silence. Strangely enough it did not happen very often! This kind of teaching is about control and not about what children need. Child development professionals are constantly telling us that children learn best through physical exploration; that they need to move and play. We know that speaking and listening skills are crucial for the development of literacy skills, but we force children to sit in silence for long periods of time. Learning about Montessori made me question these practices and make positive changes in my Year 1 classroom. I began to provide a more

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rich and diverse learning experience for the children because I did not fixate on the national curriculum. If something felt right, if the children wanted to do it, it went in to the classroom. Puzzles, puppets, water, soil, cakes, play dough, glitter, music, dancing. We made a big mess but it was fun and I began to understand that children learn best by doing, a key principal of the Montessori philosophy. Another big advantage of giving the children freedom to choose is that you are also giving them the freedom to repeat, something which is severely lacking in whole class teaching. Repetition is what builds the child's confidence in his or her abilities and embeds the skills he/she is acquiring.

I wouldn't describe Montessori as an easy route or a 'magic answer' to teaching. It means truly trusting each child in your class and believing that those individuals will show you what they need at any given time. It means relinquishing control, taking risks and venturing into the unknown. It's a great way to teach!" ■

### What is planned for 2009/10 academic year?

The school has identified two teachers as future trainers with the intention to set up a training centre in the school. With continued support from MCI London, from October 2009 the school will offer Early Childhood Diploma training not only to the staff of the school but also to all those interested in learning about Montessori in the north-west of England. The training centre at Gorton will play a significant role in promoting Montessori education in Manchester and the surrounding area.

As is evident from this celebration of

Gorton's achievements it must be stressed that none of this would have been possible without the vision, long term commitment and strong leadership of the project by the head Carol Powell and the continued support of the Montessori St. Nicholas Charity. Thanks must also go to all the teachers and the teaching assistants who are committed to continued development of the Montessori approach at the school. In a recent survey they expressed the children's and their own learning in the following words when answering a question about how their Montessori training made them a better teacher:

*"I consider why I am teaching something and whether it is valuable to the child. I take risks in planning activities. I consider individuals more and what they need"*

*"...more organised/systematic approach, better use of peer learning"*

*"It has made my classroom a more exciting place to be!" ■*

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