

In September 2007, a third state primary school in the UK successfully introduced Montessori into their foundation stage. Below are personal accounts by the head teachers of **Gorton Mount, Stebbing** and **Carlton St Hilda's**, describing their reasons for introducing Montessori and the impact the project has had on their schools.



Learning through the Montessori approach – working with the sound cylinders at Gorton Mount.

Gorton Mount Primary, Manchester

Gorton Mount Primary in Manchester was the first state school to take on the challenge. Head teacher **Carol Powell** shares her experiences 2 years into the project.

How did you come across Montessori and why did you decide to introduce it into your school?

I resonated with Montessori's ideas long before I even thought about becoming a teacher. Later on my experiences in the classroom convinced me that a child's experience in the early years created the blue print for later success. By the time I moved into management I firmly believed in the effectiveness of a Montessori approach.

When I became a head teacher, I was excited about the prospect of ploughing lots of energy and time into the early years in an effort to remove underachievement.

The school I took on was a powder keg of mistrust and frustration at every level. Fortunately, I inherited some members of staff who were thirsty for an 'emotional approach' to children's learning and these people, who had all seen varying styles of leadership were the key for the first phase of our improvement.

From the beginning I wanted to introduce the Montessori approach in full – no half measures.

For the first two years I kept this to myself and set about making the ground ready for growth by introducing emotional literacy as a taught subject with all the rigour of any academic subject. I modelled emotional coaching and taught teachers about behaviour. Slowly, the regime of punishment which existed disappeared. After we had been working with this for about 18 months, the Universe

kicked me into action and presented me with an interesting situation.

It was reported to me that Jay, then in Year 3, had left the premises. I found him on the waste ground next to school. I called his name and instead of running away from me as was his usual practice, he ran towards me with his lunch box saying 'Ms Powell, look at this!' I have no idea what he had done with his lunch but in the box was a dollop of frog spawn. I took Jay and the frogspawn to one of my teaching assistants and asked her to teach Jay and three other boys about life cycles. I realised that Jay had run out of



Carol Powell and children at Gorton Mount

school to learn things – not the happiest revelation for me! At the end of that day, with Jay's guidance, I decided the time was right for Montessori.

What was the reaction of staff to the new ethos and training?

I took my deputies followed by each member of staff to Chapel Grange Nursery near Wilmslow to look at the equipment and observe the children. I then sold it to my governors and the Chief Education Officer and the Montessori St Nicholas Charity agreed to fund us. In a whirlwind, the initial training began with the support of 4 Montessorians appointed by the St Nicholas trust. What has proved more significant has been the study for the Montessori diploma through MCI because it has developed and consolidated skills. All my teachers would say they had become better teachers as a result of Barbara Isaacs's excellent teaching and training.

What have the children's reactions been to their new environment and how have their parents responded?

The children who have learned through Montessori, are by far the easiest to teach because the skills for learning have been implicitly nurtured from the time they entered school. The Nursery and Reception classrooms show our most socialised behaviour in school.

Our recent Ofsted report begins ' This is a good school. It makes a real difference to pupils' lives and aspirations because it cares for pupils well, helps them to achieve successfully and makes good provision for their personal development and well being.' ■

Stebbing Primary, Essex

Stebbing school, in Essex became the 2nd Montessori/state primary school project in 2006 to successfully introduce Montessori into their foundation stage with the view to bring it into the rest of the school as the first cohort of students move up through the years. Head teacher **Janet Matthews** shares her experiences so far.

Why did you decide to introduce the Montessori philosophy into your school?

When I applied to become Head teacher of Stebbing Primary School I knew that the governors of the school had been working very hard to get a Montessori nursery on site. This led to the partnership between our school and a Montessori nursery owned by Michelle Wisby. I began my research by visiting pre-schools in the area and was bowled over by the beautiful equipment and the high expectations of the staff regarding the independence of these young children. I still remember watching a 2½ year old boy using the long rods and then returning them neatly to an appropriate place on the shelf, encouraged to do so by a watching member of staff.

However, I was still unsure about taking on the approach in a state school, as we are legally required to teach the National Curriculum and take on board the myriad of new initiatives the government enjoys throwing at schools! But the more research the staff and I did, the more we realised that the approach fitted into the ethos we already had in the school. An alternative approach, yes, but not that far removed from the play-

based learning techniques being practised in the Foundation Stage class.

How did you go about funding this initiative?

This project has only been possible thanks to the support from Montessori St. Nicholas. We are a small school and we would have struggled to buy furniture, equipment and find funding for training without their generosity. Ruth Bloomfield has been appointed by Montessori St Nicholas as the trustee

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responsible for the project and continues to be our mentor supported by Barbara Isaacs from MCI and Michelle Wisby. Initially staff had foundation certificate training led by Sarah Rowledge and Sue Briggs.

What was the reaction of your staff to the new ethos and the suggestion of further training?

All the staff have been enthusiastic in taking on board the Montessori



Working successfully with the Montessori materials (above and below).

training. The only grumble concerns the three hour work cycle which is at the heart of the methodology. This is not because the staff cannot see the benefits of the unbroken work cycle, it is more that they feel isolated from other members of staff and networking opportunities are often missed as breaks are taken at different times. We are also trying to work on more outdoor opportunities for the children during this independent time, particularly for the more active boys.

How have the children and parents responded to the Montessori environment?

Our reception class now confidently uses the Montessori methodology and the environment is undoubtedly a calm, busy and happy one. We have kept the parents well informed about what we are doing and all have remarked how the independence the children are showing in the classroom is also reflected at home. Regular coffee mornings are held for our new parents to show how the approach works in school and ways they can support their children at home.

What are your plans for the future?

Our years 1 and 2 teaching staff are currently being trained in the Montessori methodology and are regularly being supported by Barbara Isaacs from MCI. The two teachers involved are employed as a job-share and are learning to work together as a team and adapt their practise. We intend to keep the approach going throughout the school as the first group of Montessori children move up through the years. ■



Carleton St Hilda's Primary, Blackpool

Last September, Carleton St Hilda's Primary school near Blackpool introduced Montessori into the reception class. Head teacher **Beverley Grimes** shares her reasons behind the project and her plans for the future of the school.

How did you come across Montessori and why did you decide to introduce it into your school?

I have known Jenny Noblett, a Montessori trained teacher, since 2004 when I arrived at Carleton St Hilda's as Head teacher. She persuaded me that this was the way forward for the Reception class, where we were looking for ways to stimulate and engage the more able children in particular. On questioning her about the Montessori approach, she introduced me to some of the teaching material and talked to me about children's concentration and independent learning based on the child's interests and prior knowledge and understanding. Thus, was born the kernel of interest within me. What she said sounded like what we were looking for.

How did you go about funding this initiative?

We had money which we had saved up for over three years to refurbish and equip our foundation stage and St Nicholas funded the foundation certificate training for 15 members of staff.

The new site supervisor and my self spent a fortnight over the summer painting the classroom to save money and Jenny managed to find an affordable source of second hand Montessori equipment.

What was the reaction of your staff to the new ethos and the suggestion of Montessori training?

As the team is so strong and willing to look forward and do their best for the children, everyone is always keen to try new ideas or refine what they are already doing. Consequently, there has been a good uptake and interest in the approach as well as a curiosity. Everyone has been involved in some initial training and has been invited to come into the Reception classroom to see the work in progress.

What have the children's reactions been to their new environment and how have their parents responded?

The children in the reception class did not go to our school before the transition so they have no comparison. Having said that, it is evident that they love their classroom, they look after it carefully and are always proud to share their learning. The children are very well behaved, calm, focused and their concentration levels are very good.

The level of children's questioning that goes on is also very high as is the children's interest level in what they are doing.

Parents have gradually got to know the system and are beginning to trust that their children are learning. On talking to parents in the mornings and after school, it is becoming evident that they are all very happy about the progress their children are making and the provision of the curriculum in the classroom.

What are your plans for the future?

Our plans are to: purchase more material and use some of this in Year 1; to encourage members of staff working in the other classes to experience the approach for themselves by spending a day in the classroom; to open up discussion about the relevance for this approach in our school and whether it is to extend in part or in full to other classes; I would like to visit the other two state Montessori schools and discuss the effect Montessori has had on their schools and to see it in action elsewhere in order to learn from others and share what is happening in our school.

We would also like to raise some money in order to make outdoor classroom provision in the Reception class equal to the classroom provision. I will be coming to MCI in the summer holiday to receive some training in order to understand the approach more fully. ■



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Jenny Noblett (in top picture) and children from her reception class (above and below).