



Continuing the journey

When Head Start Montessori first opened its primary school there were only ten children attending; **Riad Mahmood** reports on its development over the last decade.

After twenty years of learning and working with children from the ages of 2½ to 6 at Head Start Montessori House of Children in Bangalore, we realised we were travelling with children only part of the way. Sometimes a passion or resolve is so strong that you are propelled into action and it seemed as if the 6 year olds beckoned and said: “Let’s journey on together”. There was no doubt in our minds about the spirit and philosophy we should follow – it had to be that of Maria Montessori. Great thinkers transcend the boundaries of region, country or continent and envision a connected world with the universal child. Dr Montessori spent around ten years in India and we feel that her beautiful concept of cosmic education was conceived during her stay in this country. This is an additional reason we feel connected to her philosophy, and when we wanted to continue travelling with children through what Montessori calls the second phase of childhood and beyond, it was a natural progression.

In 2005 we decided to open a school that would have a

culture alongside an academic programme. The practice of a way of life leads to overall development. We opened our Primary school with ten children. Our Pre- Primary House of Children already had close to six hundred children with a graduating batch of one hundred and twenty children. From the one hundred and twenty only ten parents decided to embark on this journey to an unknown destination. However these ten sets of parents seemed to us like a hundred because they were convinced that the Montessori pedagogy would work for them. They truly believed that this form of learning and exposure would engage their young learners and keep alive the joy of learning.

Schools are sensitive spaces – they manage the most fragile of relationships. These relationships address emotions that are very hard to nurture and need a strong sense of maturity and objectivity. One of the foremost relationships that we felt we must address is that with learning. Learning of all kinds is realised through this journey in a school and actually requires tremendous courage and perseverance.

Every school has a philosophy or a culture that it believes in and practices. It adds up to what we consider a 'complete education'. In 2009, after four years, the first learners of Head Start Educational Academy moved from a single room at our pre-school fifteen kilometres away into the unfinished current campus, amidst cordoned off areas where construction was still happening. The children, with our very supportive educators and administrative team, were brave. Being in an undeveloped area with meagre facilities does pose challenges. The pioneer parents were encouraging and bore the anxieties that come with strange places, and the rough and tumble of an unknown region. There were 'out of bounds' areas initially where the children were not allowed to tread and some amount of construction noise while they worked in a demarcated area. The visitors were interesting – magnificent chameleons of different colours, exquisite butterflies, chirping birds and the occasional snake.

Food was cooked at our pre-school campus every morning and travelled fifteen kilometres a day by van. Delays caused by unexpected traffic or the railway crossing en route being closed, often created a disruption in the timetable, but the children are resilient and waited, bearing hunger and enjoying some amount of excitement from the unknown. Looking back at those early days one realises how a family must come together to make something happen; it was indeed a close knit family: the Head Start team, the children and the parents. In fact, it was the bonding and the relationship that all members shared that established the foundation on which we built and which provided the opportunity to address different relationships.

Montessori believed that emotional well-being is vital to building a sense of discernment within children, and her philosophy so beautifully integrates this development with the learning of academic skills. Her words 'follow the child' need careful interpretation. Many parents today are accepting of this thought as long as it suits their palate, but when it is against the grain of expectation things

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can be taken differently. Our society can very easily be impacted by the race of life. Living in a society that stresses the more traditional approach to learning, with exams being a major focus, parents were apprehensive about a whole

morning without a specific timetable in the Primary Montessori environment. We knew that children enjoy delving deep into aspects of exploration and discovery, connecting knowledge from science and math, history, geography, language, communication and so much more. Learning how to learn expands into lengths of time enjoying music, theatre, sports and other co-curricular activities too.

Being in an open and unspoiled area, we feel close to nature and a certain peace and tranquillity pervades the campus. Children leave the crowds and noise of the city and arrive by

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bus at 8.15 a.m. The morning assembly is a special time to reflect, think and sing songs in different regional languages before the day's work begins. And unlike in the early days, food is cooked and snacks prepared in a large kitchen on campus. There is a joy in being responsible for one's environment and caring for the gardens; washing plates after a meal or sweeping the classrooms are part of the joy of work.

The need to try and give children an opportunity to be who they are and learn things in a way that makes sense to them inspired us to travel beyond the Primary and open a High School. Our main pursuit was to have a learning platform for children to learn different skills that were not just curriculum related but also where they could learn to enjoy the arts, theatre, music and dance. It has been a pleasure integrating such disciplines into our learning programme. This is not just an offering but an integral part of our growth and culture.

Now in 2015 we have a school that goes all the way to grade 12. Many students have discovered other talents within



themselves and that has gone to building their self-esteem. The ability to do something well and to enjoy doing it has also prompted them to take on other skills that pose a stronger challenge.

Challenges continue to arise in our quest to maintain the culture and practice that we believe in. Self-reflection within our team of educators reiterates that the only way to help young people understand our way of life is to actually live it out in front of them. I have been privileged to have been exposed to some wonderful educators in the past who have

given up a lot to show the way forward so that the generations that follow will reap the rewards of their perseverance.

The aspirational society that surrounds us is hard to manage but that's what makes us want to be educators. We endeavour to provoke young people to think about so many things. We do believe that the future of our world lies within our learning environments and educators play a huge role in making the planet a better place to live in.

Riad Mahmood, Founder, Head Start Educational Academy and Managing Trustee, Head Start Educational Trust

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