Reflections: A Life's Work in Montessori

by Mary B. Verschuur

Mary Verschuur writes about coming to America in 1962, recruited by Nancy McCormick Rambusch. In this article, she reminisces about the sheer sensation of practicing a new vocation in an unknown location with materials imported in wood crates from Europe and many materials needing to be handmade. A Montessori life in retrospect is worth telling, and Ms. Verschuur's story is about knowing the children and discovering their individuality as each unfolds in her prepared environment that was built so long ago and still serves children to this day.

My relationship with Montessori education began over fifty years ago when I enrolled in the two year Montessori training course in Dublin, Ireland. Little did any of the ten of us who signed up that year know that by the time we received our diplomas that the Montessori Renaissance would have burst forth in the United States. Our trainers, Sister Mary Jerome, Miss Nancy Jordan, and their colleagues, were inundated with requests for trained teachers from all over the United States, and these requests numbered, we heard, over two-hundred!

I was one of those recruited by Nancy McCormick Rambusch, when she came to Dublin in 1962, and in August of that year, I arrived at the Alcuin Montessori School in Oak Park, Illinois. My teaching colleague at Alcuin, who like myself had been recruited from Europe (France), was Monique (Frebet) Denoncourt. I was most fortunate in that Monique had had several years of Montessori teaching experience prior to coming to Oak Park, and as I was a novice, I was able to benefit from her knowledge and expertise.

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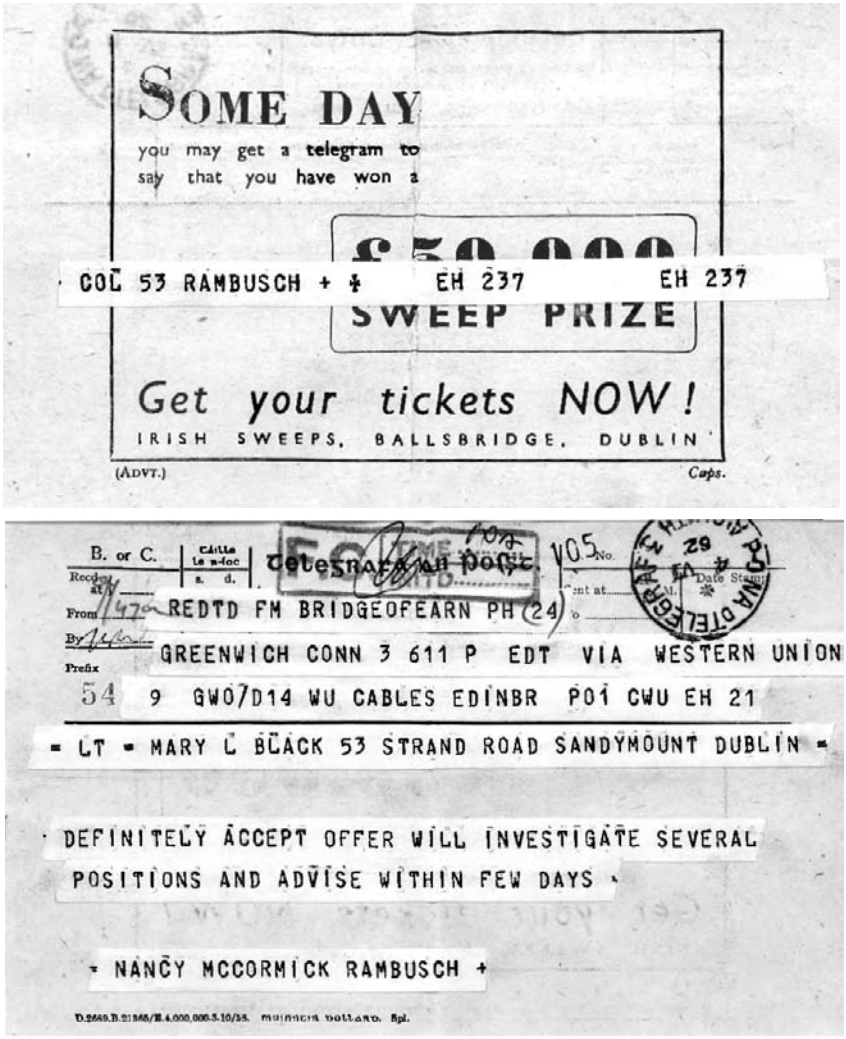
The Montessori movement has certainly flourished here in the United States since its renaissance in the 1960s. In those early days, our materials were shipped directly from Holland in large wood crates that sometimes took months to arrive. We had to make many things ourselves, especially labels, definitions, and three-part cards because these were not available in English. There were no suppliers, as there are today, of a plethora of printed support materials



Recruitment telegram

and practical life items. Working with our hands we made what we needed and the work served me in the same way as it does the children in the classroom. I became conversant with the materials, the definitions, and the nomenclature through repetition of the exercise and, in a way, this process was more valuable than any "overnight" shipping of ready-made "booklets" or classification cards. I learned the names of all the states in America while making my own labels, and I am still surprised when I meet American-born individuals who cannot name or situate a particular state!

In the early 1960s, many Montessori schools met in old school buildings or in church basements where we shared the space with other community activities, Sunday school classes, and other church recreations. In many instances, it was necessary to disassemble the prepared environment every Friday afternoon and reassemble it again on Monday morning. I suspect there are still some who continue to do this, but purpose-built Montessori Children's Houses were not commonplace in the 1960s. Our school (my husband and mine) in Lincoln Nebraska was built in 1970 and was one of the earliest ones. It is still in use today, having served as a Children's House for forty-five years.

When I came to the United States, most of the directresses, like the materials, came from overseas. My contemporaries and colleagues came from France, Holland, Ireland, Germany, and Brazil, or from the Indian subcontinent. Most of us stayed in the United States and those with whom I still keep in touch remain active in the field, running their own schools, and staying whole-heartedly connected. Like myself, we no longer work in the classroom on a daily basis, yet we stay attached by helping in our own or others' schools as substitutes or as consultants working with staff development and support. Becoming a trainer in those days was not normally a career path open to us. In order to make training available to Americans in America, Mrs. Rambusch pushed ahead to create AMS and to establish training centers across the country. The Whitby School in Connecticut offered instruction on the East Coast, Dr. Urban Fleege established MMTTC in Chicago and Dr. Ronald Koegler initiated a training program on the West Coast. Some of us were recruited to demonstrate presentations of the materials at these centers, not because we were trainers, but because we were the people who knew

the materials and the order of presentation. At the same time Mr. Montessori and Miss Stephenson coordinated AMI training as it tried to gain a foothold in the United States. The options for Montessori training have multiplied exponentially in the intervening years, but in the early years, the newcomer to the field had fewer choices for training than are available today.

Recruiting students for our classes was much more difficult in the 1960s and 1970s. Parents of young children had not heard about Montessori, as so many tell us today. There was no Angelina Lillard proving to the educational and psychological communities, that Montessori's method of education was indeed valid and could be proven to be so by academic studies and research. In the early years, parents had to take us on faith or they had to try to wade through the cumbersome translation of the first English edition of *The Montessori Method* (1912) that was republished by Schocken Books in 1964. (The 1948 edition, retitled *The Discovery of the Child*, was in print then, but not easy to obtain in the United States.) If you have had occasion to return to the former title, you will understand what I mean by *wade through.* The wealth of information is there, of course, but it is not easy reading.

I think that parents in the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to choose Montessori for philosophical reasons than are the majority of our parents today. The increasing popularity of the Montessori Method in the Unites States during the past half century has made it much easier for parents to become informed or simply to have heard success stories about neighbors or relatives who have attended Montessori schools. They now come to us highly informed by the internet, rather than as parents cautious about embarking on what was then a rather new and nontraditional approach to early childhood education. I am not implying that this change is a bad one. It means that Montessori has become widely accepted, and certainly there are still many parents who are passionate about Montessori education for its own intrinsic richness. However, the increasing popularity and success of the method is a change none-the-less that has resulted from the efforts of the pioneers of the 1960s who through their work and conviction ensured the success of the Montessori renaissance in the United States.

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Lessons Learned from Forty-plus years in the classroom

Dr. Montessori saw education as an aid to life. For me, Montessori has been a way of life as well as a means to a very fulfilling life and, consequently, an aid to my life. Montessori work has given me purposeful activity, freedom to act in the classroom, and multiple opportunities for repetition that thus has led me to personal growth and development. I have increased my skill with the materials and my powers of observation and I have had a lifetime of opportunities to understand that to act, to show, and then to step back is more valuable in a relationship with the three- to six-year-old than to talk and to teach. All this has come to me through hands-on, meaningful work.

It might be thought that one who has been working in a Montessori classroom since the 1960s would not have much more to learn about the work and indeed might have all the answers. Not so! In considering all aspects of the work, from the classroom to the materials, the children and their parents, I have to acknowledge that there are always new and challenging lessons I learn even as I continue to work in Montessori in semiretirement. Take for example the classroom. Visitors to Montessori classrooms whether

in Tokyo, London, or San Francisco would instantly recognize the same materials, the Pink Tower, the Cylinder Blocks or the Metal Insets on the shelves. The didactic Montessori materials designed by Maria Montessori are recognizable anywhere. One might ask what can be learned from using the same tools to present lessons for forty years. Recently I watched a new child struggle with the hand-washing exercise. She got through the process, but not without splashed and spilled water on the table, the floor, and on her cuffs. That same day, the third-year student who had brought the snack, washed his hands at the same table before preparing the food. He completed the process with a minimum of effort and no mess. I was again reminded that through practice and repetition the mess and disorder of the beginner will eventually be replaced by the skill of the experienced child.

The classroom also taught me that every child who approaches the material brings to the exercise his or her own temperament, level of coordination, interest, and skill. As result, it is always necessary to adapt differently to each individual. I must adjust to accommodate different learning styles and personalities. Consequently my knowledge of the materials and the philosophy behind each piece requires me to remain flexible while staying within the bounds of a proper presentation. The tools and their purpose may remain static, but what the children and I bring to them is always changing and sometimes challenging, even after four decades and hundreds of pupils.

When I reflect on the children, there are personality types about whom I can generalize and behaviors that I can rationalize. Quite, enthusiastic, apprehensive, or angry children do fit into general categories, but no two children are alike even if they are both quiet by nature. Each person is an individual and each requires me to discover who he or she is and to make my presentations in particular ways that will fulfill their needs. Just as the classroom and the materials require me to stay alert so do the children, for while Annie may grade the Pink Tower perfectly on the first or second attempt Anne may only be capable of piling the blocks together at random. Each girl teaches me about her ability to discriminate visually, her eye-hand coordination, and her sense of order, and, on the basis of that information, I have to shape my approach to each individual.

Every presentation should be as new to me as it is to the person to whom it is being made.

Over the years I have continued to learn from my colleagues and staff. Children relate differently to the different staff members. Each adult observes the children from a different perspective. By talking with and listening to my colleagues, I frequently gained new insights into the children and their behavior or into the materials. I might learn that the beautiful arrangement I had set up for water pouring, despite its aesthetic appeal, is dysfunctional, because the adult in that part of the room points out to me that everyone knocks over the poorly balanced containers. Another pair of eyes and another perspective make me aware of things I have failed to notice and thus provide me with new ideas to consider or new ways to approach things.

Talking with parents at conferences is another occasion that continues to remind me of how much one can learn about children from their parents. We all know that at conferences parents are usually anxious to hear about how their children are doing in class. This is important to them. However, I have learned that if I can establish a dialogue with parents, instead of merely giving them a report, the conversation can spark new insights into situations that arise at times of day when I have no contact with their children. These provide me with a new awareness that may trigger a fresh understanding or a clue for further presentations. A parent's comments can cause me to reflect on what I am doing, how I am approaching a child or perhaps how a particular mannerism or behavior might be sustained or discouraged. I learn from the dialogue with parents, listening to them and sharing with them, how best to make a match between the child and school, one that could help a child to overcome a difficulty, reinforce a strength, or circumvent an inappropriate behavior. There is

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much to learn about what each child needs by listening and being open. So, even after forty years, I do not have all the answers. I do not know what tomorrow's new child will bring to the environment. As a result, it has been quite possible and very rewarding to have done the same thing with interest for forty-plus years, because there is always something new to be learned as each child crosses the threshold in the morning.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my own aging along with the Montessori movement, I find that Montessori as a life-long commitment still fascinates me. Working in the classroom for decades has continued to teach me about children, about how they learn, and about myself. I relish the opportunity to substitute or to help out in the classroom where I can witness, yet again, the joy and intensity of the children's work. Although I am less graceful than I once was at getting up off the floor, I am still getting down there when a presentation calls for it. I am fortunate to have shared my life with a husband who is also a Montessori (primary) director and having someone with whom to share everyday insights and observations has enhanced my continual growth in knowledge and understanding of our work. I greatly admire the work of the pioneers who have taken Montessori education well beyond where I started: to the elementary and upper grade levels and to the public schools and community-based programs. I continue to write and talk about various aspects of the philosophy when the writing muse captures me or a request to speak comes my way, but most of all I relish the opportunity to return to the classroom for a day when the call to substitute comes at 7:30 in the morning.The author would be delighted to hear from others who came to the United States to work in Montessori schools in the early to mid-1960s. Contact Mary Verschuur at <mvquitecontrary@gmail.com>.