

# Children's Memories of their Montessori Experience

By Joyce Tatsch

As an Early Childhood Montessori teacher of 26 years, I have always wondered what impressions I was making on the absorbent minds of my students. Thus, I decided to conduct a survey at the Princeton Montessori School (PMS) in New Jersey, a school serving age levels from infants through middle school.

I designed a series of five to six questions about memories of activities, teachers, and friends for all current K-8 students with a minimum of 1 year of Montessori schooling and for former students for whom we had contact information (Total Responses-133: Kindergarten-33, Elementary-70, Middle School-13, Graduates-17).

All current students from K-middle school responded and 17 out of 38 graduates responded. Questions posed varied slightly in wording and in the method of inquiry according to age level, but remained the same in content, i.e. for Ks "What do you remember about your toddler class?" For Elementary and beyond, "What do you remember about your early days at Princeton Montessori School? Infant? Toddler? Primary? Jr. 1 or Jr. 2? Which-



Photograph by Jude Keith Rose

Children's memories of school, of teachers, of friends—wouldn't you be fascinated to learn what sticks in your students' minds one year or five or twenty years from now?

ever applies to you?" and a final question only for former students and/or graduates of PMS, "What do you find that you learned at Princeton Montessori

School has helped you the most in your school years or in your life experience?"

Teachers asked younger children questions and wrote the responses for

them. Older children responded independently and graduates responded to an online questionnaire. Questions progressed as follows: students responded to questions about memories from previous classes on what they enjoyed doing throughout the day, what *specific* activities they remembered and enjoyed, if there was anything they did not like to do, and what they remembered about their teachers and their friends. Graduates were asked an additional question regarding the most valuable thing they learned at PMS.

One example of the survey results is the response from Xan, age 25, who recalled her teachers telling her that she had an affinity for doing chores in the classroom. She mentioned she continues to find a lot of pleasure in cleaning and organizing the spaces in which she lives and works. "I think PMS enhanced this innate trait by instilling a sense of responsibility in students about their surrounding environments."

Another student remembered, "I learned how to walk at school and said my first word 'ball' because we always played with big bouncy balls."

Montessori students' positive and detailed responses suggest that concrete materials did make a difference in their learning processes. Monica S., now 32, remembered learning how to spell and do math in Primary. "We had these letter sets with clear "Es." The teacher always showed me that the clear ones were silent "Es."

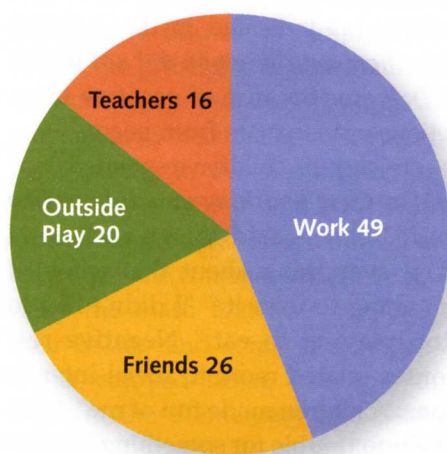
Responses also revealed the influence of teachers and impressions of the Montessori philosophy on the students. One of many responses in this vein was from Albert K., age 25.

*The inculcation of true independence in the students by way of the teachers' attitudes and the teaching methods was crucial. If I take anything away from Montessori, it is this. I think that the ability to decisively act and make concrete decisions without input from superiors (or anyone) is a*

*valuable life skill that has served me (and I'm sure many others) well in academia and in life.*

In the questionnaire children were able to make more than one response to the question *What do you remember about your class?* Most responses to the question fell into the following categories: Work-49, Friends-26, Outside Play-20, Teachers-16.

**What Do You Remember About Your Class?**



Respondents vividly recalled memories of their work in all areas of the classroom. Many children remembered sequential food activities, i.e. apple preparation, eating popcorn with chopsticks, or math activities, such as long chains and fractions using Hershey bars. Language, science, art, and geography works were included. A graduate recalled the "freedom to explore . . . baskets of possibilities with an entire day before me."

Interactions with friends and unsupervised access to them in an outdoor environment are positive and essential contributors to the development of the "whole" child. "No homework, reading buddies, recess 2x a day" was a typical comment from an elementary student. Many elementary children recalled twice-a-day recess time.

Only 16 students mentioned teachers, perhaps indicating that these Montessori teachers seemed to be

successful following the traditional Montessori teacher role of one who remains in the background and entices the child to learn through direct access to the well prepared materials within the child's reach. Children perceived teachers as helpers, comforters, or guides as opposed to the traditional classroom where the teacher clearly leads and controls the flow of the day and imparts information. Children described teachers as "kind," "helpful," "patient," and "caring."

Results imply that these Montessori teachers direct children toward independent learning through free choice and access to an attractive, rich, and carefully created environment designed to meet the sensitive periods of each child. One graduate remembered the QQ or Quick Question, a sign-up sheet for children who have questions about assignments that needed clarification used by PMS elementary level teachers. "QQ was cool and you could sign up for a lesson if you didn't understand it," the graduate said. Another recalled her experience in Primary: "I looked forward to going to school, especially Primary—so much to explore and be creative with."

When students were asked, *Which works do you remember? Did you have a favorite work?*, the largest number, 44, chose food work. Creative activities followed with mentions by 34 respondents while 49 mentioned either math or language activities. Twelve students noted that extracurricular activities were a vital component of their education.

Children expressed fond memories of apple, pickle, banana, cereal, and egg work in Primary. "Shaking cream to make butter" was one comment. Their love of food continued later in Elementary with Cooking Club, a time for socialization, relaxation, and comfort. Following in popularity were creative activities such as blocks, painting, drawing, and musical performances.

Children mentioned math and language most frequently among the

