



# From Zero

## Montessori Parent Education in Hong Kong and Greater China

By Daisy Lau and Ralph Yau

It was a hot and humid afternoon in 2006, 3 months after the opening of the Children's House at the Infinity Children's School in Hong Kong. A 3-year-old boy selected a table-scrubbing activity. He moved erratically and without purpose, accidentally bumping into another child and spilling water on the floor. Meanwhile, a toddler girl strolled around the classroom aimlessly for almost an hour. She finally chose a puzzle work, but before she could begin work on it, she was already attracted by another activity on the shelf.

Our previous teaching experiences in Canada had shown us that it usually took a couple of months for a new cohort of children to become normalized. However, these Hong Kong children continued with chaotic and hectic behaviors even after a few months had passed.

The nut was cracked after we spoke with the children's parents. We learned that the boy's mother always covered her son with long-sleeved outfits, no matter the weather, and seldom took him to play in outdoor settings, lest he catch a cold. As a result, his limited sensory-motor exposure had adversely affected his spatial judgment and sense of balance. We also learned that since her birth, the girl's father had given her frequent exposure to so-called "educational" videos and DVDs. He believed he was

nurturing her, but we believed it had the opposite effect: the screen time had led to a lack of focus, impeding the child's concrete grasp of orderly actions and sequences of movements.

We quickly realized the root of our problem was the behaviors of adults who were not well informed about their children's developmental needs. After our conversations, these parents realized that their words and deeds might have provided a shaky footing for their children's social and cognitive functioning. The parents then asked to learn more about the needs of young children and about the Montessori philosophy. We scheduled a 2-hour meeting, which, in the end, ran to 4 hours! Among other things, we discussed parenting methods and whether the Montessori way can take root in Hong Kong. This conversation was the seed for Infinity Children's World, an organization we founded to provide parent education, with the aim of helping parents become their children's best teachers.

### Normalization of Parents: Helping Parents Transform Themselves

In *The Discovery of the Child*, Dr. Maria Montessori defined the task of the educator as "to stir up life but leave it free to develop" (1972, p. 111). The first, and, we believe, most important

educators of young children are not directors and directresses but parents and other primary caregivers. Thus, the key to paradigm shift in early childhood education must involve the parents.

Montessori also said that the "real preparation for education is the study of one's self" (1995, p. 131). For Montessori, the biggest hurdle in the educational realm had to do with breaking down the prejudices that adults hold about children. We believe that this applies to parents as well: A kind of parent "normalization," or transformation, must happen so that the parent will no longer be a barrier to the child's natural development but rather an aid to it.

To explain this concept to parents, we likened it to ancient Chinese wisdom: The best doctor cures you before you are sick, and prevention is better than cure. Prevention is essential in both physical and mental health. Rather than correcting a child's behavior after a problem is discovered, we believed we should attempt to prevent the emergence of "deviances" by empowering the first and vital "teachers" of children—their parents.

However, we knew we were facing a challenge. Hong Kong is an unbalanced, highly materialistic, information-bombarded, and fast-changing society, resulting in uncertain livelihoods and

# to Infinity

terrible living conditions for many. Parents who struggle to make a living in this society are motivated by a constant fear of loss. Adults convey this anxiety to their children by force-feeding them all sorts of knowledge and information at an early age.

Education in Hong Kong, especially early childhood education, is highly commercialized. For example, apart from ensuring that physical premises are safe for children, the government does not regulate school settings, including teacher qualifications and curriculum content. Early childhood

centers are sometimes run as lucrative businesses satisfying insecure parents. Caught up in the competitive urge to “win at the starting line,” some Hong Kong parents and kindergartens adjust the curriculum and teaching methods to force-drill young children with elementary-level knowledge. Some children as young as 4 have to deal with dictation and testing.

Some Hong Kong parents and schools are very results-oriented in assessing the abilities and potentials of young children. The children are judged in terms of the number of

vocabulary words they have acquired, the number of take-home worksheets they can complete, and so on. Emphasis on grades and quantity, not quality, of knowledge is often the norm.

Finally, in recent years, Hong Kong has boasted one of the world’s highest smartphone penetration rates. Media has brought us unparalleled access to all sorts of ever-changing information, but the results and possible downsides of this constant access have not yet been determined.

We believe that these circumstances have led to many unintended consequences. Children are too exhausted to “learn” everything. Some hate learning and resent their parents for putting so much pressure on them. In addition,



Enjoying good company at mealtime



At work in a  
Montessori environment

Hong Kong society values material possessions but places little to no emphasis on inner spirit or energy. As a result, we feel many parents lack concentration, order, coordination, and independence in all aspects of their lives, including child-rearing. Families with two working parents are common in Hong Kong. New mothers are given a mere 10 weeks of maternity leave. And once back at work, the stress of staying competitive in a fast-paced financial city has resulted in parents who often try to multitask while minding their children, swiping their smartphones or watching television. The long working hours of parents lead to the employment of foreign-born domestic helpers in hundreds of thousands of families. Heavy reliance on paid help and/or grandparents for child care and household chores renders both parents and children ineffective in or incapable of Practical Life skills.

Nature has a blueprint for the unfolding of a child's potential and abilities. But adults, unaware of laws of development, busy with their own lives, and faced with social pressures, may disregard this order and occupy a child's time with developmentally inappropriate courses and training, or toys and other material possessions, rather than quality time with family.

We believe parent education that combines Montessori philosophy with the essence of ancient Chinese wisdom is one way to assist parents to transform themselves and their roles. Laozi said, "Human follows the Earth; the Earth follows Heaven; Heaven follows Tao (the Way); Tao follows itself" (1993, p. 42). In Montessori terms, "the Way" is "Cosmic Consciousness." We believe children and parents should grow according to this universal and natural order.

### **"Getting Interested in New Life": A Sensitive Period for Parents**

While parents want to be attentive to the developmental needs of their infants and toddlers, they often find it

difficult because these children cannot yet communicate using language. Our mission is to act as a bridge between children and parents by explaining the child's developmental needs to parents.

Over the past 8 years, more than 16,000 parents have attended our parent education classes, held in Hong Kong and mainland China. According to questionnaire answers collected from these parents, almost all of them have indicated that the Montessori parent program has positively changed their attitudes toward their children and affected the way they live. Many said they had made improvements in terms of their sensorial, observational,

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and expressive abilities after the classes. And the classes have had far-reaching effects: Some of our parents have been so positively inspired that they have motivated their relatives, friends, and colleagues to participate in the parent education program!

We do not advertise our parent education program. Instead, we share articles about Montessori ideas and research with our existing parents. Our "normalized" parents introduce the program to friends and relatives by word of mouth. These parents become more sensitive to everything about their children and more curious about the unfolding of these young lives. We call this the "sensitive period of getting interested in new life." Parents who have the opportunity to understand the scientific pedagogy of Montessori find it easier to understand their children. There are many parents (we include ourselves in this group) who have learned Montessori philosophy and become credentialed teachers only after their children were born.

A prepared environment is neces-

sary to facilitate the unfolding of the sensitive periods in children. We apply the same thinking to our parent education classes, offering adults in the "sensitive period of getting interested in new life" the chance to learn and be guided by instructors in a well-prepared environment.

### **Repertoire of a Successful Parent Education Program**

Before launching our first Montessori parent education program, we researched programs in many other countries/regions. We learned that a successful parent education program offers a balance of theory and practice, giving inquisitive parents the tools to apply what they learn in class to their parent-child relationship in the home environment.

In our program, parents are required to attend at least 8 hours of parent education classes before enrolling their children in our school. We explain to parents that they have to prepare themselves first and take responsibility to educate their own children instead of shirking this responsibility by diverting it to someone else. About 10% of the parents who take the original 8-hour course then go on to join our in-depth extension courses of 30, 60, or 90 hours. Parents who enroll their children in our school after the original 8-hour course also receive 6 hours of workshops each year to refresh or consolidate their knowledge about Montessori education. Since 2012, some parents have also gone on to complete Hong Kong's first AMS-affiliated teacher education program (Early Childhood course), offered by Montessori Teacher Education Center/San Francisco Bay Area.

In the course, we discuss Early Childhood research with the aim of helping parents apply Montessori principles and other child-rearing practices to their everyday lives (see p. 39 for more details). Concrete examples are used so that parents can easily apply what they have learned at home.



Observing in the classroom

For example, we discuss why smartphones and tablets—including those so-called “educational apps” that are so popular among Hong Kong parents—are not good for infants and toddlers. Even those apps that simulate conventional toys don’t teach young children essential skills that come from physically engaging with the three-dimensional world.

We also hoped that our parent education program would empower a critical mass of local parents to unleash their parenting instincts to follow the child, and to differentiate the authentic from the fake in the early childhood education field. The method is the key. We decided to make use of Socratic dialogue to help participating parents ask questions and think in developmentally appropriate ways during the

course. Instead of presenting Montessori philosophy and our observations up front, the parent education dialogue takes the form of ongoing discussion and inquiry about adults’ preconceptions and reflections on child rearing and education. For example, when one parent insisted that spanking was an indispensable part of discipline for his child, a discussion ensued in which the parent began to think critically and reflect on his own childhood. In the end, he reversed his thinking, admit-

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ting that he had felt unloved as a child due to repeated spankings.

In our parent education classes, we employ a “participatory model” (as compared with a “representative model”), which sees parents as the chief educators of children, instead of merely caregivers. Our goal is for parents not to blindly follow people they deem “professional” or “authoritative,” but to rely on their own parental instinct to distinguish right from wrong. This model has been in place at our school for 8 years now, and we feel it is effective in ensuring the natural, well-rounded education of children.

An old Chinese saying claims that something is effective when it is put in place at the right time, in the right location, and by bringing together the right people. We applied this thinking

to the establishment of our parent education program, as follows:

### *The Right Time*

In Hong Kong, parent education usually occurs in the form of a few seminars held by the government or non-governmental organizations. The most common seminars relate to prenatal care and the physical care of newborns. Any parent information sessions focusing on children older than age 3 are mostly focused on academics. The absence of parent education on how to follow the child is apparent!

### *The Right Place*

Because of limited space, we held our very first parent education program in our Montessori classroom. The impact was amazing! When parents sat on child-size chairs, they understood how it felt for a child to be given adult-size furniture. Some recalled memories of their own childhood. They could step into their children's shoes. Moreover, these parents were inspired by the logic and beauty of the Montessori way and by our presentations and question-and-answer sessions. They regarded us not only as their children's Montessori teachers but as *their* Montessori teachers!

### *The Right People*

Since many of our prospective students are cared for by domestic helpers and, to a lesser extent, grandparents, we encourage parents to enroll these individuals as well. In addition, our parents come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and often have varied ways of raising their children. We offer advice to fit all groups. For example, lower-income parents are sometimes unaware of viable alternatives to corporal punishment. We give them examples of positive wording and interacting that they can try with their young children. Children of higher-income parents often do not get a chance at home to use Practical Life skills because their families rely heavily on domestic helpers. We encourage

## Topics Covered in the 8-Hour Parent Education Program

- Introduction to the Montessori philosophy
- What does new life offer to the world?
- The importance of parental instincts
- The relationship between human beings and the natural law: the importance of nature in education
- Building the sense of competence and psychological well-being of children
- Nurturing the physical and spiritual embryo
- Sensitive periods
- The absorbent mind
- The relationship between consciousness, unconsciousness, and subconsciousness
- Normalization
- Understanding children's senses, movement, and cognition
- Understanding children's language development
- Understanding children's emotions and social behaviors
- Home management: mutual respect between adults and children
- Role modeling
- Localization: integrating Montessori into everyday life
- Brief introduction of Montessori and Montessori-inspired materials
- Comparing and contrasting Montessori and traditional education
- How to choose a mutually respectful school for children

these parents to be role models, doing household chores themselves and reflecting on ways they can allow young children to contribute to housework.

Our parent education presenters have extensive experience and solid theoretical foundations in Early Childhood development. In addition, we believe they should also have a wealth of life experience. Our staff's past work history in fields such as Chinese and Western medicine, law, mass media, and education helped us to communicate with parents from diverse professional and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The cosmic task of parenting appeals to both mothers and fathers. However, there is a widely held presumption that there are different parenting styles based on gender (Craig, 2006). Therefore, we have two presenters for each parent education course: one male and one female. They can address issues arising from different parenting styles of mothers and fathers, debunk some of the father/mother stereotypes, and involve both male and female caregivers so that they can form better partnerships for the benefits of their children.

We believe a presenter should possess mature observation skills, especially since all the theories of scientific pedagogy developed by Montessori are the fruits of her years of careful observation. When the presenter can support guidance methods with examples from everyday observations of children and parents, presentations are more credible. Some of our presenters are parents themselves, which helps them to relate to fellow parents.

### **In-Classroom Guidance**

Only when parents can “walk the talk” will they absorb the essence of Montessori approach. After parents

have completed the 8-hour theory and critical thinking session, they may enroll their infants or toddlers in an observation class that meets once a week for 2 months. Parents are required to attend at least 50% of these classes or to send their child’s main caregiver in their stead. During this time, young children freely explore in a Montessori Infant & Toddler classroom, while parents observe and discuss what they are seeing with experienced observers/instructors. The observers/instructors use this time to understand any developmental issues facing the children and talk with the parents about ways to care for and educate the child at home.

After the 8-week-long observation class, parents/caregivers and their infants or toddlers continue to attend our regular child-parent class for at least a year. Parents and caregivers are mostly there to observe how their children interact with teachers and with the environment; we show them how to selectively interact with their children so as not to disturb their growing inner discipline and independence. We see this program as a yearlong “apprenticeship” for parents, helping them to act as role models for their children. By that, we do not merely refer to the parents teaching their children how to use learning materials; rather, we show the

parents how they can live Montessori philosophies every day, so their children can fully absorb the concepts and spirit of the Montessori approach.

By teaching parents that they can indeed “follow the child,” we slowly remove obstacles to children’s development and allow parental instinct to be revived. As a result, parents find it easier to adhere to the natural way of nurturing a child, which in turn counters the harmful tide of force-fed learning.

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