

## A Montessori approach to early childhood development at the SI

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“Childhood asks us what reality really is, what the world is, and where it came from. Childhood asks where life came from, and where it goes. Does the soul exist? Where was the soul before birth? How many realms are there? Are fairies real? Do ghosts and spirits exist? Why are some people lucky and others unlucky, why is there suffering? Why are we here? Are there more things in the innocent-seeming world than we can see? These are some of the questions that the state of childhood asks, and which perplex us all our days.

Childhood is an enigma, a labyrinth, an existential question, a conundrum. It is the home of all the great questions of life and death, reality and dream, meaning and purpose, freedom and society, the spiritual and the secular, nature and culture, education and self-discovery.”

Ben Okri, *A Time for New Dreams*, 2011

In the context of a complex world, where there is little dispute that business-as-usual is generally considered inappropriate for the enormity of the tasks at hand, no more can this be as clearly seen than in the arenas of education for sustainability.

What is so unsustainable? Massive inequality in an era declared the *Anthropocene*, a term coined by Nobel Prize winner, Paul Crutzen, in 2000, to describe an epoch where humanity is the dominant force on Earth – with irrevocable consequences (*Nature*, 2002). Over the millennia agriculture, together with the start of the industrial revolution and burning fossil fuels, have impacts that have collided and escalated, particularly over the past 60 years, to a point where the influence of the human species on almost all ecosystems on the planet – including the planet itself – is no longer disputed by any reputable scientist. (*IPCC report*, 2014; Swilling and Annecke, 2012). Referred to as a ‘poly-crisis’ by French philosopher, Edgar Morin, (1999), because of the interconnectedness of the causes and impacts of multiple crises, (food insecurity, deforestation, water shortages, pollution, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, poverty, global warming) the human species finds itself in transitions at many levels, and in contested spaces. Massive global inequalities, the financial crash of 2008, resource wars and the verge of the 6<sup>th</sup> Extinction (*Science*, Pimm, 2014) where species are becoming extinct 1000 times faster than before humans entered the picture, creates wicked problems – problems without single solutions.

These provide extraordinary opportunity for creativity and human ingenuity.

However, at a time when this creativity needs to be nurtured in every area of learning possible, much of education internationally is constrained not by lack of goodwill, but by ways of learning developed for the industrial revolution (Capra, 2012; Harding, 2006). Steeped in a disconnect from nature, mechanistic and reductionist building blocks are fragmented into linear trajectories interspersed with assessing to ensure homogeneity. Children and young people appear to be geared up for a world that no longer exists. In addition to this, South African education has its own peculiarities. An education system wrenched by the desire to be ‘modern’ (influenced by outdated western styles of learning which are seldom appropriate); rectifying unjust imbalances from our colonial and apartheid histories; teachers who themselves have been through this distorted system, are parts of the multi-faceted challenge which clearly has no easy or simplistic answers.

If Africa is to take advantage of its current rapid economic growth rate, the most sensible approach would be to leapfrog conventional developmental strategies and pay significant attention to developing sustainable infrastructure using renewable resources in ways that build green economies rooted in local and regional contexts. For this, it is clear that education too needs to leapfrog modes of learning that are outdated and utterly inadequate for a relational world that is both complex and uncertain.

An ecological worldview based in opportunities for deep connection with nature, ecological literacy, mathematics, science and art intertwined with experience of artisanal crafts and indigenous knowledge are key to schools that are forging the way forward in education for sustainable futures. There are examples such as place-based education (Browne, 2007; Greenwood 2010), nature-based learning (Kahn, 2010) and activity-based learning that all give significance to alternative and appropriate values and methods in line with educating for sustainability.

Lynedoch Early Learning, working with a community of parents over many years, has selected the long tried and tested ethos, methods and curriculum developed by Dr Maria Montessori during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Forerunner in her time, (with others such as Rudolf Steiner, C.G Jung; supported by the likes of Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore and Thomas Edison; and influenced by Ghandi) Montessori was a physician, (first female in Italy to achieve this), educator, philosopher and practitioner whose titles of some of her books perhaps best describe the contributions she made to fundamentally transforming education for many across the world. *The Secret of Childhood; The Absorbent Mind; The Discovery of the Child; The Formation of Man; Education and Peace; To Educate the Human Potential; Spontaneous Activity in Education; Education for a New World;* are some of the books that have both challenged education, and articulated ways of seeing and being with children that engage deeply the human brain and its potential for creating different futures. This transdisciplinary, relational, pattern and process approach appears to fit well with the place- nature- activity-based learning mentioned above. Current neuroscience too is concomitant with the Montessori method developed over the past 100 years (refer to the work of Dr Nils Bergman, University of Cape Town, on the neuroscience of being born).

While Montessori education has grown throughout the world, it is interesting to note the recent uptake in South East Asia. According to an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) summary document (July 2014) the following is particularly noteworthy:

- Extract from report of the Chinese Society for Education on Montessori teacher training in China: “Development: In 10 years there will be about 20000 to 30000 (25% of total number of primary schools) kindergartens using Montessori method, and will need about 100000 trained teachers, will need no less than 3000 people to do research and study”;
- Delivery is to Chinese nationals by AMI international trainers (unusual to be allowed to teach directly without the mediation of Chinese teacher trainers);
- Since 2008, there have been 260 graduates in 0-3 teacher training, and 490 in the 3-6 phase and there is ongoing collaborative research, including by a team of Chinese linguistic experts, neuro-psychologists and Montessori experts on developing a new approach to the teaching of literacy (Chinese characters);
- In Thailand, AMI courses are held in close collaboration with the Thai government, Ministry of Basic Education with the government paying for its teachers to be re-trained as Montessori teachers;
- There have been 350 graduates on the Thai/AMI courses so far. 70 students enrolled for the first 3-6 course, 95 for the second and 210 for the third. The first 6-12 teacher training course has 140 students. There are 262 predominantly government schools with AMI trained teachers;
- As with China, there is extensive research ongoing in Thailand with AMI expertise with encouraging results in all areas of comparison between children with Montessori education and those in conventional schools;
- In Vietnam, an MOU has been signed between AMI and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, and plans are under way for teacher training in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City;
- There is sufficient demand to have several of Montessori’s book translated into Chinese and Vietnamese;

- In India there has been a fairly extensive Montessori presence since 1939 – with 3 AMI training centres, and an AMI teacher trainer’s programme. In addition to this, Activity Based Learning (based on Montessori principles) has been adopted in 37000 public elementary schools in Tamil Nadu. AMI is working with the City Montessori School, Lucknow (according to the Guinness Book of Records this is the largest school in the world with 39 437 pupils and 2 500 teachers) to bring Montessori knowledge to the teachers, as well as aligning itself with Montessori principles in the early years;
- It is worth mentioning that extensive work in the Torres Straits with Aboriginal people by AMI has resulted in the people there calling themselves the ‘Montessori Nation’;
- There are exciting AMI ventures into training and teacher training in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and in a refugee camp in Nakuru, Kenya both of which have been visited by a member of the Newberry House team.

Our work is located in a context of educating for sustainable futures with an approach to learning that is high quality, historically tested and globally relevant. Combining open architecture, self-organised learning, ecology and technology has seen a flourishing in the children hitherto not seen before. We are inspired by countries searching for excellence and systems that support innovative knowledge development.

While many Montessori-educated people have achieved greatness in living fulfilled lives, the more well-known include:

- **Larry Page and Sergey Brin** – founders of Google
- **Jeff Bezos** – founder of Amazon.com
- **Sean ‘P.Diddy’ Combs** – singer
- **T. Berry Brazelton** – pediatrician and author
- **Julia Child** – author, chef, TV cooking shows
- **Gabriel Garcia Marquez** – Nobel Prize winner for Literature
- **Katherine Graham** – ex-owner of the Washington Post
- **Anne Frank** – author, diarist from World War II
- **George Clooney** - Academy Award-winning actor
- **Peter Drucker** - management guru
- **Friedensreich Hundertwasser** - Austrian painter and Architect
- **Jimmy Wales**, founder of Wikipedia
- **Will Wright** - designer of The Sims
- **Helen Hunt** - Academy Award-winning actress
- **Joshua Bell** - American violinist, owner of Stradivarius violin
- **Maarten Hajer** – head Netherlands Environmental Agency

In South Africa, the creative, original spirit of this work was developmental in the post ’76 riots period, where crèches and training was provided with community members taking full ownership of this approach to learning in some of the first ventures smashing the apartheid policy of Christian National Education. Strilli and Nicky Oppenheimer played lead roles in pioneering this work at this time.

It is this spirit that the SI work with children and youth intends to convey – a creative, high-quality, innovative space of learning, rooted in a sense of place, traversing experience and practice in explorations that generate connections with ecology and more equitable futures in South Africa.