Change and Transformation: The Journey of Our School

MacDonald Montessori School • Saint Paul, Minnesota

by Beth MacDonald

When Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer honored our school by asking us to be on the cover of *Exchange*, I remembered the conferences I had attended over the years when I was a new director. My favorite was the Child Care Directors conference in 1989, which was held on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. Not only was the setting beautiful, but it was at that conference that I first heard about the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy. This is where our journey began.

Our journey has been one of change and transformation. We began as a school that embraced the Montessori philosophy, but also included a high interest in music, art, drama, and creativity. While the Montessori approach to learning was powerful and compelling, there was a piece missing. When we heard about the schools in Reggio Emilia, we were drawn to them like a magnet.

Our school is in a 110-year-old building in the heart of St. Paul, Minnesota. We are a part of the diverse West Seventh neighborhood, just blocks from the Mississippi River; downtown St. Paul, the state capital; theaters; museums; restaurants; a sporting complex; and historical buildings. In 2012, we celebrate our 26th year as a non profit infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age center for young children.

We enroll 200 children, with more than half of our enrollment being children under the age of three. We employ 38 teachers in nine classrooms, with three teachers in each classroom. We also have three floating teachers who cover staff absences, and an administrative staff of four. An additional team of three teachers, ‘the collaboration team,’ offers weekly experiences to children in music, drama, literature, and theater in each classroom so the classroom teaching teams can meet as a group, and again biweekly allowing teachers two hours of prep time together. We also have a studio coordinator who works with teachers and children to support their exploration of materials and to extend classroom research.
Amelia Gambetti with the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, has been a very special person in the life of our school. Since 1994, she has been consulting with our school and offering her support following our attendance at our first Reggio conference in Washington, DC. Many other Reggio-inspired educators from around the country have also supported our journey.

The spiral best describes our process of the last 18 years. Every area of our growth has been affected: our image of the school, the child, the environment, organization, time, collaboration, professional development, the role of the teacher, co-learning and research, documentation, parent and family relationships, and our exploration of expressive materials.

Image of the Child

While the Montessori philosophy fostered a strong image of the child, we now see the child as rich, competent, powerful, and an active protagonist in his or her learning.

Image of the Environment

Our image of the school has been transformed. Now we see the school as a vibrant community of co-learners: teachers, parents, and children. This school is a living web of relationships and interactions. Our focus is not to protect children from life, but to embrace risk, challenge, struggle, and frustration. Adults and children are supported as they construct, think, problem solve, share ideas, and question as they experience life.

Beauty is not a luxury. It is an essential element of quality in an environment for children. The environment is not decorated by teachers; it is personally reflective of the children, parents, and teachers through photos, words, learning, and research. Commercially-made display materials and teacher-made materials are replaced with the visual expressions and the thinking of children.

Professional Development

The professional growth of teachers is the key to any school’s success. Written comments from two of our parents say it best:

“The teachers seem to be as amazed at my children as I am. This is evident not only in the daily journals (that I love), but in the interactions they have with teachers throughout the building. The school is a community with a variety of people to love and learn with. We feel like family when we walk in.”

“On top of giving 110% to the curriculum and to the children, the staff are also committed to advancing their own education and on-going training, often going above and beyond.”

The school has made a substantial financial commitment every year to in-school consultation and conferences and out-of-town conferences around the country and in study weeks in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Every penny spent has been a valuable investment that comes back to the teachers, children, and parents of MacDonald Montessori and continues to support our vision for the future.

Role of the Teacher

We are moving from planners, decision-makers, entertainers, holders and givers of knowledge to listeners, observers, co-learners, and collaborators. Decisions are made with the children. The classroom is prepared with the children; the learning is made visible and documented with the children. We have shape-shifted our view of the teacher and embraced listening, observing, hypothesizing, offering provocations, and reflecting as a part of a new image of ourselves.
Co-learning and Research

Questions are the open door to learning together. Who, what, where, why, and how are questions we ask ourselves and the children. Children are natural thinkers and researchers. Our vision is not to impart information, but to support the creative thinking and problem solving of each child. These skills are crucial to everyone’s growth as an individual, a child, or an adult.

Documentation

Our process over the years has been from decorating the environment to documenting the learning: through words, photos, visual expressions, videos, panels, books, and daily journals. This documentation reflects an ongoing process as it evolves and not a finished product. Amelia Gambetti provoked our thinking by asking, “Do you document your life? Do you collect words, cards, photos, memories, traces, collections, letters, albums, recordings, scrapbooks, videos, email, and photo frames? Do you reflect and revisit them? Why don’t you document your classrooms? Don’t you think wonderful things happen there?”

Parent and Family Relationships

Parents are competent, active, essential components of their children’s learning experiences. They have a right to know what is happening in the lives of their children, a right to have the learning documented through panels, newsletters, and classroom daily journals emailed each day. Parents are not ‘invited’ into our school; they are included in the life of the school through parent nights that explore the ongoing research projects happening in the classrooms. In addition, parents participate in Saturday morning family gatherings that include infant massage, picnics, materials exploration, teacher-family trips to the farmers market, the zoo, the pumpkin patch, hay rides, sleepovers at school, and work Saturdays, birthdays, and special cultural celebrations, including Grandparents’ Day.

Exploration of Materials

The materials in our school environment are rich, complex, and competent. They are clean and organized with no broken or missing pieces. Materials are explored for their open-ended possibilities and not linked to product. Play, paint, paper, drawing, weaving, collage, wire, recycled materials, music, dance, sound, theater, and dramatic play are just a few of the expressive languages of children. Materials are maintained and organized and collected by the children, parents, and teachers, and they’re always accessible to the hands of children.

In Summary

We made a conscious choice as a school to move into this spiral of change and transformation. This means that we enter and reenter each of these categories, stages, and layers over and over. Our journey is a never ending, exciting, and challenging process for us all.

Beth Macdonald is the director of MacDonald Montessori School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, a Reggio-inspired school celebrating its 26th year in early childhood education. Beth is one of the founding board members and past co-chairs of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA). She has presented and participated in Reggio-inspired professional development conferences in the United States and abroad, and her school co-hosted The Hundred Languages of Children Exhibit from Reggio Emilia, Italy in 2004. She currently serves on the NAREA board and is an NAREA representative on the Reggio Emilia International Network.