

A Joyful Community

By Munir Shivji, MEd

"Our goal is not so much the imparting of knowledge as the unveiling and developing of spiritual energy."
—Maria Montessori (1989)

What is it that makes Montessori education stand out among other educational methodologies? Is it the opportunity for student choice in learning within mixed-aged classes? The ability to physically move about the classroom? Is it the natural social setting and the guidance that fosters friendship, respect, and personal responsibility between and among the children? Perhaps it is the enriched and engaging curriculum and materials that broaden awareness and set high expectations. For me, it is all of these, and as I seek to communicate the depth and breadth of the philosophy in simple terms, it also comes down to an honoring of the wholeness of who we are as Montessori educators and guides—physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual individuals. For Dr. Maria Montessori, the creation of a joyful spiritual community served as the foundation of many of her practices.

We are sometimes puzzled by the term *spiritual*, and the multiple meanings and feelings that surround the word can lead to disagreement. This doesn't need to be so. Spirituality is a basic human energy that gives meaning to our everyday lives.

In Montessori terms, *spiritual* refers to the natural inspiration children manifest through their questions, thoughtful insights, and unending wonder at the meaning and purpose of life. It is seen and heard every day as children spontaneously interact and engage with the world. "Did you see that?" "That is incredible!" "I didn't know that." "What's inside?" "Wow!"

Children are so open and present in their learning experiences, but they also can be quite fragile. Learning itself involves a constant flux of perceptions and ideas, and this may cause children to feel vulnerable, with emotional swings from joy to anxiety. That is the nature of change, and it is inherent to learning. But change doesn't have to be experienced with fear or anxiety. In fact, with a bit of trust, planning, and preparation—and a dose of positive attitude—change can be the force that moves our natural spiritual energy forward into a life of learning.

To support this, we Montessori educators must work thoughtfully to create a joyful learning environment. When we do, we ensure a safe classroom for risk taking, questioning, and exploring—and when children feel safe, they meet change with enthusiasm and excitement.

As a member of AMS, where everyone belongs and learns for life, I invite you to join me this year in being intentional and bringing empathic joy to your classrooms. Be sure to:

Observe. Take time, every day, to observe your classroom as a whole, and pay close attention to each individual within it. "As we observe children, we see the vitality of their spirit, the maximum effort put forth in all they do, the intuition, attention, and focus they bring to all life's events, and the sheer joy they experience in living." (Montessori, *The Child, Society and the World*)

Share yourself. Think about what you enjoy. Model and share your discoveries with students in your classroom. Share who you are with your children, and help them understand their emotions by naming them and living them. I think of the following quote that I've seen attributed to Italian theologian Romano Guardini: "It is not so much what we say, nor even what we do, that speaks loudest to our students; it is who we are."

Keep joy alive. Show enthusiasm, smile often, build authentic relationships with all your students, get to know them as unique individuals, take them outside, incorporate diverse music into your class, avoid unhelpful criticism, and take time for yourself to reflect. "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy." (Thich Nhat Hanh)

References

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