



EDUCATION

A creative approach to learning

Montessori schools aim to give children an education for life, writes **Kristie Kellehan.**

Kamilla Escombe was looking for a socially conscious career path and says she found it in the Montessori education system. The kindergarten teacher at Barrenjoey Montessori School first heard about the independent learning method in 2003.

"I started reading everything I could, both about the education model and the remarkable person behind it," Escombe says.

"Dr Maria Montessori was an advocate for world peace, she was a friend of Gandhi's and was nominated for a Nobel peace prize. She was also the first female physician in Italy."

Escombe decided to train as a Montessori teacher over two summers so she could work and study at the same time. There are other teacher training options available, including a year-long block course. "The training involves lectures on Montessori theory and pedagogy in the mornings followed by afternoons of supervised practice," Escombe says.

Now with six years' experience as a teacher, Escombe says Montessori classrooms are peaceful, collaborative environments based around respect of oneself, others and even non-living things.

"Montessori fosters a lifelong love of learning and an attitude of friendliness with error that encourages children to learn from their mistakes and develop independence," Escombe says.

"The Montessori method takes into account the needs, talents, gifts

and individuality of each child, so that all children reach their potential. Children leave us with a sense of self-worth and a belief in their own ability to learn new things, master new skills, solve problems and do things well."

Recent examples of Montessori children leading the way in society are the Google and Amazon creators, who demonstrate the creative thinking that Montessori nurtures. Escombe says the biggest challenge facing Montessori is accessibility.

"I would hope to see continued Montessori streams in the mainstream so more families can access this type of quality education," she says. "It is both the height of progressive thinking and the height of common sense."

Raji Sivapalan has 24 years' teaching experience at Montessori East school.

Sivapalan, who says she always wanted to be a teacher, first studied the Montessori method at the AMI Good Shepherd Training Centre in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Further training in Sydney established her career path.

"Living by the philosophy and observing my own son develop through the years made me realise that this method is truly an education for life and I never looked back," she says.

Sivapalan says Montessori teachers are allowed to be creative and to grow as individuals. "We teach to the individual, not to a group, and following the children's needs is more satisfying than

following a set curriculum," she says. "When we enrol a child we enrol the whole family thus inspiring and building a strong community, which is so fulfilling. Students within a three-year age bracket are taught together."

"In each cycle they get to be the youngest, middle and oldest, so the youngest learn by observing, the older ones learn by teaching," Sivapalan says. "Each cycle lays the foundation for the next stage. One of the most-often cited benefits of the Montessori method is that it teaches children how to learn rather than what to learn."

"When they leave at age 11 or 12, they are ready to face the challenges of the next stage, which is adolescence."

"They know their strengths and needs and have a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of the elements, plants, animals and humans."

Sivapalan encourages those who are interested in Montessori training to get their teaching degree first. The three main roles of a Montessori teacher are to prepare the environment to meet every child's needs; to be a scientist, observing the children at work and planning accordingly; and to be a saint practising humility. "Being a Montessori teacher is not a job but 'work' that is a lifelong journey," she says. "One needs to be prepared to be a learner – learn from the mistakes, from the child, from experienced colleagues. The work is never finished."