

*“Let us give the child a vision of the universe...for all things are part of the universe and are connected to form one whole unity.” ~Maria Montessori*

At the center of the Montessori elementary curriculum is what has come to be called “The Cosmic Curriculum”. Maria Montessori knew children and she understood that even small children can ask big questions. Young philosophers can stump their parents and teachers with their questions of “why?” and “how?” and “what does it mean?” So Montessori designed the Great Lessons to fuel the child’s imagination and ignite their curiosity.

The Great Lessons are a series of stories accompanied by science demonstrations and experiments and other classroom activities. They start with the coming of the universe, the solar system and planet earth, and continue through the coming of life on earth, the coming of people, and the fundamental needs of humanity. Each of these stories offers the opportunity for many questions and explorations into geology, astronomy, microbiology, botany, zoology, chemistry, physics, geography, sociology, anthropology, history, mathematics and language.

The fundamental needs of humanity include food, clothing and shelter as well as defense, beauty and culture, language and numerical systems. The integrated curriculum springs from the study of these human needs. Children are offered an appreciation of their place in the timeline of humanity, as they access the knowledge that has been utilized and valued by countless generations before.

The Cosmic Curriculum is intended to provide some answers to the children’s questions and to inspire more questions, allowing for a feeling of amazement when there are questions that don’t have answers (yet). Science, mathematics, and philosophy explain what humans have already come to know about how the universe works, and the investigation continues as each generation adds its own discoveries. The social sciences seek to explain the world of human relationships. Maria Montessori saw children as the philosophers and scientists who will continue asking the questions, seeking the answers. I once heard a Nobel scientist explain in a radio interview that when he came home from school each day his parents didn’t ask, “What did you learn in school today?” Instead they wondered, “What questions did you ask?”

Curiosity requires a certain degree of independence and confidence. The Montessori classroom community invites participation and is a safe place to explore and discover. When we tend to the needs of each stage of development, the child feels empowered and initiative blooms. Our words and actions are like affirmations to our children that can either shut the world out or throw open the windows and doors to invite engagement with the wide, wonderful world. From the time they are babies, we can teach the children that the world is a good, safe and wonderful place, that they are loved, they belong, and they can make a difference. The messages our children need to hear over and over are: “I love you”, “I’m glad you’re here”, “You can choose”, “You can do it!”, “All your feelings are ok”, “You can figure it out”, “I’m delighted by your discoveries”, “It’s ok to do it your own way”, “I love you just the way your are”, “You are unique and have your own special talents”, “You are capable of doing so much”, “I value your contribution”, “You can be responsible”, “I love watching you grow up”, “You have good ideas”, “Yes you can.”

Answers for tomorrow lie within the mind of a child today. Curiosity, confidence, creativity and collaboration grow in a learning environment that encourages independence, respects individuality, and values inquisitive children. The holistic Montessori environment is carefully prepared to invite children to explore, experience, work, learn, find answers and ask questions.