

# HOW WE DID—AND WILL DO—MONTESSORI LEARNING ONLINE

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In March 2020, all schools in New York City were ordered closed due to the spread of COVID-19. Following this requirement, West Side Montessori School temporarily closed, with uncertain plans for re-opening. We found ourselves in a unique situation—one that would require a transition to online learning. This approach was new to us, as well as to the early childhood education field in general.

The WSMS community sprang into action, and quickly adapted to connecting using the online platform, *Zoom*. Children, families, and teachers participated in daily online meetings until the end of the school year, and on a more limited basis into the summer. The WSMS administration provided resources, served as a sounding board, encouraged our creative approaches, shared ideas across classrooms, and were there when we needed another point of view. This process once again proved that one of our faculty's best assets is the ability to be creative and flexible in the service of children.

## • Our Transition to Online Learning

In our physical classrooms, the Montessori philosophy, methods and materials, collaboration with colleagues, and knowledge from research and early childhood best practices guide us to set up high quality learning environments and experiences for young children. While this primed us to take on the new world of online learning, we quickly found that the remote classroom is a very different place, requiring special planning and execution.

Teachers re-oriented themselves and their students to prepare for this new way of learning. From their homes to children's homes, teachers facilitated familiar routines, mimicking current classroom procedures, and encouraging belonging



and structure. Teachers led with Emotionally Responsive Practices (ERP), aiming to meet children where they were, and as a way to invite and contain children's feelings both at the onset and throughout our time online. Among our first collaborations was the creation and sharing of a digital book, *WSMS is Closed Today*. Children and their families appreciated this simple, inclusive, and informative narrative. Creating books that featured the children in our classrooms and broached important social-emotional topics became a mainstay of our work online.

While the material that teachers created and posted online was similar from classroom to classroom, each team offered unique experiences. Teachers incorporated music, movement, hands-on activities, literature, games, virtual materials, and academic learning in countless variations. Through this experimental process, teachers witnessed and experienced many moments of effective teaching and learning. In the end, teachers agreed: multi-sensory, interactive, and collaborative experiences translated best to an online environment and succeeded in helping children achieve learning outcomes.

## • Incorporating the Montessori Approach

The healthy partnership between children, families, teachers, and administration was essential to the online teaching and learning environment. Through moment-to-moment situations, observed patterns, written and verbal communication between teachers and parents, and support from administration, we improved our practices with the cohesiveness of these different parts working together.

A particularly inspiring effect, and one we are proud of, was the innovation, flexibility, and adaptability that our teachers

brought to distance learning. One WSMS teacher said,

*I got into this work of being a teacher because it requires flexibility and adaptation and we were stretched in this new way. Students got to see us stretching ourselves and there was so much learning in that ... observing grownups learning and being fallible in front of them is beautifully messy.*

Dr. Montessori was an educator, an activist, a scientist, an innovator, and a woman who lived through multiple global crises. If Dr. Montessori was here today, how would she guide us? We took inspiration from her repeated efforts to deepen an educational plan through years of observation and study. We know Dr. Montessori's ideas about children, learning, and development evolved over time. Our teaching experiences, both in-person and online, reflect that evolution as well. Through Dr. Montessori's writings and teachings, we are provided with wisdom and direction. Her words on peace inspire us today:

*An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking: it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live (Montessori 1949)*

## GOING FORWARD: ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT WSMS

The spring 2020 period of online learning was an opportunity

to examine our work and refine our practices. This is essential, given the likely event that we will return to online teaching and learning in the future. In fact, we have already scheduled a remote week after Winter Break in January, to facilitate quarantining for employees and families who have travelled, or been with people who have travelled, to/from the states requiring quarantining. During the summer of 2020 we created a Guidebook: a framework for our continuing development of quality distance learning experiences for children ages 2-6, with our Montessori philosophy, early childhood best practices, and knowledge gained from our recent online experiences at the forefront.

We used information gathered in the daily efforts of working online with children, lessons learned through trial and error, and big picture takeaways. Faculty participated in town meetings, sharing their challenges and how they addressed them. Families completed surveys to document how they and their children responded to online meetings and the various virtual classroom activities and materials offered to them. This feedback was included in the development of the Guidebook.

### • Guideposts to the WSMS Philosophy on Remote Learning

To formulate a "Philosophy on Remote Learning," we began by asking questions and establishing important guideposts through meetings with teachers, as part of professional development, and in continued conversation and implementa-

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION EDUCATION IS AT THE CORE OF OUR WORK

When considering best practice in any early childhood education setting, one must consider the necessity of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) embedded into our work as educators. On June 1, 2020, Head of School Mimi Basso sent the following communication to the WSMS Community:

### A Call to Action and Intention

If we want our children to embody justice and equity, we must model those values, every day in everything we do and say. We must strengthen our resolve to include diversity, equity and inclusion at the heart of all of our conversations. We must be optimistic and positive, and demonstrate confidence, unwavering willpower, and love for all humanity.

I ask you to personally re-commit to advancing equity and justice in our society. The trauma that black, brown and multiracial people are experiencing is a national crisis, built upon centuries of injustice. Racism and prejudice are evident not only in the violence, but also in the way people of color are experiencing this health pandemic.

As early childhood educators and parents, we are called to nurture a more inclusive and diverse generation of young children. Early childhood educators have deep faith in the principle

that all people deserve the opportunities and resources for a fulfilling life. Teachers and parents, working in concert, have a unique role in promoting every child's chances to thrive and to succeed in school, in work, and in life. A basic principle in early childhood work is that when educators treat children as if they are strong, intelligent, and kind, children are far more likely to behave in strong, intelligent, kind ways. They are more likely to learn and thrive and succeed.

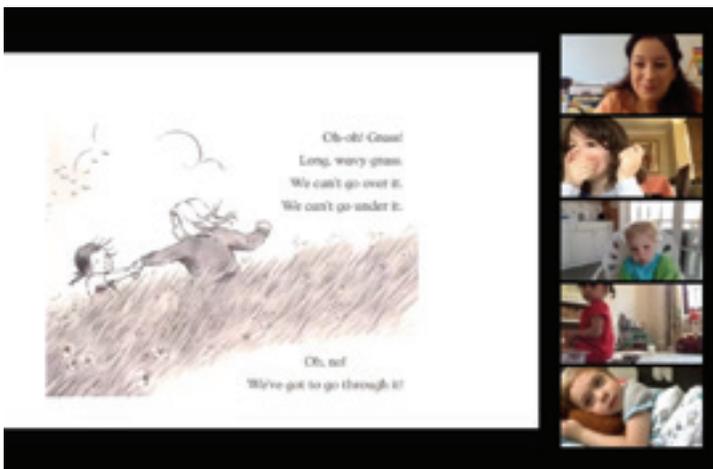
At WSMS, we have a long-standing commitment to creating an environment where every child and adult celebrates human diversity, recognizes injustice, and has the skill set to address it. We are working together to build an anti-bias community, a world in which all children are able to blossom, and each child's particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish.

[...]

Let's work to challenge our own perspectives, to uncover and identify our biases, and to consider our participation in our current society. It is a humbling path to take, sometimes hopeful, sometimes despairing, and it is a deep commitment to learning. This work requires practice and a willingness to be uncomfortable. We owe this to our children.

tion by classroom teams, to guide the work of our faculty and administration:

- **Belonging and connection:** children and families should feel connected to their teachers, classrooms, and the WSMS community, whether in person or online.
- **Daily interaction:** connections can be established when children are in a daily community with their teachers and classmates, and learning is fortified when we engage children through multiple access points and in a variety of contexts.
- **Inspiring environments:** the benchmarks we use in our physical environments can be adapted to the online learning environment.
- **Opportunities for learning:** children need a range of learning experiences that address their development across domain areas, and respond to their unique learning styles and interests.
- **Conceptual learning:** quality learning experiences are developed with an emphasis on concept-based curriculum, and that learning should extend beyond the online meeting.
- **Commitment to anti-bias and anti-racism (ABAR) work:** we actively seek out ways to create inclusive environ-



ments, as well as identify, reflect upon, and dismiss practices that suppress or exclude.

• **Relevant Research**

WSMS teachers are curious, lifelong learners who seek evidence-based research when making decisions about best practices. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged educators across the globe. Research informs us that it is essential to keep children socially connected, maintain trusting partnerships with families, support children with special needs and their families, and emphasize continuity of conceptual learning, engagement, repetition, and independence.

• **The Impact of Community in Online Teaching and Learning**

There is a vital need for children to remain connected to their school communities when situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic take place. As Mimi Basso, Head of School, told parents and teachers by email last April:

*None of us could have imagined the social, financial, medical, and educational dislocations the coronavirus emergency has created. There are surely going to be challenges of all kinds ahead—for our families, for our faculty and admin team, and for our community at large.*

*If we must continue virtually through the end of our planned school year, then we will be prepared to do that, making adjustments along the way to ensure that the program remains fresh and engaging. And if the answer lies somewhere in between, then we will be prepared for that eventuality also.*

*I believe that this community—this amazing collection of children and of adults—can exercise a togetherness and a purpose that is at once hopeful and healing. Thank you for all of your trust and support.*

• **Social connections are key**

Maintaining social connection is one of the best ways to combat stress:

*... while we are staying apart from each other physically, it's even more important to connect socially, to protect our emotional well-being. Keep up relationships and social contacts—while maintaining physical distance outside your own home. Responsive relationships—like those with lots of serve and return interactions between children and adults, adults and other adults, and children and other children all help buffer us against the effects of ongoing stress. (Harvard University 2020)*

• **Trust holds all relationships**

Trust within our communities is essential if we are to achieve our core mission as early childhood educators. Consciously

spending time and effort to build mutual trust, respect and rapport within our classroom communities—teachers, children and families—as well as within the broader WSMS community, is now more necessary than ever:

*Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.” (Covey 2008)*

• **We strive to offer excellent learning opportunities for all children**

Online learning opportunities should emphasize Montessori’s aims of helping children to develop order, concentration, coordination, and independence. We further emphasize continuity of instruction, high levels of engagement, conceptual learning and repetition.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) encourages early childhood educators to commit themselves to:

- Provide children with opportunities for rich, engaging play and opportunities to make choices in planning and carrying out activities.
- Provide open-ended activities that encourage children to work together and solve problems to support learning across all areas of development and curriculum.
- Recognize and be prepared to provide different levels of support to different children depending on what they need.
- Differentiate support in a strengths-based way to meet each child’s needs. (NAEYC 2019)

## RESOURCES

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## WINDY WELLINGTON



The WSMS community is saddened by the death of long-time WSMS teacher, Windy Wellington, who passed away on January 3, 2020, after a two-year fight with cancer.

Windy taught children—and their parents and her fellow teachers—at WSMS from 1983 to 2013, except for three years teaching second grade at Collegiate. She was a WSMS-TEP faculty member, serving as an instructor and a field visitor. Windy shared her Montessori expertise after she left WSMS at Lefferts Garden Montessori and Montessori’s Children’s Village in Brooklyn.

She was survived by her children, Mae and Jason, and eight grandchildren. Sadly, her daughter Denise passed away this fall. Her presence made our days brighter, and her legacy lives on in the impact she had on literally hundreds of children.

