

"Journey to a Montessori High School," *Tomorrow's Child*, Vol. 17, No. 4, May 2009.

Journey to a Montessori High School

You made the right choice. You enrolled your child in a Montessori school from pre-school, supported the journey up through grade 3, grade 6 or if you were very lucky, up to grade 8. Now that you've given them a great foundation for education and life, where do you send them now?

This is the question Pam Butler had been asking herself for a number of years. As director of The Westwood School for the last 24 years, Butler felt a responsibility in translating the philosophy of Montessori all the way to college and university. She takes the long view in terms of a child's education, thinking and planning down the road. But this proved to be very challenging. Area schools had strong traditions and programs but none had the commitment to the principles of Montessori that she was looking for.

As she researched programs, she came across the International Baccalaureate's (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP). The heart of the IB is the "mission to create a better world through education." These programs are characteristically holistic, child centered and teach children to develop a sense of life-long learning. Just like Montessori. The more she looked the more she realized that the IB was the key.

But how to find an IB school that would fully understand her Montessori children? This is when she got the idea to start an IB program in her own school. As an experiment, she developed the IB MYP in combination with her grade 7 and 8 Montessori program. It was a great success, but she was not sure she could extend the MYP success into the high school. This is where I came in.

Before Westwood, my experience with Montessori was mostly theoretical. As an experienced international teacher, researcher and administrator I had great respect for Montessori, but I had been uncertain of extending the idea to the high school as Maria Montessori had written little about the older teen.

I had seen a number of Montessori schools in the international setting but visiting Westwood was different. I was so impressed, that I agreed to move half way around the world and join Westwood as founding head of the high school. I knew that the key of the Montessori High School would be in the spirit of providing opportunities to continue the Montessori teaching philosophy, but at the appropriate developmental level of our young adults.

The primary learning motivation for the child students is exploration guided ever so carefully, at a distance, by teachers. The Montessori child, in practice, explores the shelves for basic knowledge and skills. Activities must be developmentally responsive; as the child develops, the activities on the shelves become more complex. At the upper level of development, it became difficult to model the world with activities on our shelves. My experience with IB told me that, for our high school, our shelves would be mostly located outside in the real world. The tool to reach these shelves would be the DP. The DP automatically bridged the gap between the Montessori school and university.

A focus on self-directed learning would foster an understanding that the student is a full member of a greater community of students, teachers, parents, city and world. Characteristics found in the IB. Abstract work in these community relationships requires that the students engage directly in the subject areas in which they have interest and requires opportunities to acquire confidence and competence. This requires a serious level of academics and the rigorous and integrated nature of the two year IB DP meets this challenge. In fact, it more than meets this challenge. The DP gives students the opportunity to demonstrate academic standards that are internationally respected and recognized as the highest standard in pre-university education.

This process was an enormous undertaking for a school of our size, but we knew that our students deserved to be part of the very best academic program in the world. Recently, our hard work paid off and Westwood became the first private Montessori school to be authorized by the International Baccalaureate to deliver the Diploma Programme. We remain steadfast in our commitment to provide a world class education for Westwood students within our Montessori framework from pre-school through high school. And we encourage other schools to consider the IB and develop their own Montessori high schools.