

Student's Corner: Citizen of the world?

Reflections on training and children by Erica Geers

So there I was, on the other side of the North Sea, separated from the mainland of Europe, separated from Italy where I did my AMI elementary training, separated from the Netherlands where I come from and worked as a Dutch Montessori trained teacher for 5 years. Does that make me, I wonder, a citizen of the world?

After my training in Bergamo I said goodbye to my friends from all over the world who were going back home. I said goodbye to the nuns in the Convitto where I lived for 10 months. I said goodbye to Italy, the country that has a special place in my heart. And I also said goodbye to 10 months of hard work, studying, colouring, discussions, observations in Brussels, Berlin and Frankfurt, reading everything which had something to do with Montessori.

I went back to the Netherlands with my friends from Australia and Italy and celebrated our new lives as AMI-trained Montessori teachers. For me the break was short: I was emigrating to Scotland. I had to find a place to live, sign a contract and get all the paperwork done. A big step for me, a small step on the world map.

So there I found myself in the kingdom of Fife at a very small Montessori school with 8 elementary children, and it was completely different to what I was used to. In the Netherlands I always had around 30 children in my lower elementary classroom and our whole school had 300 students. Some people said to me, 'that's a nice little group to start with'. Those who say that don't understand Montessori. Having 8 children is much more difficult than having 30 children. Montessori was right when she said that a Montessori environment starts to get working with at least 25 children. Children have to learn from each other instead of coming to me and ask me everything. My answer is always 'I don't know, ask somebody else' or 'Look it up, I have no idea'. After some time, I heard the children whispering to each other, 'don't go to Erica, she doesn't know anything!' That was exactly what I wanted to hear and what I learned from Jenny-Marie Hoglund in Bergamo.

There are more differences. In Scotland we created an open door environment by really taking out the doors. In the Netherlands, this was never an issue because everybody was working on his own little island, including me I have to say. In Fyfe, the children walked in and out, from elementary to Children's House, borrowing material, listening to each other's stories or just having a look. When

the piano teacher or the violin teacher was giving a lesson in the afternoon, everybody could enjoy the beautiful music.

As suggested by Baiba Krumins Grazzini, my Bergamo trainer, we had a 'protected' 3-hour work period each morning. By this I mean that we really didn't do anything other than that. All the other things were built into the afternoon programme. Children came in at 09:00 and started working till 12:00. Of course they could have a little snack if they wanted to, but there was no playing outside as I was used to in the Netherlands. This changed my way of thinking about children as well. They really are capable

of working for 3 hours non-stop. I saw it with my own eye—and not only one child, no, all of them.

In the afternoons the children chose their own activities: horse riding, running, hockey, visiting the planetarium, visiting the beach. The beautiful thing was that they all organized it themselves: they made the phone calls, wrote the emails. Of

course, not everybody took them seriously but they were not deterred. We also put the phone in the elementary classroom and children were always eager to answer it. We even got compliments from people who contacted us by phone.

All these little things made my Fife job different from my old job. But was it really all that different? I asked myself. Yes, but mainly 'no' because children all over the world are the same. So here I was in a country where everything was the other way around, except the children. They were as loving and eager to learn as my Dutch Montessori children and is that not what Montessori meant when she said 'We are all citizens of the world.' We all share the same world, we have so much in common. After working and observing in different countries in Europe, that is what I have come to understand.

This brings me back to my main question 'Am I a citizen of the world?' I moved from the Netherlands to Italy and from Italy to Scotland. And now I am back in the Netherlands and am part of a brand new bilingual Montessori school aspiring to AMI standards with my two colleagues, and with many little citizens of the world.

