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In India / A Bold Experiment in Teaching Values

Carolyn Cottom

A religiously diverse school has proven that teachers can instill both personal and social virtues and a desire to excel, and that academic excellence flows from character development.

Since its inception 36 years ago, the City Montessori School (CMS), a nonprofit private school in Lucknow, India, has been teaching children values. The world's largest school, with 19,000 students and 15 branches, the City Montessori School has provided an exemplary education for students in kindergarten through 12th grade by focusing on both academic excellence and children's emotional and spiritual well-being.

Four integrated concepts, called the Four Building Blocks, form the basis of our approach: Universal Values (kindness, compassion, cooperation, responsibility, and other such values rooted in the world's religions); Excellence; Global Understanding; and Service. Taken together, these guiding principles promote the education of the whole child, with Universal Values as the first block—the foundation—upon which the others are built.

Putting Values to the Test

In 1992, the school had a unique opportunity to find out whether its promotion of these values could affect community life. Decades earlier, Muslim invaders had destroyed a nearby Hindu temple, then built a mosque on the site. The remains of the temple were still visible, however, and in 1990 a Hindu movement to demolish the mosque resulted in worldwide conflict between Muslims and Hindus. In India, there were hundreds of casualties, and several thousand people were killed. Two years later Hindus did demolish the mosque, and an even larger national and global conflict ensued, with killings all over India.

During the uprising, the City Montessori School obtained a large Jeep with loudspeakers from which to play tapes of students singing unity songs. Behind the Jeep walked 1,000 children and several thousand parents singing and carrying posters: "We should live in unity." "The name of God is both Hindu and Muslim." "God is One, Mankind is One, All Religions are One."

The governor saw this as an opportunity to control the violence and animosity. He asked our school to provide a meeting place for the heads of all the city's religions. Every day these leaders of the religious community held a meeting that was open to the public: they would speak, surrounded by models of a church, a temple, and a mosque; and the children would sing about unity.

As the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh—the largest state in India with 140 million people—and just 40 miles from the site, Lucknow was especially vulnerable to violence. Indeed, Uttar Pradesh's government collapsed because of this issue. Yet in Lucknow, not one casualty occurred.

Excellence Springs from Values

Influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, the founders wanted the City Montessori School to exemplify the principles of unity of humankind and universal brotherhood. Beginning with five students in 1959, Jagdish and Bharti Gandhi launched the school on borrowed capital and housed it in rented accommodations. They found that their philosophy presented an immediate challenge, as the early students—like those today—were Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. Parents at first resisted having their children taught universal values from the world's religions, but they, too, admired Mahatma Gandhi and agreed to see what the results would be.

Today, they would be gratified. City Montessori students have received a record number of awards, including

- 1st place at the International Quality Control Circles convention in Hong Kong, where our school brought the only student team to compete against adults.
- Bronze, silver, and gold medals at four international robotics competitions.

- 1st prize in the 1994 University of Melbourne International Math Competition.
- 1st place in numerous All-India science, mathematics, music, computer, and academic excellence competitions.

Between 1976 and 1995, students won an unmatched number of statewide merit scholarships based on academic excellence (45 in National Talent Search and 272 in Integrated Merit scholarships). Students also have outscored all other Indian schools on national and state-level high school board exams. (On the last state exam, 7 of the top 21 scorers were City Montessori School students.) In addition, 99 percent of students maintain an average grade of A and all graduate from high school, as compared to 30 percent in the state overall.

Because its students come from the city at large (population 1.6 million), and many enroll at age 3, CMS believes its achievements are linked directly to its emphasis on values that include excellence as a lifelong attitude. The school's goal is to equip children with self-esteem, dignity, and the virtues and skills they need to deal with the complex problems of today's world.

The City Montessori School also has drawn heavily on the educational philosophy of Italian educator Maria Montessori, and has incorporated the best features of a variety of educational approaches—from robotics to teacher guardians to quality circles—each selected with the aim of helping children reach their highest potential.

The Four Building Blocks

The school's Four Building Blocks form an integrated approach to educating children. In the preschool years, much of the focus is on character development. Classroom experiences center around learning universal values such as kindness, honesty, cooperation, and responsibility. As the children mature, excellence becomes a natural consequence of the values focus; aiming for their best is not an external push, but an internal desire of students. Teachers reward children for their efforts as well as their achievements.

The third concept, global understanding, is built on the first two. At this level, children learn to value the range of cultures, races, and individual characteristics. Finally, from the first three building blocks comes a commitment to make the world a better place through community service.

Specific curricular activities relate to each of these building blocks:

1. *Universal values.* The City Montessori School believes that children are capable of learning virtues such as trustworthiness, compassion, courage, and patience. But mere knowledge of ideals and principles is not enough; children must translate ideals into action. Values education goes beyond critical analysis and intellectual appreciation by connecting it to volition and the desire for improvement.

To build virtues in children, teachers integrate values education into the larger fabric of learning. When students write essays or participate in art, music, or drama, they often focus their work on themes such as unity, peace, environmental integrity, or service. In addition, each day begins with a half-hour assembly run by students on similar topics. The school teaches the universal values of the world's great religions. All religions, for example, have their own version of the Golden Rule (fig. 1), and all teach kindness, honesty, and responsibility.

Figure 1. The Golden Rule

Do unto others as you would have them unto you.

—*Christianity*

What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary.

—*Judaism*

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

—*Buddhism*

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.

—*Islam*

Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself.

—*Baha'i Faith*

2. *Excellence.* CMS considers excellence to be a natural consequence of a student's character development. Students learn that they can make a positive contribution to their community and society by developing excellence in all things. An emphasis on the joy of learning creates a thirst for knowledge that brings more lasting results than pass/fail tactics alone.

The curriculum provides students with many opportunities to understand topics more fully by acquiring practical skills. Students participate in real-life projects—helping the city of Lucknow solve a trash collection problem, for example—thus gaining experience in how things work. The school provides numerous experiences in art, music, dance, and drama as avenues to develop practical understanding as well as creativity. In addition, quality circles promote excellence throughout the school.

The City Montessori School also awards creativity and backs students in their special interests. For example, the school hired a special teacher to train a child in judo, and that child now competes internationally. Likewise, when several children wanted to build a robot, we found the resources to build a small robotics laboratory, which got other students interested in robotics.

3. *Global understanding.* By teaching students to take pride in local language, history, culture, and arts, CMS helps students develop respect and appreciation for all peoples and beliefs. During daily reflection time, teams of students lead the student body in focusing on virtues such as love or truthfulness, using texts and stories from the world's religions. Students also visit India's holy places—Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and Jain—in order to learn tolerance for one another.

In addition, we have student exchange programs with schools in more than 20 countries, and we host international student programs, bringing children from around the world to month-long camps that promote world fellowship. Students also pray for peace in a simple yet effective World Peace Prayer ceremony. They help prepare costumes, make-up, artwork, and flags to represent 180 countries. Dressed in costume and carrying the flags of the world, they pray at various school functions, "May peace prevail on earth, may peace prevail in Thailand," repeating the names of all 180 countries.

4. *Service.* The school provides numerous opportunities for students to perform community service. Almost all students voluntarily contribute to humanitarian organizations working in nearby villages. Every year the children plant trees in collaboration with the Social Forestry department; of the 35 ecological clubs in Lucknow, six are CMS clubs. Students also adopt villages where they educate children and adults in literacy, hygiene, and first aid.

Generally, when schools teach values explicitly, they form a weekly discussion group or a curriculum unit that lasts a few weeks. At our school, teachers expose students to values training throughout the day. Classroom activities center around collaborative problem solving, and teachers reward students for exhibiting virtues such as diligence, participation, and consideration of others.

Modeling Values in the Home and School

Staff members believe that ordinary children develop in extraordinary ways when provided the right environment, motivation, and care. To this end, the school has created an extensive system to motivate parents, teachers, and students through mentoring, teacher-student-parent partnerships, and awards.

Teachers further believe that schools can teach values only if parents and teachers agree on which values to teach, model these values, and work together to support the child. The school has therefore developed a values curriculum for parents and teachers as well as for students. This unique curriculum includes a wide range of written materials, from pamphlets to teacher and parent guides to workshops and seminars. The school requires teachers to behave in an exemplary manner and parents to participate fully in the school's activities. Six principles underlie this partnership approach:

Parents and teachers are models. The school recognizes that a child observes the teacher's and parent's every move. Likewise, teachers are not merely experts in content; they are also responsible for the emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual development of the child. To develop their own commitment to the school's philosophy, teachers participate in regular training sessions on its guiding principles. They also take courses in child development, psychology, and sociology that are offered by training centers attached to the school.

In addition, the City Montessori School prepares material for parents about their role as models. One example is the book entitled *How Parents Should Behave with Their Children*, whose questionnaire appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Parents' Questionnaire

1. Do I trust my child?
 2. Do I encourage my child's confidence and listen attentively when she talks to me?
 3. Do I meet my child's questions frankly, honestly, and without embarrassment?
 4. Does my child know that I will do my best never to betray his confidence in even the smallest matters?
 5. Do I build up the positive side of my child by using do's rather than don'ts?
 6. Does my child know that she must always accept the consequences of her own actions?
 7. Instead of claiming obedience from my child, do I try to learn it and evoke spontaneous obedience and cooperation?
 8. Does my child love and appreciate beauty in its every expression?
 9. Am I willing to see my child become an adult?
 10. Is my child considerate, thoughtful, and tolerant?
- From *How Parents Should Behave with Their Children*, City Montessori School)

Teachers are mentors. Borrowing from the Russian concept of the teacher-guardian, teachers are responsible for the student's entire education, not just the subjects they teach. Each child is assigned a mentor, or guardian teacher, who provides support and guidance throughout the 12 years of school. This teacher is the liaison between school and home, visiting the home to ensure that the household is conducive to academic study and supportive of the child's development. Personal relationships between teachers and families build over the years. Says one guardian teacher, "The children respond well. They talk about their problems without hesitation because they know the guardian teacher will help."

Parents should be involved. The City Montessori School believes that the training children first receive from their parents, and particularly from their mother, lays the strongest foundation for their future development. Therefore, in parent seminars, we teach about children's needs, about parents rationing their own TV time, and about creating a child-centered environment at home. The school also distributes material about values, which parents must understand and agree to. Every two months, CMS holds a "mothers' meeting" to help mothers reinforce the values students are learning at school and assist their children with their academic needs. The school encourages parents and grandparents to be involved in the school curriculum, to participate in joint service projects, and to reinforce the school's principles at home.

The City Montessori School recognizes mothers and fathers through a system of titles and certificates that honor parents for their child's good performance. The school also rewards parents for their own involvement and attendance. Unlike many parent-

teacher meetings, our meetings have almost perfect attendance. In the school's annual function held in Lucknow's stadium, where 7,000 students perform mass synchronized sports and cultural events, more than 60,000 viewers (three times the size of the student body) turn out to support the school.

Teachers should be recognized. CMS also rewards teachers for their creative ideas and for their students' effort and achievement. When their students do well, teachers receive cash awards and prizes such as a television or scooter, items worth much more than they would be in the United States.

The City Montessori School pays teachers the highest salaries in the city, as well as excellent benefits and generous vacation time. To encourage teachers to be in top form, the school schedules each teacher a maximum of six hours per day and provides a non-teaching allowance for not tutoring in the evenings and weekends.

Students should cooperate and participate. Teachers emphasize cooperation, consultation, and participation in all student and parent activities. To foster academic excellence, teachers help students form quality circles, which emphasize group goals and cooperation rather than competition. Students strive to make each day better than the day before. And through their own quality circles, teachers strive to continuously improve their teaching methods and skills, thus modeling cooperative problem solving.

Mottos and events should exemplify ideals. The school's motto, "Jai Jagat"—Glory to the World—promotes the third building block of global understanding. The City Montessori School has declared 1995-96 as the Year of the Family, and the 1990s the Decade of Divinity. Special events highlight these designations, and all students and parents are involved in activities that focus on these themes.

Applying the Model Elsewhere

What can educators in other parts of the world learn from the City Montessori School model? Can a successful values curriculum in India be applicable in the United States or Japan? In the United States, Canada, and other countries, many schools have resisted teaching values for fear the schools' constituencies will be unable to agree on which values to teach. At CMS, however, reaching agreement is a crucial part of the process, but the process begins at school. Teachers and administrators together propose those values they want children to learn, then involve parents in clarifying and finally reaching agreement.

Parents, teachers, and administrators must begin to discuss values. Responsibility, truthfulness, cooperation, kindness, respect—these are core values over which there should be little disagreement. While it may be difficult to know where to begin, schools and parents must begin somewhere.

When we leave a garden barren, it is certain that weeds will grow. Similarly, as traditional social structures erode and families lose their focus on children, random forces take over. With no agreement about which values to teach, schools and families allow children to learn from whatever sources are available. Yet, with the proper guidance from families and professional educators, children can and will excel.

Author's note: Global Concepts, a new international organization, promotes the core ideas and disseminates curriculum materials developed at the City Montessori School to interested schools around the world. Schools may join the group's network as an affiliate. Based in Washington, D.C., it has offices in Uganda, the Czech Republic, and India. Global Concepts' director, Sunita Gandhi, is the daughter of the school's founders. (An economist, she is a CMS graduate herself.) The organization's Washington telephone number is (202) 496-9780; fax (202) 496-9781.

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