
BLUE GUM MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Perth, Western Australia

www.bluegummontessori.wa.edu.au

(<http://www.bluegummontessori.wa.edu.au>)

LIFE LESSONS

At the Blue Gum Montessori School, pupils are not just taught their ABCs and their 123s. “We have implemented a positive education programme,” says Principal Dr Maree Matthews, “where children learn to express their feelings and develop life skills, such as how to form friendships and manage their own behaviour. We give them the tools they need to respond appropriately if another pupil is aggressive, or to share when they’re feeling sad. By learning about socialisation early, they develop into well-rounded human beings.”

One of the school’s stated ethics is “to appreciate and value the diversity of humans”. This is borne out by the fact that, if the relationships the children are learning to manage come into conflict, they are not reprimanded. Instead, staff encourage them to talk through and sort out their differences respectfully by sitting down quietly at the “peace table” (the school also has a “peace pole”).

LEARNING RESPONSIBILITY

Individual responsibility is another essential part of the programme at Blue Gum Montessori School (BGMS). When one troubled pupil vandalised Dr Matthews’ office in a rage, the child was not excluded or punished. The principal’s approach was to listen until the child became calm, and to leave the damage as it was so that the child could think about the consequences of their actions. The same pupil is now much happier and the behaviour has been transformed, with the help of teachers.

“Prior to coming to BGMS, the child had refused to go to school for several months and came from a challenging family,” says Dr Matthews. “The child’s numeracy and literacy were low and their prospects weren’t looking good. We focused on the child as a person and explained that they had to make good choices. The leg was off my coffee table and I told the child we could put everything back together or call maintenance. The child chose to help repair the damage.”

BGMS has taken this innovative approach to teaching since it opened in 1983 in Bibra Lake, south of Perth. It follows the methods first outlined more than 100 years ago by one of Italy’s first female doctors, Dr Maria Montessori, who believed children’s education should be personalised and designed to capitalise on their individual strengths. Staff do not simply stand up and teach. They observe the 260-plus pupils, aged three to 12, decide when they are ready for the next stage of learning, and conduct a series of “mini” lessons – often called “jobs” – on a one-to-one basis.

A COMPLEX, CREATIVE CURRICULUM

This is in addition to learning in larger groups. “We are registered to follow an alternative curriculum along with the national curriculum,” says Dr Matthews, who has a PhD in philosophy and a background in international schools. “We abide by government standards but also deliver a more complex, creative and rich learning programme. We don’t believe that one size fits all but that each child should be celebrated, shown how to be independent and to become a lifelong learner. And all this takes place in a safe school environment.”

The commitment of Dr Matthews and her staff towards the children is what lies behind the school’s recent success in Australia’s National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). BGMS has ranked third out of 6,000 Australian primary schools in the category of most improved results. Results that reflect the school’s philosophy and the secret to happy children lies in fostering their passions and encouraging positivity. Happy children make happy learners, now and for the rest of their lives.