

Simon Arthur retrained as a Montessori teacher after leaving a financial job in the city. In this new section which puts the spotlight on a teacher working in a Montessori school, he shares his journey so far.



Zoom, zoom! we're going to the moon (left) and a diploma from MCI started Simon on his Montessori journey (above)



Using the instant white boards seen on dragon's den



A nursery which truly reflects the community it serves

What Montessori means to me...

Three years ago, languishing in a dull and dead-end city job and with middle age approaching fast, I made the decision to change my life. It is perhaps unfair of me to criticise my old job in the first sentence of this article. The truth is I was a terrible employee and my boss was endlessly patient with me. Teaching appealed to me, but I do not have a degree and so the retraining to full teacher status would have taken too long, especially as I have a young family to support. My oldest, Amy, is now fourteen. When she was three she was a very shy and withdrawn child. We sent her to a local nursery where she continued to be shy and withdrawn until a dreadful day when we were summoned crossly by the owner to find her alone and crying in

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what I seem to remember as a sort of contamination unit. She had nits. She never went back, but we found her a place at the Wimbledon Village Montessori. The transformation was astonishing. Within weeks she was confident and happy – a different child (thank you Mrs Nolan). This had always stuck in my mind, and to retrain as a Montessori teacher seemed to solve all the problems. I could retrain to be a teacher while still working and ultimately open my own business and thereby take myself out of the job market saving a lot of trouble for unsuspecting future bosses.

Many of us who are Montessori teachers have arrived in our current professions via very different ones – often later in life, often prompted by a desire to give something back to a younger generation and to leave one's mark on the future. There is a specific theory about this stage in people's lives that I have saved somewhere deep in my mental hard drive under the filename c:/simon/ things_ I've_ forgotten_ from_ my_ time_ as_ a_ student_ but_ that_ certainly_ rang_ true_ at_ the_ time.doc . Many of you will know the theory I mean, some of you may even remember whose theory

it was; however, I was a very average student and for me it is gone.

Anyway, back to the desire to change one's life and, yes, for me there was an element of wanting to do something more worthwhile than marketing investment funds but also the idea of long school holidays and a gentler pace of life appealed. And so it was with immense naivety that I left my job in the city clutching a diploma freshly won from MCI and set off to find this happy trilogy of long holidays, a gentler pace of life and financial security.

As a man, I am obviously in a significant minority in childcare and nursery education. There is no doubt that a few people outside of the industry raise an eyebrow at my choice of job, but with colleagues within the sector it tends to break the ice, means that most remember my name and gives me an element of standing out from the crowd that initially made me self conscious, but now I quite enjoy. In fact the only negative I can think of was at a recent first aid course, where there was a marked reluctance by my fellow delegates to partner me in the practical exercises and I was left hanging around like the last kid to be picked for the football team. Does being a man have an effect on the way I teach? I don't think so, but I certainly do believe that having male teachers and carers within the nursery creates a more balanced and real environment for the children.

It took me about two years to find



Reviewing the bird calls for Montessori International magazine.

the ideal location to open a nursery. A chance introduction to Angus Aagaard, a dynamic and community focused vicar in Lambeth, led me to St. Anselm's hall in Kennington which, though needing refurbishment, showed real potential. Six months, a considerable amount of money and an even more considerable amount of stress later, Angus had become my landlord and the Pelican Nursery opened for business. Or, rather, we just opened. I had organised with the vicar some bursary places for members of the local church congregation, so when we opened our doors in April 2007 there was no actual business, just myself, two teachers and a pair of wide-eyed two year olds in a large, beautiful and expensively equipped nursery. Initially we opened for four mornings each week. I networked and marketed frantically and by July we had about

three more children at the nursery, each doing just two mornings a week. So the gentler pace of life and long holidays had certainly been achieved, but financial stability was a long way off. By the time we closed for Christmas 2007 we still had only eight part time children on the register and I was beginning to think that, though the nursery as a school was a success (and by now we had an excellent Ofsted report,) as a business it was not succeeding quickly enough. So I took the decision to abandon the idea of a gentler pace of life and long holidays and in January this year we relaunched the Pelican as full day care, open year round between 8am and 6pm.

Before my own experience with full day care I had been rather ambivalent about it. And I worried that our transition from local part time nursery, where the children were voluntarily enrolled with a view to enhancing their life experience, to a day nursery where hard working parents are compelled to place their children in our care probably for more days and longer hours than they would like, would have a negative affect on the very positive atmosphere and feel that the nursery had built up. I was wrong to worry. Because we grew out of a nursery school, we have maintained our emphasis on the children's' development. The longer days have a gentler rhythm to them, but as some children are with us up to fifty hours per week, we get to know them really well and can work with them in a very

rewarding way. And after all, the first Casa dei Bambini themselves were effectively daycare.

If you are a sessional nursery, squeezed by the credit crunch and worried about impending recession, you should certainly consider opening year round and for longer hours if your premises and lease would allow it. Your market will expand and what you offer will be to some extent recession proof, as people have to work harder and longer in tough times. And you will find that the Nursery Education Fund (NEF) (and we are in a 15 hours per week pathfinder borough) suddenly becomes your friend rather than a loss-incurring burden. The £3-something per hour that the NEF provides per child is, for the Pelican, way below our hourly rate for a child attending for mornings or afternoons only, but is almost level with our hourly rate for a child attending full time.

Probably the best thing to come out of the Pelican's transition is that we now have a nursery that truly represents the community it serves. On a recent trip to the park we were complimented by another nursery group both on the diversity of the children in our care and their impeccable behaviour. I now work much harder, for longer hours and with fewer holidays than ever before, but the rewards in terms of the pride I have in the children and the nursery are enormous.

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