

In conversation with Dr. Maja Coradi Vellacott

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Co-founder of Cantaleum Zurich, Educational Sociologist, School Evaluator



International School Parent Magazine talks to co-founder, Dr. Maja Coradi Vellacott about her vision for the new school, and why innovation is needed now more than ever in the sector to ensure children are heading for a bright future.

Let's start at the beginning: tell us about what inspired you to start the Cantaleum?

Establishing the Cantaleum was a natural result of many years of research and experience in both the academic and musical world by myself and my co-director, Konrad von Aarburg.

My background is in the theory behind education, with a PhD in Educational Sociology and several years in the field of academic research. Part of this was focussed on the effects that music and singing can have on children; on how they learn and how it can help cope with stress. It was this knowledge, coupled with a period working in management for the Department of Education for the Canton of Zurich, specifically in a unit for school evaluation, where I assessed learning environments, that really inspired the idea of the Cantaleum.

What I saw again and again was a shocking increase in the number of children experiencing burnout from the intense pressure they were under to achieve high academic goals. I believe that, given the right environment, children can achieve without so much

stress, and music is integral to that. This is where Konrad came in, who has a huge amount of experience working with children to develop their musical abilities.

We decided together to start a school which really supports children to learn and achieve through combining the academic and practical side of schooling with the emotional benefits of music.



Now that the school is up and running, how does the day-to-day reality measure up to how you envisioned it would be?

It has been fantastic. We are working so hard to realise our vision, but it's been a wonderful experience so far. There are so many moments that make it all worthwhile, like when we take the children for a trip to the forest and everyone starts singing aloud, enjoying the outdoors and the sound of the music.

We have seen already that the students are beginning to trust in their own voices, and that when they sing or play an instrument, they relax. This is not just through the enjoyment of creating something; we have also seen that it can be a source of comfort. When children are upset, they often use singing as a way of calming and relieving those tensions. We also offer children who already play instruments or sing at an advanced level a good musical learning environment through our day school model. Here, they are able to round out their musical education and practice daily, which also brings much joy to these students.

It's also been interesting to work closely with parents, and ensure that they understand our mission while also feeling like they are part of the process. We had our first parents' evening a few weeks ago, which was a great experience as we discussed all elements of the research that we have put into practice so far.

Then of course there are the things that have been more unexpected and that have developed naturally as we went. One of these has been the creation of our school assemblies every Friday morning, which are sessions that I lead. We use these as an opportunity to get the children together as a whole group and discuss topics varying from what community we collectively want to create at the school, to broader ideas like democracy.



What sort of families are drawn to the school, and do you generally find that they

are aligned with your vision?

For children that come to Cantaleum, music and art are a source of strength and enjoyment. This forms the basis of our educational experience, where children achieve academically because they are fulfilled creatively.

Generally, parents feel like we are a good fit for their child because of that unique mix we have of a high-quality education, musical excellence and the important bilingual element. The fact that we teach in German and English immersively is very appealing to many parents.



And how does that all inform the teaching approach? Leaving aside the music for a minute, how are you insuring academic excellence?

Our teaching approach is centred in having a well-organised schedule and engaging learning environment. We experimented with elements of this initially, particularly with how

firm we were with enforcing things like homework. After a period of adjustment, we have fostered an environment that encourages quiet, reflective, individual learning.

During lessons, children work to tailored, two-week plans due to the fact that classes include a mixture of age groups. Teachers create the plans with the children, so that they feel comfortable with the learning objectives outlined. The plans are part of a wider set of competencies that students are required to achieve each term. The short time periods that we set for them are important; it means that children can focus on achieving a manageable goal and put their full effort into doing their best towards it. We start this approach gradually from a young age, and that as children get older, we encourage them to start setting their own goals and take ownership of the process.

This creates a concentrated, academic atmosphere, which means that the musical element and outdoor activities are so crucial. It provides an outlet for the students, so our approach is really a holistic one that focuses on the student as a whole.



How do you incorporate the multicultural aspects into your teaching to foster an international outlook?

Firstly, we do this through music. We believe in using the international perspective of music to broaden children's outlook, using teachers who have studied and taught internationally. We invite musicians from around the world to perform here bi-monthly, and the music we teach is from a range of cultures.

Then there's the culture that we encourage in the school, which is based on a very democratic approach. The advantage of starting as a smaller school is that we can use our weekly school assemblies as a way of talking together about international issues, something which we will move to class discussions as we grow.



Looking ahead, what are you hoping the future will hold and what sort of characteristics or values are you hoping to instil in your students?

Our main mission is to ensure that our students trust their own voices in every sense of the notion. We are aiming to provide each child with a passion for learning, a high quality

musical ability and a multi-cultural education. What makes the Cantaleum so special is this unique combination of all three elements, with the musical profile at its core.

We also see the school's bilingual aspect as an important part of our identity. Migration and globalisation are huge challenges, and it's important that we look for ways that we can provide a premium education on an international stage. It ties in with global changes like the progress of technology, which are driving us to think creatively about how we educate the next generation for future jobs that don't yet currently exist.

Children leaving Cantaleum will have enjoyed more of a holistic education, so that they can think creatively about problem solving and have a broader set of competencies to be able to overcome future challenges. Hopefully, they have a life-long love of music, two languages which enable them to communicate widely and give them a global reach, and a creative approach.



What kind of things are you doing, or planning to do, which take advantage of what Switzerland itself has to offer?

We are already firmly rooted in Swiss culture and the schooling traditions of Zurich in particular. Myand Konrad's backgrounds are in the education sector here, the school is located in the Haus Sonnenberg, which is a city-owned building, and we also have connections with two local educational organisations to host choir practices and other events at Cantaleum.

In the future we are also planning on taking advantage of our beautiful location by offering holiday singing courses and personal development weeks here. It's very much part of the Swiss culture to go out and enjoy the mountains, so we would like to incorporate this more into our curriculum.



You've been in the sector for two decades now, what do you think is the future of education and what do you think we can do to shape it?

It's linked to the wider challenges ahead of society in general, like migration, artificial intelligence or information overload. The beauty of an international school is that we are not bound by the constraints of public schools, we have the freedom to innovate and try new things to find solutions to these challenges.

Within the sector, the uncertain future is widely recognised and there is a debate around what the curriculum should emphasize to combat these challenges, whether it's traditional knowledge or broader skills. Many schools like ours are trying to teach children a wider set of competencies and to be more self-reliant. At the Cantaleum, we believe it's important to teach students the skill of self-reliance; to know their own strengths and weaknesses and how to cope with them, with traditional knowledge as a fundamental basis. I believe that a holistic, cultural education can shape the way children are able to deal with the strains and recognise the opportunities of the future.

What makes Cantaleum so special?

It's a unique combination of the academic encouragement, musical focus and international outlook through its bilingual teaching, while remaining deeply rooted in the Swiss educational heritage. And it's based on rigorous academic research, and using an innovative and personalised approach.