

REFINING OUR PRACTICE AS MONTESSORI TEACHERS: CULTIVATING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE METHOD, OURSELVES, AND THE CHILD

by Sarah Werner Andrews

The most important task of the Montessori teacher is to connect the children with their environment. To do this well, we must go beyond simply presenting a material to a child and think deeply about how, when, and why this connection takes place. To elevate our practice, we will look at the physical, intellectual, and spiritual preparation we first learned about during our teacher training and explore what this means for experienced teachers who seek to refine their work as Montessori teachers and develop a true partnership with the child.

This talk was presented at the NAMTA Conference titled "Building Partnerships: In Support of the Child, Teacher, and Parents". Baltimore, Maryland. October 11-14, 2018.

In 2010 I attended my first International Trainers Meeting. It was held in Rome, and we had the remarkable opportunity to hear presentations by several of the leading Montessori scholars from the University of Rome. Dr. Raniero Regni delivered an incredible lecture called "Geopedagogy and the Nature of Childhood," which ended with the words,

"To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori. Maria Montessori is waiting for us...in the future."

Those words gave me chills when I first heard them, and they have stayed with me ever since, taking on new meaning and importance as I think of them in different contexts. I think of these words when I hear people

Sarah Werner Andrews is an AMI primary director of training and the pedagogical director at Montessori Northwest in Portland, Oregon. She holds a master's degree in education from Loyola University, a bachelor's degree in music performance, and AMI primary and elementary diplomas. Sarah began her work in Montessori education in 1987 and is now an international speaker, Montessori consultant, and writer.

saying that Montessori education is outdated and that children are “different” today, or when people scoff and ask how a method that is over 100 years old can possibly be relevant in today’s world.

I think of these words when I hear people saying that “Montessori isn’t enough,” and how quickly we sometimes conclude that we need to bring in specialists or supplemental curriculum. Even though I am an ardent supporter of collaborating and sharing resources with experts in other fields, I sometimes worry that we’re losing sight of the depth of what Montessori does offer, or that perhaps we don’t look deeply enough, or take the time to find our answers.

To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori.

I think of these words when I reflect back on my own early years in the classroom, when I was faced with implementing my Montessori training. I questioned whether some parts of my training really worked, and I sometimes substituted other materials or activities. In my first year of teaching I confidently told my AMI consultant, “Oh no, I don’t do walking on the line anymore. I tried it, but the children don’t like it. They just push and shove, and argue. None of us like it very much, so I quit doing it. When the children need movement we just go outside.”

That consultant, with grace and kindness, responded gently, “Now, let’s just think about that for a moment.” She helped me to look at what the children were showing me, and re-examine how I was introducing Walking on the Line. She helped me consider that Walking on the Line actually could possibly serve a developmental need in the children that was different than the playground, and what I might do differently to make Walking on the Line more successful.

She encouraged me not to give up on Walking on the Line or abandon it as something that wouldn’t work with my class, was outdated, or seemed unappealing to “today’s” children. She challenged me to go beyond the surface disorder and try to understand on a deeper level what the children were showing me. Perhaps most importantly, she showed me how to trust the Montessori method, to trust the children, and trust my training. Instead of turning away, she encouraged me to lean in. She encouraged me to *rediscover Montessori*.

Over the years, there were other materials and activities that I was tempted to turn away from, and sometimes I did for a while. But every time, when I circled back and really looked at a material that I didn’t really like, or that I didn’t think the children were responding to, I found

that it was actually me; I didn't really understand it. The red rods? Why was it that the children seemed to love the pink tower but no one loved the red rods...? And what about those constructive triangles...what do children actually do with them? It took a long time, but every year, I chose two or three materials that I wanted to understand better, and I dug in, I observed the children, I worked with those materials myself, until I was satisfied that I had rediscovered them.

To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori.

My good friend and fellow trainer at Montessori Northwest, Elise Huneke-Stone had a similar experience in her early years of teaching when she decided to do away with the elementary work journals. It was too much trouble, the children didn't want to write in them, and she didn't know what to do with the journals anyway! But someone convinced her to take another look, to dig in, and to come to a deeper understanding of what those elementary children needed, and trust that they could do it. Instead of moving away from what she learned in her training, she leaned in – *to rediscover Montessori*.

Today the elementary work journal has become one of her most cherished personal and professional contributions. Elise understands the potential and power of those journals better than anyone I know.

I'm going to tell you another story, because telling stories is how human beings connect to one another across time and space, it's how we learn to relate to each other on an emotional and social level, and because it creates a context for learning. And, because Montessori teachers tell stories.

I loved being in the classroom, and (most of the time!) I loved teaching. I taught at the primary level and at the 6-9 elementary level, and I loved them both in different ways. Every year, I hosted student observers and practice teachers, because I wanted them to see their training in action. I wanted them to know that they could trust their training and could trust in the children. I wanted them to be able to see what they wrote about in their albums happening in real life, every day, with real children. It was a big decision for me to leave the classroom and become a teacher trainer.

People who know me well know that I question everything, and I hold myself and others to a very high standard. One thing I knew for sure was that even though I believed that Montessori worked, I could not stand in front of a group of intelligent, educated adults and talk to them about things like the "absorbent mind", "cosmic education", "normalization and deviation", "the spiritual embryo", or even worse, "the psychic

embryo”, without something more contemporary to back me up! I had to read and research, and see for myself that Montessori’s findings and conclusions were supported and still relevant. I needed to go beyond Montessori, and so I did.

It was great fun! I found that “MNEME” was the name of a punk rock band. When I started researching the psychic embryo, I found images of Dr. Sylvia Dubovoy. And of course, since I stand before you as an AMI Primary Trainer, I also found that no matter where I looked, or how far I went beyond Montessori there she was. Dr. Montessori.

“To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori. Maria Montessori is waiting for us...in the future.”

To go beyond Montessori, to look at what contemporary research tells us, is to rediscover Montessori, because it is all there. In her books, in your training. This is why we have garnered support from Dr. Angeline Lillard, Dr. Stephen Hughes, Dr. Adele Diamond, and Dr. Patricia Kuhl (a specialist in early childhood language development at the University of Washington who even tops Montessori when she described babies as “linguistic geniuses” whose minds have a “celestial openness”!)

To go beyond Montessori, to look at what contemporary research tells us, is to rediscover Montessori, because it is all there.

I had to learn, for myself, through my own work, my own observations, and my own efforts of will, to trust Montessori.

But what about **Children Today?**

Are the children of today different than in Montessori’s day? Are they more challenging? Do they experience more obstacles? Are they harder to teach? Yes, and no.

Consider the circumstances of that first Casa. At that time, San Lorenzo was a wretched area of Rome where 30,000 people were crowded together living in dire conditions. There were unemployed workers, beggars, prostitutes, former convicts, and children, all living in partially constructed shelters. Do you think those children were neurodiverse? Did they experience the effects of generational poverty?

Montessori describes those children as,

“timid and clumsy, apparently dull and unresponsive. They could not walk together and the mistress had to make each child take the pinafore of the one in front...they wept and seemed to be afraid of everything...they did not answer when spoken to. They were really like a set of wild children. (Not) like the wild boy of Aveyron, but (wild) in a forest of people, lost and beyond the bounds of civilized society.”¹

Did the children Montessori worked with experience trauma and loss? Yes. In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori writes about the Messina orphans whose homes and families were destroyed. Following a devastating earthquake in Sicily, sixty children were discovered among the ruins. The children were severely traumatized. They were numb, silent, and wouldn't eat. Montessori describes them as “lost in sadness.” They awoke in the night screaming and crying. The Queen of Italy made them her personal concern, and she had a Children's House built for them, taught by nuns in the Montessori method. You had better believe those children had PTSD. They had ACES.

And what about concentration – surely today's children have a worse time with attention than in Montessori's time. But no, Montessori shared letters from teachers writing about the children of privilege in America,

“The children snatched the apparatus from each other; if I tried to show something to one child, the others dropped what they were doing and noisily, without any purpose, crowded around me...They ran around the room without any end in mind...they took no care to respect things; they ran into the table, upset the chairs, and walked on the apparatus.”²

And from Paris,

“I must confess that my experiences were really discouraging. The children could not concentrate on any work for more than a minute. They had no perseverance and no initiative... Sometimes they rolled on the ground and upset the chairs.”³

These were the children in those early classrooms. If the Montessori Method didn't work, if it didn't produce dramatic changes in the children in San Lorenzo, in the Messina orphans, in the children of privilege in Paris and America, there would be no Montessori Method. All of that would

1. Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, “The History of Methods,” p. 31-32, Kalakshetra, 1966, Johnstone trans.

2. Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, p. 152, Ballantine.

3. Ibid, p. 153

have just been one more experiment that didn't work. But here we are.

Do we need to go beyond Montessori, or do we need to rediscover Montessori? Maybe it isn't that the children are different, maybe it is us. Can we do something different; can we help ourselves by "rediscovering Montessori"?

"If pedagogy is to take its place among the sciences, it must be characterized by its method; and the teacher must prepare herself, not by means of the content, but by means of the method."⁴

I'm sure that part of why I've been musing on this because I just started a new course, and often at the beginning of a course, the students are consumed by the idea that there is one right way – the one right way to illustrate something, the one right way to scrub a table, or the one right way to tie a bow. They just want to know the answer to the question: "What ...?" What to present. What to say. And of course, as they begin to learn about the materials, "What do we do with this?" In this early stage in their training, they can only focus on the CONTENT.

The same is true for many people. We are currently a very curriculum and content driven society. Many people think that what makes a Montessori school is having the Montessori content – the materials and presentations. Many people think that what makes a Montessori teacher is delivering that good Montessori content.

But in this quote, Montessori tells us the teacher must prepare herself, **not by means of the content**, but by means of the **method**. How do we do that? How do we prepare ourselves in a method? Guess what! I'm going to tell you exactly how to do that!

We are going to go **beyond Montessori** to the cutting edge of innovation in education. Here are "five of the most important new teaching methods making a positive impact on student's learning in the modern world" from an organization dedicated to innovation in education.⁵

1. **Personalized Learning** – when educators seek to tailor challenge, lessons, and instructional style to each student's needs.
2. **Project Based Learning** – when teachers are collaborators and coaches, and help their students navigate interesting and challenging projects together.

4. Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Vol. 1, p. 102, Clio.

5. <http://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/10/5-new-teaching-methods-improving-education/>

3. **Place-based Learning** – this gives students real-life, authentic learning experiences that help them to connect and relate to the people in the community doing work that the students are learning about and are interested in.
4. **Formative Assessments** – these help teachers look at each child individually, and make minor course corrections with a student along the way in order to help them stay on the right track when they are learning something new.
5. **Maker Education** – this gives students a chance to engage their creative side while engaging in “academic work” (plays, dioramas, river models, electric circuits)

To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori. Let’s break these down:

Personalized Learning is every lesson we give. **Project-based Learning** is embedded in all of our elementary follow-up work. **Place-based Learning** is just another way to describe our Going Out program – connecting children to their community and the people working in the real world doing the same things they are interested in. We do **Formative Assessments** every time we analyze the difficulty of a task or concept, break it into steps, and offer one step at a time. Could we think of our Points of Interest as little assessments along the way? What about the Control of Error? Is that actually a Formative Assessment? **Maker Education?** See “Project-Based Learning” and I think of Practical Life as the original Maker Education! These five techniques are currently considered the best **methods** out there to support children’s learning.

What about the methods and models specific to early childhood? **The Pyramid Model**⁶ is currently the best practices **method** adopted nationwide for early childhood education. It is considered a “tiered model” because everyone starts at the bottom, and children move up as they need more interventions or supports.

The base of this pyramid, what every child needs and receives, are nurturing and responsive relationships in a high-quality supportive environment. According to the research, most children’s social and emotional needs are sufficiently met through nurturing relationships in a supportive environment. (85% of children need only that first tier.)

6. <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Pyramid/overview/tiers.html>

Some children, about 15%, will need additional targeted approaches to teaching social skills. For example, a child who consistently runs up to children and knocks them down might need a special lesson on how to ask for a hug. About 5% in the school might need intensive targeted interventions. This is where we need to bring in the specialists and collaborate to help children who need the most work. This is not a Montessori Model, but



it sure looks like our Method, doesn't it? What all these different models and methods tell me, is what Margaret Stephenson wrote in the 1970's: *"In reality, there is no 'Montessori' method, there are not 'Montessori' principles – what we are speaking of are universal principles guiding development."*⁷

Montessori herself was clear that these universal principles were not her invention, they were there for anyone to discover. In fact, you can read in her books an increasing frustration with the world because they continued to look at her, and at her finger, instead of the direction she is pointing – *to the child*.

The Heart of the Montessori Method

*"If pedagogy is to take its place among the sciences, it must be characterized by its method; and the teacher must prepare herself, not by means of the content, but by means of the method."*⁸

It is here we find the heart of the Montessori Method – The Child. Right there, in front of us. To understand the Montessori Method is to understand The Child. While there are universal principles in development, we know and understand that every child is different, every child is unique. This is why it is not enough to simply offer the materials for development. We cannot simply give lessons – deliver the content. This will never be enough. This will not reach the soul of the child; this will not "enthuse him to his inmost core."

7. Stephenson, (1970) "Montessori: An Unfolding-The Child from 3-6, p. 7

8. Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, p. 268, Kalakshetra

What sets Montessori education apart from all other approaches, even those that use similar “methods,” is that our “method” is respect, trust, and faith in the Child. This is why, although we can go beyond Montessori and learn from other approaches other specialists, we also must come back to The Child. There is no one else who can answer our questions about what to do. The answers come from understanding our Method – The Child.

In *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Montessori writes, “Only her intelligence can solve the problem, which will be different in every case... The good doctor, like the good teacher, is a person. Neither of them are machines, merely prescribing drugs, or applying pedagogical methods.”⁹

Don’t we get frustrated when we go to a conventional doctor and feel like we are just treated as a collection of symptoms, and not looked at as a whole person? Montessori is challenging us to use our intelligence and our observation skills to look at the whole child, to figure out what each child needs in order to connect to the environment.

Montessori tells us it is not enough to have eyes and knowledge, but that observation is a habit developed through practice. The details we need to see are subtle and not easily discernible by the untrained eye. She compares learning to observe a child to looking into the night sky and seeing stars, but not being able to identify particular constellations. It takes practice, continual learning, and the desire to see. But once our skills of observation are honed, we can see the details in the child’s development with passion and great interest; we too “discover the child.”

Without observation, regular, practiced, intentional observation, we can never implement the Montessori Method. Without observation, we can only be, as Ginni Sackett likes to say, “conventional teachers with really cool manipulatives.”¹⁰

When we learn to really “see” the child, when we have trained ourselves in the art of observation, we then begin to feel a deep interest in the child, and Montessori says this interest is the motive, or power, which creates the spirit of the scientist.

However, observing like a scientist also takes patience. We’ve probably all experienced looking into a microscope, and perhaps it is unfocused,

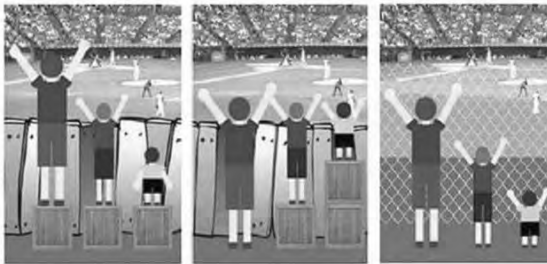
9. Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Vol.1, “The Preparation of the Teacher,” p. 102, Clío

10. Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Vol.1, “The Preparation of the Teacher,” p. 103, Clío

or we don't know what we are supposed to be looking at, and we turn away, unsatisfied, or frustrated – thinking, "There's nothing here to see! I don't have time for this!" Yet Montessori tells us that it is not time we are lacking, but patience. It takes patience to keep looking until we find what we are looking for, and too often, we give up before we've found it.

Think about the difference between looking for something if you are not even sure it is there, as compared to looking for something you know is there, somewhere. In the first case, we give a cursory look, hoping to find it, but give up if it is not easily seen and found. In the second case, when we know that what we are looking for is there, somewhere, we keep looking. We take longer, we think where we saw it last, we think about where we were when we had it last, and we don't give up until we find it. Our belief that it is there, makes us sure we can find it if we just keep looking.

Are we able to extend this certainty, this deep, scientific interest to the children in our care? Do we really believe that we will find the soul of the child if we just keep looking? Do we keep turning over every stone until we discover it? Or do doubts creep in that keep us from continuing to look... "Maybe Montessori isn't for this child..." "Maybe this child needs a different environment..." "Maybe the sensorial materials just aren't interesting to children anymore." "Maybe it's not fair to spend this much time observing one child, with all of the other children who need me too." But "fair" is not "equal."



True justice doesn't mean that there is a single law for all; this kind of justice puts everyone at the lowest level. Some children need more help than others, this will always be true. Real justice in education means removing obstacles to development, whatever those obstacles might be. Our work is to remove the obstacles to development. (And in this picture, let's remove the fence too, and invite everyone to play!)

When I was presenting to a group of teachers and administrators in New

Orleans about supporting children in trauma, one of the teachers did bring up that she struggled with giving some children so much more of her time and energy. She felt like it was the most disruptive children who got all the attention, and felt that it wasn't fair to the other children, and wondered if that had a negative effect on the rest of the class. One of the school administrators stood up and told her, "Think about what those other children are seeing, when you work with the children who are the most disruptive. They are seeing that you are patient, that you are calm and loving even when a child is angry, that you are there to help them and protect them when they need it, and that you don't give up on them. What could be more important than that for the rest of the class to see? When they see you treating others with kindness and justice, they learn too, to treat others with justice and kindness." That is a lot more important than the next presentation with the stamp game.

The patience to keep observing, to keep trying, to keep searching for answers comes from our unwavering belief in the child. We have to believe in the light within every child.

This brings me to the third quote: Montessori wrote: *"All we really need to do is change our fundamental attitude towards the child, and love him with a love which has faith in his personality and goodness; which sees not his faults but his virtues."*¹¹

Montessori wrote those words in an article called "Disarmament in Education". "Disarmament" means to dismantle weapons – dismantling the weapons in education. In 1950, Montessori wrote about the state of war in education. "A war, the victims which are primarily, but not exclusively, the children. She writes that "the teacher is often the persecutor, although an unconscious persecutor. And that the war is not confined to the schools; it is everywhere. The war is between the strong and the weak; between those who have power and those who do not."¹²

She said that we are in a state of mistrust, which resembles hatred, or at least a lack of love. Because what do we see in the children? We see their flaws and their mistakes. We see their misbehavior and their dis-regulation. But when a person loves another, we find all of the good possible in them. Not only the obvious things, but the secret hidden virtues as well; things other people don't see. Isn't that true when we fall in love,

11. Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, p. 286, Kalakshetra

12. From an article Dr. Montessori wrote on 'Disarmament in Education'. The article first appeared in the *Montessori Magazine* Vol. 4 No. 3, July 1950 and was later reprinted in *Communication* 1965, 4

and our friends say, “What does she see in him?!” Later, we might say too, “What did I see in him?!”

What are the steps to disarmament in education? What are the weapons we must disarm? They are our prejudices, our biases, our lack of faith in the child, our lack of faith in ourselves. Our fear.

It is hard to change a fundamental attitude, isn't it? It's hard to let go of our fears. It is hard to love that child who is disruptive, who is aggressive, who is whiney, or clingy, or dis-regulated. It's hard to have faith in that child's personality and goodness. The hardest work of all is to love the children who push us away, who push our buttons, who act unlovable.

And yet, it is the children who challenge us the most, who need us the most.

We are all flawed individuals, and it is hard to take that look deep into ourselves, and change our fundamental attitudes. But this is what we must do. There is no easy fix. We have to use everything we have, our mind and our heart; what we learn about in our training as our intellectual and our spiritual preparation. We have to rediscover Montessori.

First, we adopt an attitude of humility. At any moment, we have to be prepared to abdicate everything we thought we knew about a child, or ourselves, in the face of new observations or new discoveries. Again, this is the science of our art; like a scientist, we have to be ready to be wrong in order to make a new discovery of truth. Humility works together with patience. We cannot simultaneously see ourselves as knowing everything, and also give the children the time and opportunity to create themselves. Humility allows us to step away and observe, knowing that although we are facilitators, the child's most important work takes place without us. It takes patience to understand that self-construction is the work of the child.

We have to let go of seeing the children as an extension of ourselves, that our ego is wrapped up in what they do. I think this is the root of our discomfort, feeling that the children's actions reflect our ability as a teacher, or lack of ability. The children are their own beings. They are not us. We can't control them, but we can help them to control themselves. Self-construction is the work of the child. Children construct themselves from their experiences in their environment.

We cannot change the child; but we can change the conditions in the environment. What are the building materials we are placing in the environment? I'm talking about the 'psychological building materials' here,

not the didactic materials. What's in there that doesn't belong?

Are we removing obstacles to development, or are we creating more obstacles? Are we blaming children, and getting frustrated, are we using our power over the child to manipulate their behavior, or are we giving the children the power – teaching children the skills to manage themselves? Self-construction is the work of the child.

To disarm the weapons of oppression in education, we must look inside of ourselves and look deeply into The Child – to our Method.

Montessori tells us we must serve the child as a valet serves the master. We have to channel our inner Downton Abbey! Through careful observation, we determine what the child needs and prepare it for him. We are in the background, waiting, watching, offering support when needed.

We can change the conditions in our environment. We can change our fundamental attitude towards the child, and love him

with a love which has faith in his personality and goodness; which sees not his faults but his virtues.

In this society, serving the child is a disruptive innovation. To trust children is considered irresponsible, foolish, and even dangerous. When we have faith in the child, we are disrupting the notion that the adults must always be in control. The revolutionary act, the subversive act, the disruptive innovation is to deny the typical conventional thinking that the power is out there - some new method must be better, that the answer is outside of us, outside of the child. To disarm the weapons of oppression in education, we must look inside of ourselves and look deeply into The Child – to our Method.

When we do this, then we truly follow the Montessori “method,” and we begin teaching for mutual liberation. The following is an excerpt from a paper called “Teaching for Mutual Liberation: A Microcosm of Equity.”

“Too often, teachers adopt the role of oppressors, training their students to accept societal oppression, and teaching them to survive in an oppressive society, rather than working towards a liberated one. However, teaching also has the potential to empower students and demonstrate what a liberated society might look like – this is the power of emancipated education.

Education based in mutual learning, equity in experiences, continued growth,

and the practice of liberty in the classroom would produce educational systems that could teach students that they have the capacity and power to shape and create their world, as opposed to teaching them that they are pieces of a static, unalterable environment.

Fostering this understanding is key to moving towards a just society. When people understand that they have the power to shape their world, they have the power to lead revolutions that push society in the direction of equity.

When teachers and students work in concert, and grow together to build liberating classrooms, their work will be reflected in society at large. And this is work; teaching for liberation is not an easy task, but one that requires a complete commitment of mind, body, and spirit.

To draw forth, rather than squash the potential of students, to demonstrate to them their intelligences and the power of their will, to show them that society is malleable and theirs to alter, and to recognize their own capacity for greatness – this is the potential of a teacher.¹³

Following the child is teaching for mutual liberation.

Montessori education is a revolution. More than six decades after Montessori spoke out for disarmament in education, we still need that revolution. Now more than ever. But our revolution and our disruption to the status quo is based in love.

“The new education is a revolution, but without the violence. It is the non-violent revolution. After that, if it triumphs, violent revolution will have become forever impossible.”



13. Julian Werner Andrews, Unpublished paper, 2016. Brunswick, Maine.