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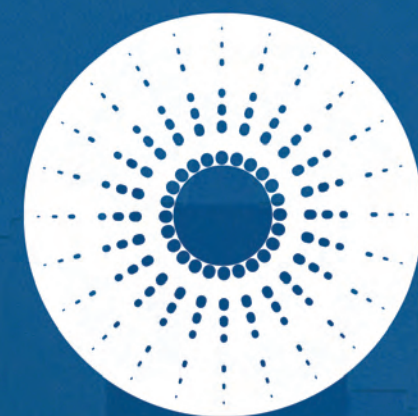
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- The new AMS membership year starts July 1.
- This is the last issue of the current membership year.

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THE ESSENCE OF MONTESSORI

By Margaret Howard Loeffler, PhD

THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED IN OUR WINTER 2002 ISSUE.

I first met Margaret (Peggy) Loeffler when I began working on my master's through the Montessori teacher education program at Oklahoma City University, in 1972 (a program she helped begin). Her presence in the classroom was powerful and at times demanding, so I was quiet but not intimidated. Peggy was also director at Casady School's Primary division, where I did my internship. She later offered me a teaching position: In the morning, I guided two Practical Life areas, and in the afternoon, I taught Math. A favorite memory is of Peggy marching into my classroom space, admonishing me, "It's too noisy back here." With a straight face, I replied, "We are having fun!" She paused briefly and then went back to her office. I turned back to my students and suggested that we be quieter.

One day, just before spring break, I passed Peggy on my way to get coffee, and she said, "Your course starts in June." You didn't say no to Peggy, so just like that, I became a member of the adult teaching crew.

Peggy later retired and moved away from Oklahoma, but when she returned for visits, she would call and we would meet for dinner, . . . evenings I continue to miss. A few years ago, inspired by Peggy's work, I began a one-day Montessori school at a local church. This endeavor keeps me close to all she taught, and to a commitment I made so many years ago.

—Kathy Carey, Editor, *Montessori Life*

IN MARCH 2000, A RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM SPONSORED BY THE AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY WAS HELD IN NEW YORK CITY. ITS GOAL WAS TO CREATE A RESEARCH AGENDA TO STUDY THE EFFICACY OF MONTESSORI EDUCATION IN THE NEW CENTURY. WITH THE HELP OF A STELLAR GROUP OF SCHOLAR/RESEARCHERS FROM OUTSIDE THE MONTESSORI COMMUNITY, AIDED BY EXPERIENCED MONTESSORI EDUCATORS, AN AGENDA WAS CREATED AND MANY PARTS OF IT ARE IN THE EARLY PHASES OF IMPLEMENTATION.

The primary goal of Phase One of the agenda was to "clearly define the essential elements of Montessori education." This seemed an obvious beginning step, to describe "the essence of Montessori," and one that should be easily accomplished by a group that has been following the legacy of a remarkable educator for nearly a century. Yet, the task was more daunting than at first perceived.

The difficulty is that it's so easy to get caught up with the unique aspects of Montessori's methods (the didactic apparatus, the prepared environment, writing before reading, mixed-age-level classes) that one can miss the forest for the trees. Certainly, there are many interesting trees to examine in Montessori's forest, and all of these components have an important role to play in Montessori education. However, they are not its essential elements or essence—rather they are a means to an end.

In *The Absorbent Mind* (1949), Montessori provides clues to the richness of the philosophical soil in which her ideas took root. Using her medical and psychological understanding of human development, and through the careful and objective observations she made of young children's behaviors when free to pursue their own interests and needs, Montessori described the child's natural and positive tendencies evidenced in the critical period from 3 to 6 years of age. Montessori was an especially astute observer. Her ability to observe carefully and objectively had been honed to a sharp edge through her training as a physician and an anthropologist.

By observing the spontaneous behaviors of young children of ages 3 to 6, when free to act in a supportive environment, Montessori found that they exhibited four surprising characteristics not usually associated with children of this age:

- the ability to concentrate;
- the need and enjoyment of meaningful activity or work, which led to competence and independence;
- the ability to evidence self-discipline or self-regulation; and
- sociability or the desire to be a responsible and contributing member of a community.

Although Montessori described these characteristics as natural and universal tendencies in young children when in an environment appropriate for their developmental needs and interests, she made it clear that if impediments to their natural development were placed in their paths, these positive traits would not survive and combine to form an integrated personality. Thus she tells us that the notion of “normalization,” the initial integration of these positive traits, might not occur.

Montessori also made it clear that these traits could not be developed in isolation.

The human being is a united whole, but this unity has to be built up and formed by active experiences in the real world to which it is led by the laws of nature. The embryonic development of each of its parts, which is first carried out separately from birth till three, must in the end become integrated, when it will be so organized that all of these parts act together in the service of the individual. This is what is happening during the next period from three to six when the hand is at work and the mind is guiding it. (Montessori, 1949, p. 203)

If, as Montessori says, an initial integration or normalization has been achieved during the first plane of development, a strong foundation is created upon which the child’s own positive personality can form and mature. This chart from *The Absorbent Mind* (see Fig. 1, below) depicts in a graphic way the characteristics she described and the negative outcomes if this initial normalization does not occur. Montessori describes the chart’s meaning as follows:

In the drawing, we see on the right hand side the different characteristics of children as we used to know them (before normalization). These are shown by a number of lines radiating outward fanwise. The half-way line, wider and perpendicular, symbolizes concentration on something specific; it is the line of normality. Once the child begins to concentrate, all the lines to the right of this midline disappear, and there remains only one type which has the characteristics shown by the lines on the left. The loss of the superficial defects is not brought about by the adult but by the child himself who passes into the central line with his whole personality, and this means that normality has been attained. . . . We find this phenomenon repeated unflinchingly in all our schools, with children belonging to different social classes, races, and civilizations. It is the most important single result of our whole work. (Montessori, 1949, pp. 203–204)

When I was first a student of Montessori’s ideas nearly 40 years ago, I hated this chart. The words on the right side, such as *caprice* and *sloth*, seemed from another age and represented an outdated, Victorian set of views. However, as I’ve continued to study Montessori on a deeper level as well as current, related ideas and have spent a great deal of time in many classrooms, both Montessori and those following other methods, I have gained a profound respect for what she was telling us.

Her notion of normality indicated what she had found as the inherent characteristics of young children when their “superficial defects” (Montessori’s phrase)

were overcome through their own self-directed efforts. This drive to concentrate on things of interest and their ability to become engaged in work meaningful to them led to self-discipline and self-regulation and a desire to become responsible members of the classroom community and beyond.

In subsequent writings, as Montessori continued to develop and implement her ideas through the sequential developmental planes, she made it clear that new integrations were necessary at each successive phase through adolescence. Although the word *normalization* was not used again after the first plane, Montessori described the changing manifestations of these characteristics at each succeeding developmental stage, and she introduced a new word, *valorization*, to describe the new integration to be achieved in adolescence.

Montessori’s early writings focused on the young child and the need to alter the methods of education to meet the child’s needs and characteristics, rather than meeting the needs of adults. Montessori described children in new ways. First, she noted that each child was unique and, though there were certain commonalities, it was not possible to teach them as a group. Therefore, there should be a mixed age level of children so that they could work individually and in small groups to meet their intellectual and social development.

The second reason Montessori gave for the necessity of change in educational methods was her conviction that all learning takes place within the child and cannot be provided from the outside. The child constructs his own knowledge from the experiences provided by the environment in which he is developing. The final reason that Montessori gave for her new education was her observation that young children enjoyed learning about the world around them more than any other activity.

These were startling ideas and brought much discussion and some criticism, but the evidence supplied by the children happily working and learning in these classrooms convinced many educators and parents that Montessori’s ideas were correct. In one of her earliest books, *The Montessori Method* (1912), she describes the various activities carried out in an ideal prepared environment for the young child and the purpose of her didactic materials as activities to assist children in their autoeducation.

It is important to remember that between Montessori’s first descriptions of the process of the work in the Children’s House in the early 1900s and her later writings in *To Educate the Human Potential* (1948), *The Absorbent Mind* (1949), and *From Childhood to Adolescence* (1949), more than

The notion of Cosmic Education, the development of her educational ideas for children in the elementary school years, had come about through her observations and experiences in the more nonlinear Indian culture.

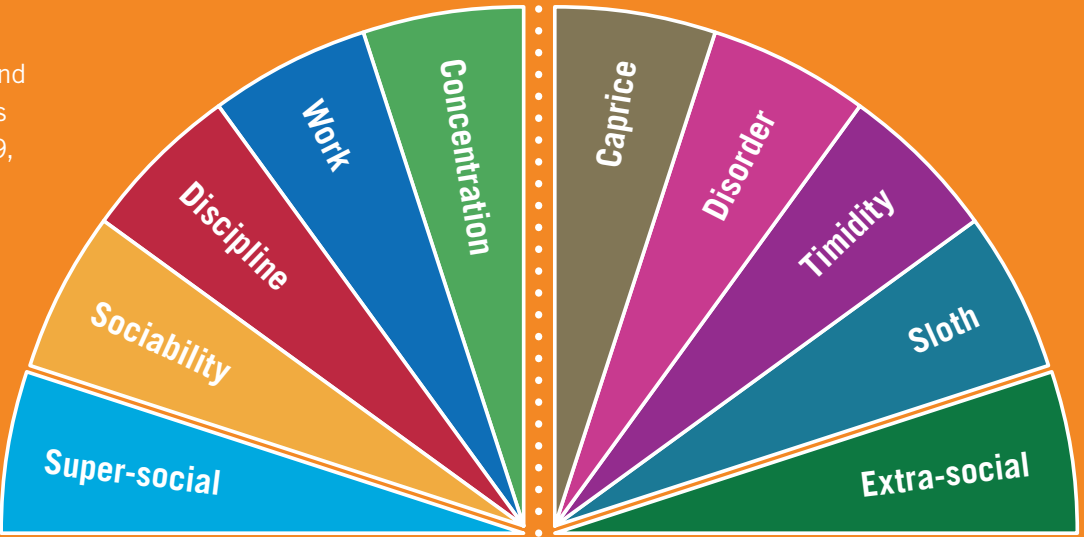
40 years had elapsed. During this time, Montessori had experienced a devastating war in which she had been uprooted from her native Italy, been interned as an enemy alien in India by Great Britain, and, most important, had evolved a much broader and richer view of the child’s development beyond the early childhood years.

The notion of Cosmic Education, the development of her educational ideas for children in the elementary school years, had come about through her observations and experiences in the more nonlinear Indian culture. She began a school for a group of children who had been sent, with their mothers, to the hills of Kodaikanal, as had Montessori, to remove them from the dangers of enemy bombing. In this school, with children ranging from early childhood through the elementary years, nature became the predominate focus of study, thus building on the children’s natural interests in the world around them and their relationship to it. Since no didactic materials were available in this school, materials were drawn from the natural surroundings. Nature itself and the child’s place in this natural world became the curriculum and formed the underlying foundation for Montessori’s view of Cosmic Education, the dynamic force in the second plane of development from 6 to 12 years of age.

In her book *To Educate the Human Potential* (1948), written while she was still in India, and in the later book *From Childhood to Adolescence* (1949), Montessori describes her ideas gleaned from this experience.

FIG. 1.

Montessori’s “Normal and deviated character traits in children” chart (1949, p. 204)



It is very easy to lose track of Montessori’s broad mission when faced with a classroom full of children and with the pressures for achievement that society demands.

These include a growing understanding of how the child from 6 to 12 continues to develop the characteristics of normalization, now at a new developmental level. This includes the child’s recognition that the group of which they are a part includes the world and universe outside the classroom and the growing knowledge that to be a contributing and valued member of this group requires concentration, work, and self-discipline aimed at the common good. The child at this age begins to appreciate his own uniqueness while at the same time seeks to find his own role in the interrelationship of all living things.

Montessori was concerned with the devastation she saw in the aftermath of World War II, and she came to believe that it was only through the children, educated to see the universe as constantly being re-created through their own lives, that understanding and peace among peoples would be possible.

In *The Absorbent Mind*, Montessori devotes many pages to a discussion of love. It is the nurturing of this inborn energy she thought of as a form of universal love among peoples that would, through the sensitive education of children, lead to world peace.

It is very easy to lose track of Montessori’s broad mission when faced with a classroom full of children and with the pressures for achievement that society demands. Right now many of you are filled with

To accomplish this task, Montessori teachers must educate themselves to understand what the children are like at each of the planes of development as they progress through what Montessori has termed a set of rebirths on their developmental journey. In addition, the Montessori educator must create a prepared environment appropriate and supportive for this “new” child that will nurture and sustain the positive characteristics as they are demonstrated at each stage.

The Elementary child, from 6 to 12, is not the same child as in the Children’s House. Though the four underlying characteristics are the same, they may look very different in their manifestations at this new stage. The child may concentrate more fully when working with peers rather than when working alone, self-discipline and self-regulation will have new parameters for the older child, and new expectations for work and for responsibility to an ever-larger group will be noted. And differences in the manifestations of these characteristics will be found in the Middle School years, as well, as the child moves on from Elementary and participates in the Erdkinder (Earth School) for the young adolescent.

Teacher education programs attempt to teach students what the child is like developmentally at specific age levels. They also show students what a prepared environment should be like both physically and psychologically to support the positive growth and development of the child at a particular age.

Methodologies and strategies, appropriate to the particular age, also are taught to assist the teacher in engaging the child in his or her own learning.

But the graduating teacher’s education really begins only when they enter a classroom filled with children and create a prepared environment just for these particular children based upon the natural tendencies of this age level, modified by the singular and unique talents of the specific group. Montessori teachers really are very lucky individuals. They have two important things to assist them in their work. First,

they are well-prepared by knowledgeable instructors for the task before them; and, more important, they have an underlying belief that the child constructs his or her own knowledge while the teacher provides only the necessary support and resources for this self-directed task.

Sometimes, it is true, they forget this latter point in their zeal to cover the curriculum; but it is a foundation upon which their work must be based. Montessori’s mantra, we must remember, is to “Follow the child,” not to lead and direct according to our own preconceived notions.

How, then, are we to put together in a positive and productive way all that we have learned through the many weeks of study and work—the mechanisms of Montessori’s method of education—and still maintain the essence of Montessori’s message to recognize and foster the basic and essential characteristics of the child? It isn’t easy, but it is a challenge that we must meet because it affects our future and our world.

First, we must model these characteristics for children so that they are reminded of their importance in the daily life around them. We also must learn to observe their different forms in children of various ages, and we must find time for this observation. How many times have I heard teachers decry the fact that Elementary children are not the sweet, lovable children of the Children’s House years or that those in the Children’s House are not the chubby, adorable toddlers they once were. Of course they’re not. They have moved on; and it is up to us to recognize the new but important and positive forms that the basic characteristics have taken.

We must open new avenues for children to manifest these characteristics to themselves and to others. We must take the time to observe children’s demonstration of these characteristics and praise them for these behaviors. Finally, we must see the big picture as Montessori did—that the development and retention of these positive characteristics can be the foundation for a peaceful world inhabited by adults who manifest them in their daily lives. Of course, we don’t have the power to change the world and everyone in it, but we can work very hard to change our corner of it.

Montessori saw and understood the true power of normalization at every stage of development—not a quieter and more peaceful classroom, not a busier

group of children, not a higher level of achievement—although these may be products of the integration of these characteristics. Rather, I hope you have gained a vision of a group of adults, 20 or 30 years in the future, who have fully developed these characteristics while children in your classrooms. As adults they have become leaders who recognize common responsibilities and demonstrate an interest in and a respect for each other in a new and peaceful society. This new society must be one that continues to grow and expand until it embraces all the inhabitants of this little blue ball we call Earth.

Montessori saw and understood the true power of normalization at every stage of development—not a quieter and more peaceful classroom, not a busier group of children, not a higher level of achievement—although these may be products of the integration of these characteristics.

This, I believe, is the true essence of Montessori, the goal that she sought: the nourishing and retention of the four essential characteristics through each plane of development into a new level of thought and actions demonstrated by those adults that our present Montessori children, with our help, have become.

MARGARET HOWARD LOEFFLER, PhD (1921–2016), was the 1996 AMS Living Legacy, a member of the AMS Board of Directors, co-founder of the Montessori primary program at Casady School, in Oklahoma City, director of the Oklahoma City University Montessori teacher education program, and founder/co-director of the Teachers Research Network. She wrote the book *Montessori in Contemporary American Culture* (2002).

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The graduating teacher’s education really begins only when they enter a classroom filled with children and create a prepared environment for these particular children.

visions of didactic apparatus and activities that you are expected to be able to demonstrate to children. “Isn’t this,” you are saying to yourself, “really what Montessori education is all about?”

Of course these are important components, but they are really, as I said earlier, only a means to an end. The end product for Montessori is the developing and maintaining of the four characteristics of normalization into adulthood.