Responsibility: A Gentle Reminder

The maxim that history repeats itself prevails in education every bit as much as it does in any other human endeavor. Indeed, we Montessori educators are now faced with just such a recurrence in the form of the newest leading edge venture into national educational policy, the Common Core State Standards. It is therefore prudent to remind ourselves why we need not and should not compromise our pedagogical principles to accommodate these new educational "insights" any more than we have had to for such educational fads in the past. To do so is the purpose of this article.

Like a fugue, responsibility is a recurring theme or motif that winds its way through all levels and aspects of those Montessori schools hoping to provide an authentic Montessori education for the developing child. This authentic education is one in which its application is in complete concert and harmony with the principles that Dr. Maria Montessori identified for the creative development of the individual. The vital notion of responsibility that we hope to engender in the burgeoning development of the child, aligned with the responsibility of those who have undertaken the provision of a genuine Montessori experience, creates a fundamental unifying network around which Dr. Montessori's vision for the older child can be achieved successfully. Simply put, to foster the development of favorable characteristics in the child that will allow him to function as a successful contributing member of society according to the principles of Dr. Montessori, all of us involved in whichever capacity we have chosen in this process must responsibly uphold and implement those defining principles earnestly and without compromise.

Dr. Montessori gave us very clear directives and guidelines to aid the child in his development. If we follow these clear directives assiduously, then easily we can succeed in our efforts to assist in the construction of the individual. Experience has established that to stray from her principles and guidelines results in an imperfect application and a failure to achieve the intended goal. Thus, as Montessori teachers we must always be vigilant and thoughtful regarding the choices that we make in regards to our children and measure these decisions by our guiding principles. This is our responsibility as Montessori teachers. This task requires constant evaluation and objective assessment, lest we unintentionally veer from our original path.

Along with vigilance and thoughtfulness, we must also muster the courage to defend and uphold those principles we know to be true, since all too often we are faced with so many influences that are foreign to our approach, but that are adopted by the public at large. In the face of any groundswell movement, we must act courageously and wisely, so that our resolve to implement our Montessori principles will not be undermined leading to ultimate failure.

Responsibility is also required of those who administer a Montessori school in that it is they who are the first line of defense when undue influences emerge and pressure to alter

our approach arises from some quarter. Like the role of the teacher, administrators of authentic Montessori schools are also charged with ensuring that Dr. Montessori's guiding principles are not inadvertently violated or breached in an attempt to acquiesce to popular demand. To do this, administrators must know, understand and endorse faithfully Dr. Montessori's ideas so that they can support the efforts of their AMI trained teachers, freeing them up to do that which they have been trained to do without gratuitous, harmful interference. This support is fundamental and essential to whether a Montessori teacher can realize her intended and inspired goal. Consequently, administrators, too, must be vigilant, discerning, judicious, and courageous lest they fall prey to the latest "educational reform" or demand made of them, and by doing so distort Dr. Montessori's method.

One such reform that is emerging in today's educational climate is that of the proposed Common Core State Standards. Apparently as a result of feeling their responsibility to the students of the nation, education activists and the National Governors Association were moved to establish consistent educational standards across the fifty United States to ensure that students graduating from public high schools were fully prepared to enter the workforce and succeed in college. Thus, in 2009 the National Governors Association convened a group of educators to work on developing a core set of standards of education that would define what students should know in English and math at the end of each grade. In an attempt to motivate education reform and to encourage the adoption of these Common Core State Standards, the states were given an incentive: the possibility of receiving federal grants by engaging in competitive federal contests in which schools must satisfy certain educational policies, such as performance-based standards. These are the Race to the Top grants that president Barack Obama and the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced on July 24, 2009.

Although not all fifty states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, they are no doubt here to stay, or at least until a new federal or state design for education reform is advocated, for example, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Thus, it is imperative that Montessorians be fully apprised of these reforms so that they can address cogently any issues that arise in connection with them. The two approaches, the Common Core State Standards and the Montessori Method serve two different objectives, and, in fact, conflict with each other. The CCSS movement focuses on the acquisition of basic academic skills, while the Montessori Method takes a more holistic approach. Certainly, our Montessori children acquire the same basic skills and academic accomplishment that the CCSS movement is hoping for, and they have done so for the past 100 years. But our Montessori plan is more far reaching in that our children have opportunities to develop those attributes that will allow them to function well and meet the demands of creativity and innovations that the 21st century requires. Our schools serve the development and cultivation of those intangible qualities that are difficult to measure: the human potentials. Hence, alongside academic achievement, by virtue of a very deliberate process, Montessori children develop the abilities to think and act independently, to think creatively and comprehensively, to be accountable and responsible to one's commitments to others, to work collaboratively in groups successfully, to empathize and care for others and the world at large, and to view themselves as contributors, seeking to discover the

gift each holds in potential in order to bestow that gift on society for the greater good of humankind. Imposing a list of academic expectations on children, which is the goal of the CCSS, can never achieve the development of those indispensable characteristics that we Montessorians have seen spontaneously bloom in our children throughout the decades that we have been implementing faithfully Dr. Montessori's principles and vision. Under no circumstances must we jeopardize this critical development.

To responsibly manage this recent movement in the public sector, the AMI Elementary Alumni Association has assembled a team of veteran AMI elementary Montessorians to map the list of expected achievements defined by the Common Core State Standards to those comprehensive lessons that are offered to the children in an AMI Montessori school. By undertaking this project, the AMI-EAA is providing schools and teachers with an instrument that will assure the parents that their children are receiving all that they would have received in a public school simultaneously while benefiting from the broad, personal development that only Montessori education engenders. Indeed, this document discloses that the Montessori curriculum not only covers the expectations outlined in the CCSS, but far surpasses it. For the few minor omissions that appear, they are easily dealt with as they always have been by just following the guidelines for such occasions given in the AMI training courses

In the implementation of Cosmic Education AMI Montessori elementary teachers have always been aware of those requirements outlined in the public school curriculum. In fact, in the implementation of Freedom aligned with Responsibility, the public school curriculum plays a prominent part. Among the three metaphorical pieces of material that serve as the limits to freely chosen work outlined by Mario Montessori in the 1958 elementary course in London, England, is the prescription that both the child and the teacher should be aware of and address those expectations that the child would have achieved by a certain age had he been a student in a public school. This means that should something be required by the public school curriculum that was not explicitly given in a training course, it should be presented in accordance with the same approach as with all Montessori lessons. The CCSS should be managed in the very same way, without requiring a dramatic shift or alteration of the Montessori guiding principles. As with the public school curriculum, the CCSS should never be the driving motivation of what or how the children learn in our Montessori schools. A check-list that the children follow and tick off breaches the whole notion and principle of allowing the children the freedom to choose that which intrigues them. Additionally, the children should never be moved through the curriculum according to the dictates of external pressures that arise from speculative and extraneous expectations. Instead, it is the Montesssori's teacher's obligation to ensure that the children cover the items in the course of their explorations. They must be given the freedom to establish a reasonable and realistic personal timetable that is natural and suits their learning abilities and styles. If rushing through a curriculum imposed on the children to meet an arbitrary governmental timetable becomes acceptable and diligently ticking off all that is listed in the CCSS or the public school curriculum, or any list for that matter, becomes the goal, then the entire objective of assisting in the creative development of the child has been obscured and defeated. If we let that happen, we have abdicated our responsibility to faithfully implement Dr. Montessori's principles.

Guiding Montessori Principles

In order to fortify our efforts to always provide our elementary children with the very best of Cosmic Education, let us remind ourselves of some of the salient guiding principles that we know will result in the construction of a responsible human being, one able competently to comport himself as a happy, contributing member of society.

how we give lessons

Because we appeal to the elementary children's imagination and reason in our presentations, we tell them story after story from the pantheon of human knowledge and then augment those stories with limited visual aids and materials related to the subject at hand that also both appeal to their imaginations and reinforce the concepts. And, since our lessons are geared to the natural psychological characteristics of the children and suited to their needs, the children are easily inspired to explore that which is unknown and still waiting to be discovered. Any subject that was not fully addressed in the elementary training course, but that appears in the CCSS, can be treated in the same manner.[1] After the lesson we encourage the children to work collaboratively in groups rather than individually so that they can develop the valuable skills they need for working with others. At this point the teacher can easily orchestrate the organizing of different groups of children based on their compatibility and natural abilities. Because an elementary class should always have an overlap of ages, many times the participants in these presentation groups are of different ages. This allows children to help each other, as well as fosters opportunities for peer-teaching amongst the children. This point alone allows for leadership qualities to be exercised and honed, qualities that cannot be derived from marching to a list of expectations.

Further, we encourage the children to imagine and design their own follow-up projects and activities, as this is the way that we cultivate and respect creative thinking in the children, an attribute that will serve them as they face the demands of the 21st century. We also expect the children to work to completion, because this is another desirable feature in a responsible individual. This, too, is easily and naturally accomplished because when children are working on projects of their own devising and as an expression of their own ingenuity, they work indefatigably until completion. Also contributing to the completion of the children's work is that they are allotted the time they need for working on their activities and projects without interruptions of any kind. Interruptions tend to intrude, stifle, impede, and even arrest the work that was initially kindled. That is why the admonition to the Montessori teacher to always "protect the child's work period" is always observed by the responsible Montessori teacher.

Often when children are immersed in their work or explorations, to complete their projects they require materials or data that are not readily available in the immediate environment. Thus, they need to have the freedom and ability to go out to seek that

[1] For examples of such presentations, see the Appendix to this article.

which they need for their endeavors. Accordingly, the responsible teacher must provide them with a way by which they can go out and achieve their goal independently. This is the going-out program that Dr. Montessori advocated for the elementary child that is geared to the development of responsibility, independence and an understanding of what it takes to navigate and function well in the world. When the child is allowed to go out into the world, not only does he acquire that which he needs for his immediate work, but even more importantly he sees for himself how society works and how to work within society. He learns this through experience, not through pedantic lectures. This going-out is fundamental to the implementation of Cosmic Education without which one does not truly have a Montessori elementary class.

If our children are granted these freedoms to choose and design their own work, to work in self-established, productive and harmonious groups, to have the time they need to complete and perfect their ideas, and to pursue their needs and investigations outside of the classroom, there is little need for the teacher to supervise, oversee, or micro-manage their work. In fact, to do so is another breach of one of our Montessori principles, which is to allow the child the opportunity to work autonomously and independently, opportunities without which he may never be able to develop those very characteristics that will serve him later in life.

didactic Montessori materials

Happily, when giving lessons in a Montessori elementary classroom, we have the advantage of presenting different concepts on scientifically designed didactic material. Thus, children have the concrete visual impression of the concept before they are expected to grasp the ideas abstractly. This elementary material should be used consistently in both the lower and upper elementary classes, even though the upper elementary children often move to the abstract representations of the concept before their tenure in the upper elementary class ends. Because the material is adaptable and comprehensive, Montessori teachers will find that it lends itself easily to the presentation of any ideas that are listed in the CCSS. The presence of the Montessori materials obviates the employment of such methods such as workbooks, worksheets or any other teaching devices advocated by a traditional approach. In fact, utilizing such techniques hinders the creative and intellectual growth of the child in that these instruments ask very little of the children, many times demeaning their actual abilities by dictating the extent of what should be learned. Children who have been given the responsibility and autonomy for their own learning frequently exceed those limited expectations and skills that are asked for and developed in those traditional approaches, strategies that stifle the holistic growth that occurs through the use of the Montessori materials and the application of the principles.

Furthermore, when children grow through their own efforts and endeavors, rather than through prescribed activities that workbook activities dictate, they soon realize for themselves exactly what they are truly capable of doing. From their own self-directed and freely-chosen activities children discover both their strengths and those areas that need to be strengthened. From the former they will realize a sense of pride and a sense of

self esteem that is sincerely earned. From the latter they will be honestly informed of those areas that they must responsibly attend to in order to grow and progress. Thus, they can take responsibility for their own learning. And, because the child has been granted this responsibility by the teacher, the child recognizes the faith the teacher has invested in his abilities to accomplish what is necessary. This aspect alone serves as a monumental support and encouragement for the child as he progresses.

three metaphorical pieces of material

One fundamental principle of Montessori education is that there is a three-year overlap in ages, which means that a child will stay in one class with the same teacher and the same peer group for at least three years total. Thus, children continue from one year to the next with very few changes with which to contend. An additional advantage of this idea is that the teacher at any level has at least three years in which to deliver the whole of Cosmic Education to the child whom she knows well. She busily gives her inspirational lessons to small groups of children in all subjects of the vast curriculum, which undoubtedly will touch upon everything that might appear on the CCSS list for a particular grade. Through this exposure to a myriad of lessons the child soon learns what excites his interest and what he wishes to explore in further detail and depth. As the child moves into the next level, he again will hear these lessons presented with the same materials but with a different focus, allowing the child to delve deeper into the subject matter, eventually moving to abstraction. At the same time that the child is pursuing his favorite topics, the teacher makes him aware of certain skills and competencies for which he is responsible, allowing him to apply himself to those aspects in a timely fashion. The beauty of having the children for three years is that it gives both the teacher and the child ample time to learn those things by the end of the first three-year cycle and then again at the end of the next three-year cycle. In this way the child can establish a healthy balance between the time spent on pursuing his favorite interests and for the expectations of the public school curriculum.

Freedom is a fundamental tenet of Montessori education. It must be offered to the child so that he can make his individual and social construction. But this freedom must be counter-weighted by responsible actions. To effect this balance we Montessori teachers have the aforementioned three metaphorical pieces of material that work in tandem described by Mario Montessori in the London course: 1.) the child's tracking his work in a personal journal, 2.) regular individual meetings between the child and the teacher, 3.) and an awareness of the educational expectations of the public school system. Without the full implementation of these three "pieces" in tandem, the freedoms offered the children cannot be responsibly balanced or managed. Establishing this process begins early in the children's Montessori elementary career when the teacher makes them aware of the public school curriculum and all that they would be expected to learn had they attended one of those schools. By the end of each three-year cycle, it is the teacher's responsibility to see that the children have been presented all that they would have received had they been students in the public schools. She is joined by the child in this responsibility since once he knows the expectations, with help from the teacher he must balance his time and efforts between accomplishing those skills and those areas he

especially loves. The process by which this comes about can easily be adapted to the CCSS.

The necessary, careful records of the child's work that both the teacher and the child maintain diligently, serve as instruments to track jointly the child's lessons, efforts, work, and all that the child has accomplished. Moreover, and most essentially, the child's personal work journal provides a means of measuring his productivity. This daily work journal is a pivotal step in the process of responsibly offering freedom. Without this specific record there is no means by which the child can see for himself how efficient or productive he has been. Therefore, it is essential that the children keep their work journals.

Not only do the regular teacher/child meetings provide a time in which the teacher and child together can assess the quality of the child's work and his productivity, but it is also a time when the teacher can remind the child of those things that he must learn to satisfy the public school curriculum. Together they can establish a timetable in which those particular lessons can be given and certain goals can be reached. In just this way the list of the CCSS can be addressed responsibly as well. This collaborative process between the teacher and the child is a key responsibility of the teacher and is the means by which she can guide and bolster the child in his work.

conclusion

This network of responsibility that ties all of Dr. Montessori's precepts together into one unified whole can continue to serve our children as they journey through their educational paths to adulthood. Dr. Montessori's method is tried and true, as evidenced by the last century of individuals who have been the recipients of the implementation of her ideas who developed into enterprising, creative, artistic, inventive, and flourishing people. In the face of today's proposed educational reforms or those that might arise in the future, we should not waver or abandon our standards and beliefs. We know what works, and it has been working successfully for decades. In fact, our method achieves those very goals that the adoption of the CCSS is hoping for and even more. Would that the educational activists and the National Governors Association seek our Montessori advice and expertise in the construction of an individual who is "fully prepared to enter the workforce and succeed in college." The children of our nation and our nation itself would be well served were politicians to take such an unprecedented and unparalleled step.

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APPENDIX

One such example might be a lesson on English object pronouns. We have Montessori material for subject pronouns and a Montessori method for their presentation. To present object pronouns we merely need to make the corresponding cards, and proceed in the same fashion that we did with the subject pronouns.

Another example might be a presentation of the Cartesian coordinates. We could begin by telling the story of how René Descartes, while lying ill in bed, conceived of the idea of locating the exact position of a pesky fly that was walking on the ceiling tiles of his bedroom by using the lines of the tile that intersected each other at 90 degrees. Giving the intersection of the two lines the name "origin" and assigning the horizontal line as the "x-axis" and the vertical line as the "y-axis" with positive and negative numbers on either side of the origin point, he realized that by determining pairs of numbers as they related to the axes and the fly's position, he could communicate precisely the fly's whereabouts.

To augment this story, the teacher could employ additional typical Montessori strategies. For example, she could show the children a picture of Descartes and provide a book in which the children could find out more about this remarkable mathematician and his innovations. Also, she could draw on large graph paper the two intersecting lines naming and notating each of them as well as the origin, which is designated as "O." Once that was done she could assign both lines with their positive and negative numbers. Then she could point out the four quadrants that were derived from the two intersecting lines and number them in Roman numerals going counterclockwise beginning with the upper right (northeast) quadrant. Next she could introduce the children to "ordered pairs" and how to notate them conventionally by first addressing the x-axis and then the y-axis separating them with a comma and surrounding them with parentheses. Taking a button or some marker (a plastic toy fly would be delightful), she could place it somewhere on the graph paper and show the children how to record the "fly's" location. Once the children adequately grasped the concept and the pertinent language, she should leave them to work independently together finding other positions of the object and denoting the ordered pairs that pinpointed the object's position by challenging them to find specific points on the plane by dictating several ordered pairs or encouraging them to do so with each other; and then conversely by randomly picking a point and then having the children identify the ordered pair that related to the point's position. Always beautifully rendered handwork should be encouraged and expected to reinforce the concept. In due course, the teacher could adapt this idea of Cartesian coordinates to longitude and latitude, number lines, and eventually preparing the children for the algebra of Cartesian coordinates.