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Tending the Light: Essays on Montessori Education

John R. Snyder

John Snyder is becoming a leading thinker and exponent for Montessori creative commentary and anecdotal theory into practice for the elementary years. We are providing the preface and this excellent chapter to introduce him and his compilation of writings titled Tending the Light: Essays on Montessori Education that has just been published by NAMTA. John will be the first in his generation to bring a new understanding to Montessori, exemplifying Dr. Montessori's words, "In addition to the work of observing material reality, there is a creative work which lifts man up from earth and transports him into a higher world which every soul may attain, within its individual limits."

John received two standing ovations at the NAMTA conference in Dallas and at the Atlanta AMI/USA Refresher Course for his book presentation, his courage, and his pursuit of insight and expression.

Preface

It is immensely gratifying, very humbling, and a little miraculous to me that this book, so long in my imagination, has, with the help of so many friends and colleagues, finally come into being. Although I wrote steadily and widely during my career as a Montessori guide and administrator, I always thought of collecting and publishing these writings as a project for my retirement years. And so it is, although I never intended to retire so young.

In the spring of 2011, during my second year as a school administrator, I was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), a progressive disease that gradually disconnects all of the muscles of the body from the control centers in the brain. With the help and understanding of my school community and equipment provided by the state of Texas, I was able to keep working until the summer of 2013.



John R. Snyder is an essayist, speaker, and poet. He taught and served as an administrator at Austin Montessori School in Austin, Texas, and is former chair of the AMI Elementary Alumni Association, a member of the Montessori Administrators Association, and a charter member of the Montessori Leadership Collaborative. He has also been a regular columnist for the quarterly Public School Montessorian. He holds degrees in music, philosophy, and computer science and the AMI elementary diploma from the Washington Montessori Institute. His website is <http://ordinarypersonslife.com>. Tending the Light: Essays on Montessori Education is available for \$20 USD from NAMTA, <http://www.montessori-namta.org/Print-Publications/Staff-Picks/Tending-the-Light-Essays-on-Montessori-Education>

When my Montessori friends learned that I was interested in publishing a book, a number of them stepped forward with offers of help. Leaders of AMI-affiliated societies in the US, including David Kahn and Jacquie Maughan of the North American Montessori Teachers' Association, Chris Trostel and John Hooper of the AMI Elementary Alumni Association, Bonnie Beste and Adam Lewis of AMI/USA, and Sue Pritzker of the Montessori Administrators Association worked with their respective boards and networks to fund the production of the book.

David Kahn graciously offered his time and expertise, and his highly experienced colleague Amy Losasso was kind enough to design the interior and manage production. To my delight, we were able to add Aurora Bell, a former student of mine now working in the publishing industry, for editorial support. To these three, I offer heartfelt gratitude for their collegiality, expertise, and significant contributions to the improvement of the manuscript. Thanks also to Jamie Rue and Donna Bryant Goertz for reading the manuscript and offering helpful comments. My spouse Kathleen Snyder lived through many years when I was too often at school and not at home, and she has been a constant source of support for this book project.



John Snyder joins the AMI/USA refresher course in Atlanta via skype.

I think Maria Montessori would be thrilled, as I am, with the technological advances that have allowed me to compile and edit the book: Dragon Dictate dictation software that transcribes my spoken words and recognizes my editing commands, and a TrackerPro head mouse that tracks my head movements to provide the functionality of a mouse or trackpad.

In his sermons and books, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. popularized the term "beloved community" as the open-ended expression of enlightened goodwill in a society that takes care of all its members. The Montessori community in North America and around the world, especially the staff of Austin Montessori School and the members of AMI-EAA, has truly been and continues to be my beloved community. The debts, great and small, that I owe my community are beyond reckoning. I am particularly grateful to my trainers Elizabeth Hall, Janet McDonnell, Dr. Kay Baker, and Greg MacDonald for sharing their profound understanding of Montessori education and setting a very high bar for my practice. The opinions expressed here, including the mistaken ones, are strictly my own.

John R. Snyder
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On Comparing Apples and Oranges: A Perspective on Montessori and Conventional Education

An earlier version of this article, dated June 2006, was my first regular column for the quarterly Public School Montessorian. Over the next seven years, I wrote almost thirty articles for editor and publisher Dennis Schapiro, work that forms the core of this collection. A revised version was published in 2010 on MariaMontessori.com, the blog of the Montessori Administrator's Association.

Montessori teachers and school administrators often hear versions of the following questions from parents who are wondering how well their children in Montessori elementary programs are being academically prepared for middle school or high school: *How does the Montessori curriculum compare to traditional curricula? Are Montessori elementary programs usually academically "accelerated" in relation to their traditional counterparts? How do Montessori graduates compare to other students?*



It is difficult, and I think unhelpful, to make blanket statements on these questions, one way or the other. To be sure, there are some recent scientific studies, as well as a hundred years of anecdotal evidence from around the world, that attest to the academic efficacy of the Montessori approach. Dr. Montessori herself famously claimed that graduates of her elementary schools would know as much as the average Italian high school student of her day. But all this should not mislead us into thinking conventionally about what is really a very unconventional approach to education.

Montessori's work was not aimed at creating accelerated learning, better grades, or precocious children. Her desire was to support the development of the whole child, the whole human being—not to isolate certain cognitive powers of the human being and to build an educational system based solely on these. Her method of support

had mostly to do with removing what she saw as impediments to human development that are common features of conventional educational systems (both in her time and in ours). These included traditional understandings of the role of the adult in the classroom.

Dr. Montessori supported the children's development by creating some brilliant educational materials designed to dovetail perfectly with the cognitive and psychological characteristics that she observed in children at various stages of development. Always pragmatic, she would try her ideas out in a number of classrooms, keeping the materials that children loved and used and removing the rest. In some cases, she found that materials made for a certain age were of more interest to children of a different age; she would duly note this and make adjustments.

The history of education is littered with the ruins of many, many educational reform movements—all of them seeking to find a better way for children to learn or a better way to shape future society. We were able to celebrate the centennial of the Montessori "method" in 2007, even as the worldwide Montessori movement was beginning to achieve unprecedented momentum, because Montessori's ideas were based on a lifetime of careful observation of children in real educational settings and not on what seemed right to some educational philosopher or political appointee with this or that academic or political axe to grind.

I was reminded of the importance of this real-world foundation of Montessori at a 2010 lecture by Professor Dan Willingham of the University of Virginia, a leading researcher into the cognitive science behind learning (and a Montessori parent). Professor Willingham pointed out the qualitative difference between what he as a scientist can observe in an artificial laboratory setting and what Montessori guides can observe daily in the dynamic real world of the prepared environment. Said Willingham, "The Montessori method is way beyond what cognitive science knows. We are slowly catching up."

So, speaking to the questions with which we began, we do see many children who go farther faster in Montessori than they would have been allowed to do in a school with a lockstep curriculum—even a curriculum for the "gifted and talented." We see some who do not. The important difference is that even the ones who do "average" academic work—and even those who struggle to do any academic work at all—come out of the process with their psyches, spirits, and moral values intact; with positive attitudes toward any future educational endeavors; and with a feeling of "ownership" that comes only from being supported to educate oneself.

I was recently at a Montessori elementary teachers' conference in Ohio. During a heated conversation about how much more new academic material Montessori elementary teachers should cover with the children, Laurie Ewert-Krocker, one of the key architects of the prestigious adolescent program at Hershey Montessori School near Cleveland, Ohio, stood up to say, "I need to tell you, it's not about how much material you cover. It's about how *unimpeded* these children have been in their development. If you [elementary guides] will keep sending us *whole children*, we'll take care of turning them into great artists, scientists, and so forth."

Although they would not think to put it into the same words as Ms. Ewert-Krocker, high schools love Montessori graduates. I have been told by teachers at a number of high schools that our former Montessori students are the only ones that will speak up in class or show an active interest in learning. They are never the ones to ask, "Will this be on the exam?" They have "ownership" of their own educations. They are responsible, organized, and helpful. They know how to work with others and how to mediate conflict—two key leadership skills.

A former Austin Montessori student who was attending a well-respected private high school was told by an instructor that he could skip class because he was ahead of the other students and did not need a review session. The boy hesitated for a moment and then asked, "Why would I want to do that?"

What the teacher did not know is that "rewards" such as getting to skip class would make no sense to most adolescents nurtured in the Montessori tradition. They would not have been comparing themselves to the rest of the class; they would not expect to be extrinsically rewarded for something excellent that they saw themselves as doing for themselves, not for a teacher; and missing out on possible learning would likely be seen as a punishment, not a reward.

By means of contrast, I can also think of former students who waited until adolescence to learn to read fluently, to do independent research, to make friends with math or writing, or to find enough inner peace to sustain lasting friendships. When they really needed to do those things, they did them—and that, too, is part of being a former Montessori student.

My point is that all these children—those who are on the developmental "fast track" and those who were not—were equally well served by their Montessori experience because they each got exactly what they needed at that time to do their very different work of self-construction. To a Montessorian, success in education is not about how many Montessori graduates are ready for "advanced placement" (although many are), or about how many go on to world-class universities (although a disproportionate number do), but about serving real children as they need to be served.

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Sometimes the question is not so much about children's performance as it is about the relative difficulty and sophistication of the curricula in Montessori and traditional public schools. Funny word, "curriculum." It comes from the Latin *currere*, meaning "to run," as does its close cousin "course" (in both its noun and verb forms). The metaphor is that of a racecourse laid out ahead of time for all the runners to follow—and may the best man win. If we speak of "curriculum" with its common meaning, we are already far, far away from the approach that Dr. Montessori worked out for her schools—one about which she never failed to claim, *not I, but the children showed me*. If this racecourse metaphor is what we mean by "curriculum," then we would have to say that Montessori education has no "curriculum" at all in the traditional sense. It has no predefined path through knowledge that all children will follow, no mandatory checklists of lessons, no set of lessons tied to the child's calendar age (or "grade"), no academic forced marches of any kind.

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Because we may find it difficult to imagine how learning can be structured without a traditional curriculum, to hear that Montessori has none can be alarming. We are all heirs to several thousand years of educational thinking that begins by asking the questions, “What is to be known?” and “What is the structure of that knowledge? How does this fact or skill depend on others?” The natural end product of such questioning is a curriculum—a logically coherent, stepwise plan for leading a student through a culture’s particular answer to “What is to be known?”

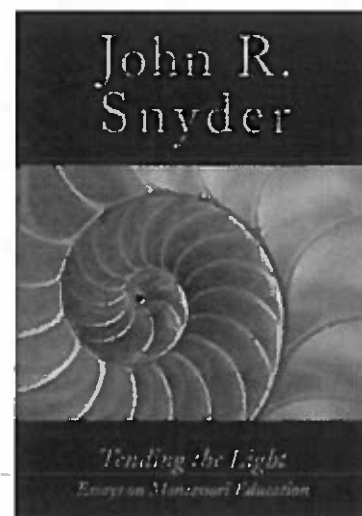
Having established the curriculum, the conventional educator may turn to “pragmatic” questions of method, instructional technique, educational setting, measurement, and so forth. Conclusions about these pragmatic issues may (or may not!) be informed by studies of the cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics of the children for whom the curriculum was designed. Curriculum design, then, is one thing; curriculum “implementation” another. In this common approach, “the children” are an abstraction to be modeled, not a living part of the process.

Maria Montessori’s big insight, the difference that made all the difference, was to start *not with questions about knowledge*, but with the “question of the child.” This “question of the child” was something that she came back to again and again throughout her long career. In effect, she turned the conventional approach on its head by asking, *What sort of being is this who learns? How does this being naturally exercise its powers of learning? How may we best serve the work of this being? Only when she thought she had (through observation and experimentation) some insight into these questions was she ready to ask the questions of what and when—the sort of questions that are traditionally answered by curricula.*

If Montessori education does not have a traditional, linear “curriculum,” what does it have? A vast, interconnected ecology of human knowledge, precisely and economically represented, both in its content and in its interconnectedness, in the Montessori materials and the enticing, inspiring key lessons and stories that go along with them—what Dr. Montessori eventually came to call Cosmic Education. In an environment that concretely mirrors the structure of knowledge, children are led by these lessons and materials to explore the interconnections for themselves, both individually and in groups, guided by the teacher who constantly observes them and serves their optimal development. Skills develop naturally and deeply, according to the child’s specific blueprint for development.

While there is no unique, linear path through the field of knowledge, children who are given the full six or seven years of the elementary for their guided explorations forge their own paths through all of the disciplines. They get to all of the topics that would be in a traditional linear curriculum, but there is a qualitative difference in how they “own” their learning. Nothing has been crammed or forced and immediately forgotten. There is no throwaway learning in the Montessori classroom. Instead, the child has a personal relationship with what they have learned; the knowledge is *theirs*. The result of such unimpeded learning is a young adolescent—a *whole* person, in Ewert-Krocker’s terms—who has acquired the skills, knowledge, and self-confidence necessary for their work in the next stage of life.

So let us, like Dr. Montessori, start with the “question of the child” instead of the “question of knowledge” and not worry too much about comparing the Montessori holistic approach to standard curricula. Better to ask “Will my child have all that he or she needs to develop to full potential in this classroom?” Chances are, if the child’s natural drive to learn is stimulated by an educational environment that is always leading children out of the classroom and into exploration of the whole world *and* supported by a home environment that protects the authentic nature of the child from harmful influences, we will get to experience for ourselves Montessori’s own surprise and joy at just how far beyond our “expert” expectations the child can go. ♦





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