

# ***Montessori: A Modern Approach***

## **Discussion Questions**

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*Note: Montessori and the author use accepted terms at the time in their discussions of neurodivergent children, but for our purposes, we will use the phrases “children with intellectual disabilities” or “children with cognitive impairment” during our discussions.*

### **Chapter 1 “Historical Introduction to Montessori”**

“[Montessori] worked with the children there [at the general insane asylums in Rome] for two years, basing her educational methods on the insights she had gained from Itard and Seguin. All day, from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., she taught in the school, and then worked far into the night preparing new materials, making notes and observations, and reflecting on her work. These two years she regarded as her ‘true degree’ in education. To her amazement, she found these children could learn many things that had seemed impossible.” (p. 2)

*Montessori began her work with children who had intellectual disabilities. Through observation and trial, she was able to find materials and activities that allowed these children to reach greater abilities than anyone had ever expected. Why might this have been an effective way to start her work? Do you think it allowed her to experiment more freely and witness more dramatic results?*

“The pattern that led to this phenomenon [concentration, peace, and satisfaction] was each time observed to be the same. First, the child would begin to use a piece of apparatus in the accustomed way. But, instead of putting the equipment away when the exercise had been completed, the child would begin to repeat it... Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she was finished with her task and put the equipment away... [W]hy should the children actually be rested and appear to have ‘experienced some great joy’ after such a cycle of activity.” (p. 5)

*Why would this process have been so surprising the first times Montessori observed it? What is unexpected about it? Have you witnessed this with your own children?*

“A second surprising phenomenon in the children’s behavior occurred quite by accident. The teacher was accustomed to distribute the materials to the children. However, one day she forgot to lock the cupboard where the equipment was kept. She arrived at the classroom to find that the children had already chosen what pieces they wished for themselves, and were busily at work. Montessori interpreted the incident as a sign that the children now knew the uses of the materials, and wanted to make their own choice.” (p. 5)

*The idea of giving children choices would have been revolutionary at the time. What would Montessori have observed that led her to change the process in the classroom this way? When have you observed responsible choices in your child leading to further development?*

“[The children] began reading [books] with the explosion of energy they had previously exhibited in writing and reading words encountered at random in their environment. The process was interesting on three counts: one, the spontaneity and direction of this activity from the beginning belonged to the children; two, the usual process, of reading preceding writing, was reversed; three, the children involved were only four and five years of age.” (p. 7)

*The Montessori approach to writing and reading was unique in its process. When you hear about these “interesting” elements, do any strike you as unusual today? Are any currently accepted in cultural norms? Are any still considered out of the ordinary?*

“[Once] an intense interest was aroused in these children [at Montessori’s second school], phenomena began to appear similar to those seen in the first Casa dei Bambini [school]. First, the children’s cycle of repetition, concentration, and satisfaction would begin. It would lead to a development of inner discipline, self-assurance, and preference for purposeful activity. Montessori called this process which took place in the child “normalization.” It appeared to her, in fact, to be the normal state of the child, since it developed spontaneously when the environment offered the necessary means.” (p. 8)

*Normalization is a common Montessori term, referring to children in a state when they are their most natural, optimal selves. What do you know about this concept? Have you witnessed anything like it with your children? What does it look like? What usually precedes it?*

“[This] initial burst of enthusiasm for Montessori gradually met with an equal torrent of criticism by... American professionals... Most influential of these was the noted professor William Kilpatrick. In 1914, he published a book, *The Montessori System Examined*, in which he dismissed Montessori techniques as outdated... Kilpatrick focused his criticism of Montessori on two areas: the social life of the classroom and the Montessori curriculum.” (p. 9-10)

*Kilpatrick’s main points of criticism for Montessori were that she emphasized academics too much, she did not focus on social development, the materials did not stimulate the children’s imaginations, the Sensorial Materials were too specific and unnecessary, and language and math was introduced too early. What do you think of these criticisms today? Are they true about the method itself? Are they valid criticisms?*

“It was five years after her death [in 1952] that an American renaissance for Montessori education began... What had happened in America in those forty years that caused alert professionals and laymen alike to reconsider the contribution of Montessori? Two major factors appear responsible. First, America was a disenchanted land educationally in the late 1950’s... Americans - particularly parents - were alarmed by the results of our educational system. A significant number of children couldn’t read above the most rudimentary level after twelve years of schooling. Too many students were choosing the first opportunity to drop out of school... In addition, Sputnik had startled a nation accustomed to feeling smugly superior in the field of scientific technology... A second factor involving the reception of Montessori in the 1950’s was

the gradual evolution that had taken place in the conceptual framework of American Culture... All through 1940's and 1950's, post-Darwinian influences, the Freudian impact, the accepted theories of motivation, of the brain's operation, and of the maturation and growth of the child were being gradually absorbed and reconstructed. This re-thinking was sparked in large measure by dramatic new discoveries in the laboratories of psychologists and physiologists. Most important for our purposes here, these discoveries began to substantiate, one after another, the very Montessori theories and practices which had been so dissonant with previously accepted educational and psychological theories." (p. 17-18)

*Why might this background provide the conditions for a re-examination of the American educational system? Why was Montessori ideally suited for this period in history?*

"The four areas of Montessori education that had been most out of step with the theories of the early 1900's involved the Montessori emphasis on intellectual or cognitive development, sensory training, the sensitive periods of the child's growth, and the child's spontaneous interest in learning." (p. 18)

#### ***Emphasis on intellectual or cognitive development***

"Darwin's theory of evolution based on natural selection left the American culture of the early 1900's with a belief in fixed intelligence. Montessori's emphasis on early cognitive development was clearly out of step with this concept... Both the belief in fixed intelligence and the theory of predetermined development were dealt a death blow in the 1940's when American psychologists began to turn their attention to the effects of early environmental conditions on the mental development of children... Children in orphanages and institutions were discovered to be suffering from severe [cognitive impairment]. This occurred in spite of the fact that the children had been given good to excellent physical care." (p. 20)

*How did this discovery make room for Montessori's approach to education? What beliefs were overturned? What do we know now about the importance of emotional and mental stimulation for the development of cognitive abilities?*

#### ***Sensory training***

"Psychologists began to design experiments to discover the effects of sensorial deprivation... Experimenting first with rats and then with dogs, [Donald] Hebb found that the richness of their early environment varied their adult problem-solving abilities considerably... His book provided the first psycho-theoretical base for Montessori's approach to early learning and environmental stimulation." (p. 21)

*How did this discovery make room for Montessori's approach to education? What beliefs were overturned? What do we know now about the importance of early experience with sensory stimulation for later cognitive abilities?*

### ***The child's spontaneous interest in learning***

“Montessori’s observation of the child’s spontaneous interest in learning also received support from Hebb’s theorizing. Previously all behavior was believed to be motivated solely by instinctual or homeostatic needs... If this were true, organisms would be quiescent if no such motivation was present. On the contrary, physiologists had recently established that the central nervous system is continuously active regardless of outer or organic stimulation... Hebb theorized that there must be an intrinsic motivation for behavior in addition to the already recognized motivation based on instinctual drives and homeostatic needs. Some of the important work supporting this new theory was done by H. F. Harlow. In three separate studies, he found that monkeys can and do learn to work puzzles when no motivation has been offered other than the presentation of the puzzle itself... Harlow even demonstrated that the use of hunger-reducing rewards actually destroyed motivation, rather than supporting it.” (p. 21-22)

*How did this discovery make room for Montessori’s approach to education? What beliefs were overturned? What do we know now about intrinsic motivation for learning and development?*

### ***The sensitive periods of the child’s growth***

“Montessori’s emphasis on sensitive periods in the child’s life also is compatible with [Jean] Piaget’s theory of the development of the child’s intelligence. Piaget saw the mental development of the child as a succession of stages or periods, each extending and building out of the previous one... If the opportunity for developing the needed structures in any given period is missed, the child’s subsequent growth will be permanently impeded... Konrad Lorenz produced the first laboratory research documenting [sensitive periods’] existence... He designed an experiment involving the imprinting phenomena in the social behavior of birds. Geese in one group were allowed to remain with their parents after hatching. A second group was removed from their parents immediately upon hatching, and Lorenz presented himself to them as a parent substitute. The first group reacted to other geese later in life in the expected ways of the species. The second group, however, behaved throughout their lives as if human beings were their natural species. Lorenz concluded that species recognition was imprinted upon the nervous system of the young geese immediately upon their hatching. Imprinting has been the subject of numerous experiments and studies since 1950, and, as a result, sensitive periods in early human development are now generally accepted.” (p. 24-25)

*How did this discovery make room for Montessori’s approach to education? What beliefs were overturned? What do we know now about sensitive periods in human development?*

“Montessori had found that [social characteristics and creativity] developed spontaneously as the child’s intelligence became established through his interaction with a prepared environment. This

was an indirect approach to these areas, in contrast to the more direct approach of traditional education.” (p. 25)

*What is the experiential difference in learning about social life and creativity directly versus indirectly? What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each? Why might Montessori’s indirect approach work more effectively with the natural development of children?*

## **Chapter 2 “The Montessori Philosophy”**

“[Montessori] considered the adult to be dependent on the child, even as the child is dependent on the adult... In 1948 she stated her ‘conviction that humanity can hope for a solution of its problems, the most urgent of which are those of peace and unity, only by turning its attention and energies to the discovery of the child and the development of the great potentialities of the human personality in the course of its construction.’” (pp. 29-30)

*Have you ever considered the adult world as depending on the world of children? What does Montessori mean when she says this? Why does this perspective matter? Do you think our perspective has changed in the 100+ years since she said this?*

“[T]he child is dependent upon an integral relationship with his environment, both the things and the people within it. Only through this interaction can he come to an understanding of himself and the limits of his universe and thus achieve an integration of his personality.” (p. 30)

*Why does the environment play such an important role in a child’s development? How does it serve his understanding of himself and the limits of the universe?*

“[T]he child requires freedom. If he has been given the key to his own personality and is governed by his own laws of development, he is in possession of very sensitive and unique powers which can only come forth through freedom.” (p. 30)

*What does the concept of freedom mean when we are talking about children? How is this different from an adult’s freedom? In what ways have you experimented with giving your child more or less freedom in different areas of their life?*

“Montessori considered the dependent relationship of the child’s psychic growth to free interaction with his environment a natural result of his mental and physical unity. Western educational thought had been influenced by Descartes’ view of man as divided into two parts, the intellectual and the physical. Montessori now challenged this philosophical position, and stated that the full development of psychic powers is not possible without physical activity.” (p. 31)

*What has your experience been with the connection between mind and body? How do you see the two relating to each other - either in your own life, or when observing your child?*

“Sensitive Periods are blocks of time in a child’s life when he is absorbed with one characteristic of his environment to the exclusion of all others. They appear in the individual as ‘an intense

interest for repeating certain actions at length, for no obvious reason, until - because of this repetition - a fresh function suddenly appears with explosive force.” (p. 32)

*The sensitive periods are: order, language, movement, tiny objects, grace and courtesy, refinement of senses. Have you witnessed any of these in your children?*

“One of the most important [psychic principles] she observed is the law of work. Montessori had observed that the children in the Casa dei Bambini had achieved an integration of self through their work. They appeared immensely pleased, peaceful, and rested after the most strenuous concentration on tasks they had freely chosen to do.” (p. 37)

*When have you seen your young child engaged in hard work? How did they appear afterwards?*

“A second [psychic] principle revealed through the child’s development is the law of independence... He uses this independence to listen to his own inner guide for actions that can be useful to him... It is because the adult persists in... usurping [the function of this guide] that much of the child’s potential is never realized.” (p. 39)

*Why are adults so tempted to take over a child’s inner guide? Why is it challenging to let children practice independence regularly? How is this practice for you in your home?*

“A...psychic principle involving the will is revealed... The child chooses a task and must then inhibit his impulses toward extraneous movements. An inner formation of the will is gradually developed through this adaptation to the limits of a chosen task. Decision and action then are the bases for the will’s development. Lectures on what the child ought to do are of no use, since they do not involve decision or action.” (p. 40)

*Have you ever considered “decision and action” as the basis for the development of the will? Taken with this understanding, why are lectures so ineffectual? What are activities and routines at home that help your child develop their will?*

“[Another] natural law governs the development is the child’s imagination and creativity. These are inborn powers in the child that develop as his mental capacities are established through his interaction with the environment. The environment must itself be beautiful, harmonious, and based on reality in order for the child to organize his perceptions of it. When he has developed realistic and ordered perceptions of the life about him, the child is capable of the selecting and emphasizing processes necessary for creative endeavors.” (p. 45)

*Why would a beautiful, harmonious, and realistic environment be important for a child’s developing mind? How do you see these traits supporting creativity? How is imagination and creativity founded in reality?*

“[Another] psychic principle deals with the development of the emotional and spiritual life of the child. Montessori believed the child possesses within him at birth the senses that respond to his

emotional and spiritual environment and thereby develop his capacity for loving and understanding responses to others and to [a higher power].” (p. 47)

*Have you ever considered your child from this perspective? Do you believe that the capacity to love and be in relationship with others is inborn? How have you seen this with your child?*

“Because it was through observation of the child that Montessori made her discoveries of the Sensitive Periods, the Absorbent Mind, and the natural laws governing psychic development, she determined that education must have a new goal: to study and observe the child himself from the moment of his conception.” (p. 49)

*Why is observation such a revolutionary basis for an educational approach? How is it unique as a foundation? Does this work for you at home?*

### **Chapter 3 “The Montessori Method”**

“She described this environment as a nourishing place for the child. It is designed to meet his needs for self-construction and to reveal his personality and growth patterns to us. This means that not only must it contain what the child needs in a positive sense, but all obstacles to his growth must be removed from it as well” (50).

*What do you think Montessori meant by “obstacles to his growth”? Why would it be important to remove these in order for the child to develop and reveal themselves to us?*

“If the teacher is to play this key role in the environment for the child, she clearly must be open to life and the process of becoming herself. If she is a rigid person for whom life has become existing rather than growing, she will not be able to prepare a living environment for the children” (51).

*What is the difference between “existing” and “growing”? Why would this mindset affect an adult’s ability to create a “living environment” for children? What are times in your life you have experienced the difference between being open and being rigid?*

“The child must be given activities that encourage independence, and he must not be served by others in acts he can learn to perform for himself” (52).

*Is it hard for you not to do things for your children that they can do themselves? What are the greatest challenges for their independence in your home? When are they able to be most successful with their independence?*

“The child must be aided in developing his will by being encouraged to coordinate his actions towards a given end and to achieve something he himself has chosen to do. Adults must be on their guard against tyrannizing him and substituting their wills for his” (53).

*What do you think Dr. Montessori meant by “tyrannizing him and substituting their wills for his”? What does that look like? Why would using our will take the place of their will?*

“The child must be aided in developing a clear understanding of good and evil... To achieve this distinction, the adult must set firm limits against destructive and asocial actions” (53).

*What are some destructive and asocial actions you put limits on in your home? How do you enforce those limits? What are some actions that adults put limits on that are **not** destructive and asocial? Do you think this is always necessary?*

“The children are given as much freedom to work out their own social relations with each other as possible. Montessori felt that, for the most part, children like to solve their social problems, and that adults cause harm by too early and frequent interference” (55).

*Why might it be important for children to work out their own social relations with each other? When have you witnessed an unsuccessful intervention by an adult? When have you witnessed children working out social issues successfully?*

“Through the freedom he is given in a Montessori environment, the child has a unique opportunity to reflect upon his own actions, to determine their consequences both for himself and for others, to test himself against the limits of reality, to learn what gives him a sense of fulfillment and what leaves him feeling empty and dissatisfied, and to discover both his capabilities and his shortcomings. The opportunity to develop self-knowledge is one of the most important results of freedom in a Montessori classroom” (56).

*Why is freedom so essential for developing self-knowledge? Have you ever considered this importance for the young child?*

“She regarded beauty not as an extra aid for the developing child, but as a positive need in calling forth his power to respond to life” (59).

*How is beauty a necessity in life? Have you seen your children respond to something beautiful?*

“In order to serve their purpose of internal formation, the materials must correspond to the child’s inner needs. This means that any individual material must be presented to the child at the right moment in his development” (60).

*Why is offering the materials at the right time in development so important? What happens when a child is offered the materials too early or too late?*

“The materials begin as concrete expressions of an idea and gradually become more and more abstract representations. A solid wooden triangle is sensorially explored. Separate pieces of wood representing its base and its sides are then presented, and the triangle’s dimensions discovered. Later, flat wooden triangles are fitted into wooden puzzle trays, then on solidly colored paper triangles, then on triangles outlined with a heavy colored line, and finally on the abstraction of thinly outlined triangles. At a certain stage in this progression, the child will have grasped the abstract essence of the concrete material, and will no longer be dependent upon or show the same interest in them” (62-63) (*Show materials*)



*How does this progression from concrete to abstract provide such a solid foundation for further learning? Do you remember how you learned concepts like these in your education? How was it different?*

“Montessori materials are designed for auto-education, and the control of error lies in the materials themselves rather than in the teacher. The control of error guides the child in his use of the materials and permits him to recognize his own mistakes... The dialogue with the materials puts the child in control of the learning process” (63).

*Why would having the control of error in the materials give children control over their learning process? How does learning to recognize their own mistakes change the learning experience for children?*

“After a period of repetitive use of an exercise in its originally understood form, yet another phenomenon appears: the child will begin to create new ways in which to use the materials, often combining several different exercises that are interrelated or comparing the material to related objects in his environment. It is the child’s inner development, combined with the creative possibilities hidden within the design of the materials, that makes his burst of creative activity possible. Because the child doesn’t know that many of his own discoveries with the materials have been made by others before, they belong to him in a very special way and enable him to experience the thrill of discovering the unknown for himself” (68).

*How do you think a child’s relationship to their education is different when it feels like they are discovering knowledge themselves? How is this kind of work “creative”?*

“[The development of community life] is aided by several key elements in the Montessori method. One of these is the sense of ownership and responsibility the children develop toward the classroom environment, largely because the classroom is indeed theirs and theirs alone. Everything in it is geared to their needs - physically, intellectual, and emotional. The teacher herself has no possessions there, not even a desk or chair of adult dimensions. The children are the key source of maintaining the daily order and care of the classroom. It is they who return the materials to the shelves, who polish the tables and care for the plants and animals” (74).

*Why would having the environment belong to the children aid in the development of community? How does caring for their environment support the community?*

“Adults must aim to diminish their egocentric and authoritarian attitude toward the child and adopt a passive attitude in order to aid in his development. They must approach children with humility, recognizing their role as a secondary one” (79).

*How is an adult’s role “secondary” for children’s development? What is primary? Why would humility be so important in an adult’s attitude towards themselves with children?*

## Chapter 4 “Montessori and Parents”

“The child’s needs should come before all others, for, if mankind is to progress, it must be through the child” (104).

*How do you interpret this call to put your child’s needs above all others? What do you think these “needs” are? How do you balance this in family life? And what does this mean from a global perspective?*

“[T]he first three years of life [are] the years Montessori considered more important than any others for the child’s development” (105).

*Why are the first three years of life more important than any other for a child’s development? What amazing changes have you seen in your child in their first years of life? Has there been a shift in your perspective of these early years?*

“The child, then, is given his own powers for development, and, if the parent is to be helpful, he must try to learn from the child himself what he must do” (108).

*How does a parent learn from their child? How can a child teach a parent what the parent must do to support their development? What have you learned from your children about what they need?*

“If parents are to learn and grow with their children, they must develop the power to observe them, to enjoy them, and to accept them. All of these depend upon a willingness to adopt the slower pace of the child and to trust his inner powers” (109).

*What is your experience with observing, enjoying, and accepting your child? Is this natural for you or did you have to adjust? How does slowing down serve this purpose?*

“Such a harboring environment is a boon to the adult; it is a necessity for the child if he is to develop to his fullest potential, because of the different relationship of the child to his environment. The child doesn’t just live in his environment; it becomes a part of him” (110).

*What is the difference between a boon (something that is helpful) versus something that is essential? How does your child’s environment become a part of him? What do you know about the absorbent mind? How does understanding this affect the way you prepare your child’s environment?*

“As the baby becomes older, his growing independence sets up an increasing conflict between the parents’ wishes and the child’s needs... Thus it is the parent, even though he truly loves his child, who is in danger of becoming the child’s first enemy in his struggle for life. This occurs because the parent fails to understand that, unlike himself, the child is in the process of becoming” (111).

*How does your child’s growing independence create conflict in your relationship? When are times that your child’s new abilities have been challenging for you? How might our resistance to*

*their growth be an obstacle for our children? How does it shift our understanding to think of our children as being in the “process of becoming”?*

“In his early explorations of his environment, the child is seeking to establish his independence through mastering his surroundings. It is up to the parent to permit the necessary exploration and also to arrange the environment so that the child can learn to do things for himself” (114).

*How have you changed your home to allow for exploration and independence for your children? What are areas of your home where you would like to introduce more of this?*

“Montessori was concerned that a child might be waited on unnecessarily and, therefore, not develop the independence vital to a full life” (114).

*How can helping a child too much be harmful? When are you most tempted to “wait on” your child? And why does this hinder their ability to have a full life?*

“Montessori felt that the adult in our culture is unprepared to recognize and accept the young child’s desire for work and, therefore, is not only amazed when it appears, but refuses to allow its expression. He instead tries to force the child to play continuously. Adults must learn to recognize the child’s instinct for work and cooperate with it” (115).

*When have you seen your child choose work over play? Why do you think it is difficult for adults to recognize and accept this desire in children? How do you support both work and play in your home?*

“The parent must observe his child closely, and watch for the kinds of [Practical Life] activity he chooses spontaneously in his environment. The parent can then make them more available to the child by organizing them on the child’s own level, and later by creating expansions and variations of them” (118).

*Are there any Practical Life activities you have prepared in your home for your child to do? What is your child particularly interested in right now? How could you set it up in a simple way at home so they can do this work?*

“A word of caution is in order: a parent who is planning to work with his child at home with definite learning objectives in mind should have a realistic understanding of his own nature and that of his child, of their relationship together and of his motivation in pursuing these activities. Many...parents overpower their children with too much enthusiasm and overdirection. Others are tense, anxious parents who expect too much of their children and themselves” (119).

*How do you view your personality in your relationship with your child when you are working with them with a particular objective in mind? Do you think you are prone to more “enthusiasm and overdirection” or more “anxiety”? How do you seek to balance yourself in these moments?*

\*Note: Recall the next line, “Instead of placing one more demand on them both, parents might best concentrate on relaxing with their children and enjoying them - perhaps taking unhurried walks in the woods with a camera, field glasses, or magnifying glass.”

*Why might this be an antidote to tension or control in your relationship with your child?*

“In our rapidly changing culture, there is pressure on parents to give their children more and more ‘freedom.’ Increasingly, it is only the mature and confident parent who gives his child the guidance, limits, and leadership that are necessary for the development of true freedom” (119).

*Why are limits and leadership necessary for the development of freedom? What do you think “true freedom” is? Is this a challenge for you? Why or why not?*

### **Chapter 5 “The Montessori Approach to Reading and Writing”**

“Dr. Montessori did not write a textbook explaining exact procedures in detail... Perhaps she was apprehensive that... teachers might memorize certain techniques and procedures, and mechanically reproduce them with children. Nothing would be further from Montessori’s concept of education as a living process, determined not by teacher or parent but by the child’s inner powers” (120).

*Why would a procedural textbook take away from the living process of education? Is this a different way of understanding education than you are familiar with? What do you think Dr. Montessori meant by “education as a living process”? And how is it determined by a child’s inner powers?*

“In understanding Montessori education in any area, it is important to remember the approach is always indirect - never the direct one of traditional education. Montessori’s enormous respect for the mysterious powers that form the child from the moment of conception led her to fear any direct interference with their unfolding” (121).

*How do you understand the difference between an indirect approach versus a direct approach to education? What are examples of this? Have you seen this in your home? How might a direct approach interfere with a child’s “mysterious powers” of development?*

“The environment is so designed that all activities feed naturally toward the development of the skills required for reading, and thus reading is experienced as part of the process of living” (122).

*Can you describe in your own words how the Montessori environment naturally supports reading? How does this make reading a part of the process of living? What is the alternative?*

“It was not only Montessori’s trust in the child’s powers that led her to approach reading in this natural way, but also her concept of the child as an active rather than a receptive being. She considered it the job of education not to fill the child with the techniques of reading but to free him for self-expression and communication” (123).

*What is the difference between viewing a child as an active rather than a receptive being? Do you agree with this distinction? How have you seen this at home? Assuming this is true, why would a teacher want to free a child for communication rather than fill them with the mechanics of reading?*

“If all of this knowledge is not to become a mechanical process for the child, the teacher must convey some sense of the mystery of language to him” (123).

*What is “the mystery of language”? How can we share what makes communication so extraordinary with a child? How is this done in the Primary class?*

“He is in the sensitive period for facts and he hungers for real knowledge. He is at this stage quite a literal person. When he says, ‘What is that?’ or ‘Why is that?’ he wants the adult to tell him what an object *really* is, or what is the *real* explanation he seeks” (125).

*In what way have you seen your child hunger for real knowledge? Is there a difference in the way they communicate and respond if you engage in fantasy versus reality when you tell stories or talk to them?*

“Language development is also encouraged in the Montessori class through its total freedom of conversation. Through this freedom language becomes an integral part of the life of the classroom, and there is a continuous encouragement of self-expression and communication, child to child and child to adult” (125).

*How do you understand the concept of “total freedom of conversation” in the Montessori classroom? How does this differ from a conventional environment? How might this support language development?*

“The sandpaper [of the sandpaper letters] serves to control the child’s movements when he feels the letter, for he knows by touch when he has slipped off the letter onto the smooth board” (129).

*Why does a built-in control of error support a child’s educational experience? How might their experience be different if the adult supplied the control of error? How might this approach affect language development?*

“The Movable Alphabet enables the child to put together symbol and sound in order to render his own language visible” (129).

*How is writing making your own language visible? Have you ever thought of writing in this way? How does the Montessori environment support this way of thinking about language?*

“There will come a time when the child does not want to put away his story, as he must, when he has formed it by means of the Movable Letters. This is the natural motivation that produces the transition from the Movable Alphabet to writing. It comes from the child’s own desires, then,

and not the desires of teacher or parent. This self-propulsion of the child toward the development of writing must not be interfered with by either the anxieties or praises of adults” (131).

*How does a desire to make language permanent motivate a child to write? Why is it important that it comes from a child themselves, rather than an adult? How might this change one’s relationship to writing and feelings about expressing oneself?*

“The Montessori child, then, does not learn to read from books, but through a long process of indirect preparation. When he takes a book to read, he already knows how. This is very important for the child’s initial response to books. Who wants to read ‘See, Jane, see. Come and see. See me.’? A child’s first encounter with books he is going to read himself must involve those he will find worth exploring. This can only be accomplished if the reading of books themselves is saved for the final act of the drama” (132).

*What is the difference between learning to read from books and reading a book as a “final act of drama”? Why might it matter for a child to read a book they want to explore, rather than beginning with rudimentary books?*

“The needs of the child in his sensitive periods are matched with an indirect preparation to meet those needs. It is this that makes it possible for the Montessori child to build one foundation out of another in an ever-extending reach for self-construction” (137).

*How does the Montessori environment utilize a child’s sensitive periods with indirect preparation for later work? Why does this indirect preparation make such a difference in a child’s development? How does it support the concept of self-construction?*

## **Chapter 6 “Why Montessori Today”**

“If young people are to meet the challenge of survival that faces them today, it is imperative that their education develop to the fullest extent possible their potential for creativity, initiative, independence, inner discipline, and self-confidence” (138).

*Why are these traits so important for survival today? Do you think they are more important now than ever? How do you see Montessori as especially preparing a child in these ways?*

“By ‘work’ Montessori did not mean mechanical drudgery, but physical and mental activity freely chosen by an individual - activity that has meaning for him because it promotes his own growth or contributes to society” (139).

*Is this your understanding of the word “work”? How has your relationship with work changed over time? How is this different from the way many people speak about work?*

“We do not take seriously the young child’s instinct for work in our cultures. Instead, we encourage him to play all day. Even if a young child goes to preschool, it is assumed he will not be directly motivated toward intellectual development and that he will have to be led to it without his being aware of what is happening” (139).

*How do you see your child's relationship to work? Is work different from play for the young child? Do you believe that children are intrinsically and joyfully motivated to work in this way? Do you think children need to be "tricked" into learning?*

"Montessori's approach to nature has special significance for our culture. Montessori regarded man's inter-dependence with nature as both physical and spiritual... Botany, zoology, and the study of land forms are an integral part of the Montessori curriculum, and many a six-year-old Montessori child knows more about the classification of plants and the care of living things than the average adult. Thus, the Montessori child is well prepared to become an ecological responsible adult" (141-142).

*How is our interdependence with nature both physical and spiritual? In what ways does our culture support this relationship? Why does it matter? Do you think the Montessori environment and curriculum supports ecological responsibility? How does knowledge and experience provide this foundation later in life?*

"Montessori emphasized the family as the natural unit for the nurture and protection of the child... Montessori's inclusion of the parents in the life of the classroom and the guidance they are given in carrying out their role at home appears to be especially meaningful" (142).

*What has your experience with Montessori parent education been? How has it been particularly helpful? What do you see as the main advantages?*

"Our society, bent as it is on a breakneck pace of production and achievement at all costs, desperately needs to work toward the balance that seeing the world through the eyes of the child gives." (143).

*What advantages are there to seeing the world through the eyes of a child? When have you been able to do this, and what gifts has it given you?*

"The child, like all living things, has his own natural laws. Recognizing them and adjusting our pace and tempo to them are beneficial to the adult, who has lost much of his own natural rhythm of being" (143).

*When have you experienced slowing your pace and tempo to that of your child? Is it challenging for you? Did it feel beneficial? Why do adults lose their own natural rhythm of being? What does that feel like?*

"Perhaps because Montessori began by doing the 'impossible' with children, this spirit of faith in the child has continued to pervade Montessori education to a unique degree" (144).

*How does Montessori uniquely represent a faith in the child? Is this a philosophy you believe in? What examples of it have you seen?*

“It is the teacher’s attitude toward the children and herself that establishes a Montessori classroom” (153).

*How do you understand the unique attitude a teacher has towards children and herself in a Montessori environment? How is this set apart from the philosophy associated with conventional education? Have you found your own attitude evolving as you’ve learned more about Montessori?*