

Bringing The World of Artistic Expression To the Child

by John R. Snyder

When I speak to parents who are just learning about the Montessori elementary, I sometimes tell them that there are many ways for children to learn "the 3R's". To be sure, they will learn them in a very special way in the Montessori classroom, but it is not this sort of academic learning that makes Montessori education unique. I tell them that Montessori education is different because our children exhibit "the 7R's". Resilient, Responsible, Resourceful, Respectful, Rational, Refined, Ready — these are the characteristics we look for and support in the children.

Parents readily understand and appreciate the importance of the 7R's, but sometimes I get questions about "Refined". What does that actually mean? Is it really important? Does it imply some sort of cultural elitism or snobbishness? Good questions!

I maintain that refinement is an important goal of Montessori education, but we have to understand it properly. In the primary, it is well understood that the children use the sensorial materials to refine their senses and to learn the words that describe various sensations. As children move into the second plane of development, the child's work increasingly becomes less about the outside world and more about the inner world — the world of ideas, concepts, imagination, and reasoning.

Just as the elementary child loses his attraction for physical order and finds satisfaction in the ordering of ideas, the refinement of the senses that was so satisfying to him in earlier years now becomes refinement of experience, refinement of taste and judgment. The reasoning mind is less and less satisfied with merely liking or disliking things; it wants to understand and justify its judgments of experience. This is where the Montessori elementary prepared environment can be of great service to the child.

Bringing the world of culture to the child

Maria Montessori said that it was the job of the elementary guide to "bring the world to the children". That's a tall order. Moreover, she wanted us to do it in a way that was "an aid to life", by which we understand her to mean (1) what we bring should have some relevance to the child's present life, not just some hypothetical future, (2) what we bring should meet the developmental needs of children that age, and (3) it should at least indirectly help the child stay on a trajectory toward becoming the kind of adult that could join with others to improve the conditions of life for all humanity. Dr. Montessori wanted us to bring the very best of the whole world to the child in a way that is positive and immediately helpful to the child in its big work of both understanding the world and adapting to the specific culture in which it is growing up.

As we choose which cultural experiences to offer the elementary child, we must also keep

in mind our practice of offering keys that open doors into new areas of knowledge. Always, we work to broaden the field of choice for the individual, now and in the future. To me, there is a big difference between not choosing a certain cultural experience because it's not one's cup of tea at the moment and not choosing it because one has no idea that it even exists. The first is a form of freedom; the second is a form of oppression.

In choosing which "seeds of culture" to sow in the classroom, the elementary guide is limited only by his/her own knowledge and experience and in his/her ability to discern what is and is not quality in a particular art form or genre.

There is also a practical limitation; namely, that there aren't enough hours in the day to sow all the seeds, to bring the whole world into the classroom. Guides will therefore want to use their time very wisely. For me, there was always a calculation to be made that involved just how eye-opening or mind-expanding a particular experience might be for the children and an estimate of the probability that the children might not have the experience unless I introduced it to them.

So, there were always many good activities to be done, much good music to be listened to, much good art to be seen, and many good books to be read that the children weren't going to hear about from me, because they didn't have to. Instead, I chose to offer what was new to the children, what was inspiring, and what was often inaccessible to the layman. Of course, all these decisions were contingent on the needs of the particular group of children I had with me. In different years, with different groups of children, my choices could be quite different.

Inspiration and gratitude

Dr. Montessori was wise enough not to have ensured the immediate obsolescence of her work by giving us lists of specific cultural experiences the children should have, but she did give us advice about the orientation we should model for the children with respect to culture, both current and past. This advice can be summed up in two words: *inspiration* and *gratitude*.

One of the main themes — arguably, *the* main theme — of the elementary is that we who are alive right now are the living edge of human civilization poised between the past and the future. We were born into a world and into a specific culture and a specific family that preexisted us, and from the moment of birth until the moment we die, all that makes our life and our accomplishments possible is a gift, a gift purchased at incalculable expense of human life, labor, creativity, courage, and passion. Gratitude is the natural response to this awareness. We the living preserve, embellish, and improve the gift of culture we have received and pass it along to our children and future generations.

The role of the guide is not so much to teach as it is to inspire, and nowhere is that more the case than it is with the arts. Art, music, and literature have the capacity to touch and

transform us very deeply, and I know from personal experience and my experience of working with many children that such deep impressions can stay with one for a lifetime.

Carefully selected and skillfully presented, encounters with artistic expressions of all times and cultures afford the children the opportunity to experience creativity as something belonging to humanity, not just to a few or to a specific time and place. Such an experience invites the children into the ongoing stream of culture, invites and inspires them to see themselves as people who can make their own art, music, dance and literature. Such self-expression not only strengthens their self-confidence and sense of belonging to the world, it also becomes a means by which they explore other areas of knowledge — geometry, geography, science, math, history, economics, and all the rest.

As we explore music and the other arts across time and space, we do so with an open mind and a sense of humility, knowing that the artistic expressions of others arise from their life experiences, which may be very different from ours. We know that we may not easily understand or know how to appreciate the art of times and places very different from our own. Nevertheless, we also know that to understand a culture's art is to understand something essential about that culture. So, we persist; we work hard to understand more and more about art and those who made it.

This necessarily takes us into studies of history, religion, philosophy, social organization, and even technology. When we know who made a particular piece of music or art, we learn the stories of that person's life and practice, trying to hear or see that person's work from the perspective of the person's time and place. When we see how often great artists of all times and cultures have had to struggle and sacrifice to create the beautiful and inspiring works we still enjoy, we once again connect to gratitude and inspiration.

There is, then, no room for narrow-mindedness or snobbery in the Montessori environment — whether it be the snobbery of elevating the Western artistic canon above all others or the reverse snobbery of thinking that we can somehow skip or depreciate the artistic achievements of what some have foolishly termed DWEM's (dead white European males). If it is the skillful product of human minds, hands, and hearts, we receive it gladly and without discrimination.

Children deserve the best

Because we approach the arts of other times and places with humility, gratitude and respect, we want to bring the very best artistic expressions of those cultures to the children. Each culture, each genre, each artist deserves to be represented by the very best work available. This can be difficult and time-consuming work for those of us adults who were not helped as children to refine our own tastes and to learn about the artistic expressions of other cultures and times, but it is what the children need from us and what we must do.

Commercial collections of music and art marketed to teachers and parents for use with children are often thrown together from low-budget material, poorly performed or reproduced, and are often selected based on condescending under-estimations of children's intelligence, taste, and abilities. Instead, adults working with children in the Montessori way will educate themselves enough to know which works are most representative and how to tell a high quality, authentic version from a cheap knockoff.

When children are helped to experience the very best and highest quality works of art, they have benchmarks against which to measure the mediocre, formulaic, commercialized pop culture in which they are immersed. They begin to understand what it means to be innovative and highly skilled in the different genres. They come to know that there has been great art and mediocre art in every time in place and that we are not living in a "fallen age," doomed to look back longingly to some golden age in which only artistic giants walked the earth.

Above all, children who are helped to refine their taste and broaden their experience are better able to accept the many explicit and implicit invitations we give them to join the great stream of human creativity, better able to evaluate their own progress, and better able to appreciate the efforts of others. These habits of mind are gifts that will keep on giving through a whole lifetime of cultural experience and exploration.

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