

LANGUAGE: A MIRACLE OF SELF-CONSTRUCTION

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Introduction: Supporting Language Development as an Inner Process

Montessori wrote in 1946 that “Language seems to be born complete.” Language is created inside, and like the physical embryo is suddenly born complete, total, with a life of its own. You might say language is a series of rebirths — an integration of inner constructions which reveal a mysterious process of creation.

Language is an integrated part of human development. Language is the synthesis of experience. It is the recorder of the history of civilization. It is story, drama, poetry, folklore, novels, and personal and intimate expression. It is the basis of sharing.

In the next hour, I would like to help us reach an appreciation of the child’s first acquisitions in spoken language and then symbolic language so that we might see it with a clarity that is a higher level than before. This requires us to encompass the psychological, spiritual and physical construction of language that occurs in all children naturally, sequentially, and globally if the environment provides the experience.

What happens when you see the creative work — not just as rules of presentations, but as a universal journey every human being takes between birth and six through the powers of the absorbent mind, as one of many unfolding acquisitions — step by step? Connection by connection. Pathway by pathway. The child’s journey of discovery is in the hands of the child who moves through the passages and makes the connections governed by the mind’s own inner structures. We immerse ourselves now in the child’s great work and our ability to create the right conditions for that great work to finish its whole symphony of linguistic measures, with notes translated into a music that embraces experience and prepares for abstraction.

It is possible to see the child’s predictable transformation from spoken to symbolic language, not in a flash, but through the careful observation of the steps as manifested with every individual child. Our task in this hour is to capture its awe and mystery again — seeing the importance of details, but not getting so absorbed in them that we lose our vision to see the child’s fullest appreciation of language and the capacity to absorb it in its entirety in order to better understand the world, its names, and the logical connection of any of its facets, as well as the surrounding culture of the society to which he is born.

We must go back to the beginning to understand further the mystery of language and the capacities of the child. So, in revisiting the tools developed over a 20-year span by Montessori based on her observations and those of her collaborators, we must also listen and watch the children to know how to travel on this journey. Let’s take what we all know and try to understand it in relation to normalization, so that children direct their own learning with joy, concentration and discovery, and thus succeed in becoming literate, communicative, expressive, analytical and conscientious in *what* they say, *what* they write, and *what and how* they read. In this process, we also become more capable of reassuring parents, who sometimes feel a deep anxiety regarding the not-yet-evident ability to read, for example, without subjecting ourselves to the tension and weight of demands and expectations that stem from looking at outcomes, rather than developmental milestones.

(*Delegates listened here to a tape of the sounds of babies talking.*) Language is a means of expression and communication, a way of connecting, relating, sharing and extending ourselves. If we think of the passion conveyed through colors of oils on a canvas, or the emotion evoked through the chords and notes of a violin, perhaps we are on the road to understanding the degree of vitality, power, life, force, and emotion that words can possess. We witness the child's brilliant capacity to generalize patterns and order, when he describes what happened yesterday at his birthday party, with the absorbed "–ed" as his expression of past tense, i.e. "I swam and ate cake and I blew out the candles."

Is each funny construction not a moment of poetic richness? Is it not evidence of the capacity to absorb and generalize patterns, in spite of the exceptions of the English language? This is the pure individuality and freshness of each absorbent mind as the sensitive period for language invents and recombines with what it absorbs. Each challenge is converted into new combinations that arise out the difficulties with verbs and their conjugations and tenses, singulars and plurals, pronunciation of sounds, vocabulary, and the finest subtleties of meaning, especially apparent with the understanding of natural puns, play on words, and idioms.

Let me read to you another powerful linguistic statement:

And the final result? It is 'man.' The child of six who has learned to speak correctly, knowing and using the rules of his native tongue, could never describe the unconscious work from which all this has come. Nevertheless, it is he, 'man,' who is the creator of speech. He does it entirely by himself, but if he lacked this power, and could not spontaneously master his language, no effective work would ever have been done by the world of men. There would be no such thing as civilization. This is the true perspective in which we must see the child. This is his importance. He makes everything possible. On his word stands civilization. This is why we must offer the child the help he needs, and be at his service so that he does not have to walk alone. (Absorbent Mind, Maria Montessori)

Look at the last line of this quote: "This is why we must offer the child the help he needs, and be at his service so that he does not have to walk alone." What are these helps so that each step along the way is surefooted and predictable, universal and yet individual? How can the child walk assisted, but not crippled by too much anxiety and external pressure which leads to the loss of the intrinsic discovery and exploration that language deserves for its creative, secret, subtle, unfolding process?

INDIRECT PREPARATIONS

Most often, when one speaks about indirect preparation, the focus is on the materials and the ages and stages in which the materials should be used. What do we plug the child into at ages three, four, five, and six? How do we get to the end of the reading and writing sequence? Already the process sounds external, like some kind of penitential carrying of a ball-and-chain burden of teaching the child to read — trapping the child with the lattice work of the prepared environment marked for ages three, four, five and six. But there is another way to look at this.

The beauty is that the child is able to delight in the activity without an awareness of all that awaits her. She enjoys the process, and over time, discovers that she is able to do something quite complex without knowing how this has come to be. Like the increasing energy of the mountain about to erupt, the varied activities are preparing for a culminating **explosion**. Separately prepared, the conglomeration is much more dramatic because of the unexpected surprising outcome. This explosion is never induced from the outside, but is a natural and vigorous happening from within.

Explosions

How does an explosion occur? When children are able to write with the movable alphabet, making their words visible rather than audible, or when they can pick up a pencil and start writing in cursive without practicing letters first, this is so compelling to them that they cannot stop from doing the activity over and over again. The child is effortlessly successful because of the many ways in which the materials served each of the difficulties, without the child's knowledge! The result is a hunger or fascination with the new acquisition that is relentless until satisfied — an explosion was Montessori's description of an inner phenomenon that causes an outer repetition of the exercise that was so exciting that it was termed "an explosion."

With each of the manifestations leading to explosions, the guide has feedback as to where in the developmental sequence intense concentration takes place with a work freely chosen again and again and again.

Our feedback is based on our observations. For example, we decide, based on what we observe, when to present the Phonetic Object Box just when the child begins to have a new consciousness about the words he has written with the Movable Alphabet. It is often assumed that one can read instantaneously what one has written, but Montessorians who put writing before reading know it is usually six months before the child begins to realize what his words say as he begins to synthesize sounds. This observable occurrence indicates the timing of the next presentation, realizing the consolidation of the writing process and the maturation of the child's phonemic awareness. What makes the difference for the child is the *discovery* and accompanying pleasure by the child that he is able to read because of what he already has learned through each of the difficulties presented by the materials. The result of a discovery process based on an indirect preparation approach is the joy and total flow or explosion of the synthesis which is made by the child, assisted by the adult, and not imposed by the adult with the child merely trained to give the right reading response.

Keys

The child is an **explorer**, so much wanting to belong and to understand. Our role is to assist by giving just the **keys** for discovery. Although our shelves are quite full, the observation Montessori continued to follow was that less is more. It is more complex than thinking that it is not necessary to add more materials. It is actually detrimental to learning, as it causes the child confusion, or it slows down the process. The idea of a three-year cycle is significant here, in that the child experiences layer upon layer of learning. What is already known is visited again in a new way, from spoken language to writing the same words and then encountering these same words as the reading materials. The keys repeat the same elements throughout each level of exploration. The obvious delight in the repetition is observable when the child asks us to reread the same book again and again. The repetition is attracting. The keys are the right materials linked to the developmental phases of the child's self-motivated sequences and the child's intense repetitions and deep concentrations (manifested as explosions) moving from experience to the classification of experience.

For example, in flower arranging, or tending to the garden, the child is experiencing orally the names of different flowers, and also their parts. When she is shown the classified cards, she sees again in symbolic pictures, the flowers she has experienced many times, and can recall the words that correspond. She asks for additional names as she sees new images of exotic flowers beyond the Casa garden. When the child is writing with the movable alphabet, she has the ability to create a list of the flowers that she loves, and their parts. When she encounters the same pictures with labels to read, she delights in the new form of an already familiar experience. Here are the words written out that she embraces once again, almost tickled with their sameness, yet with her awareness that she can decipher their names yet again by this new method of reading. The

outcome is truly-consolidated concepts, known by the child in an integrated way that is learning for life. Isn't this a true love affair, to fall in love again and again with the same world, and all its facets, just seen with a new perspective, with deeper comprehension, with fuller commitment? Building on what is already known, also builds self-confidence so that learning includes engagement, focus and concentration.

SPOKEN LANGUAGE

When one speaks a language and that language surrounds the child, Montessori tells us that absorption is global. The child drinks in language all at once in her first months of life, and establishes her native tongue long before turning three. The child hears sounds before producing them. She understands the meaning of words before saying them. She understands word order before she speaks word order. She understands grammar structure in speech before any conscious thought about the "parts of speech" as the classification of spoken language. She talks and interacts with words, either with peers or adults, before she reads and writes. In fact, she must interact linguistically before she reads and writes. The conversing with others, hearing it, processing and expressing back is fundamental to the cognition required for reading and writing. Spoken language is the ultimate **indirect preparation** for literacy.

THE ADULT AS MATERIAL

The only material that all of us started with before we even took training was ourselves, and specifically our voices. What an instrument! As the infant is drawn to the mouth of the speaker, the child who comes to the Casa, still very close to her parents, attaches to the adult. The Guide is the material with the dynamic, vital, emotive, responsive, musical language of her mother tongue. How much more attractive than something on the shelf! So with precise language, with a sensitive ear attentive to what the child shares, the guide is the **key** material, using all the richness of the prepared environment. The **keys** are embodied in the environment, just needing our vocalization to provide "key occasions" for interactive speech. The presentations still use the Practical Life materials, still involve the Sensorial attributes, still include card materials for discussions and three-period lessons, but they can be as alive as songs and poems. And the result? The child feels them in her soul in the same way that she feels your smile. Language is in the air, like oxygen. And the children thrive on it. We see that this is so by all the explosions and signs of normalization. She shows her attachment to reality — the child links to the prepared environment by going around and naming materials in the classroom. She asks, "What's this?" She tells us, "This is ____." Her joy is evident, as we witness the exclamations of new names heard, or repetitions of the words and phrases applied to situations or physical occurrences in the indoor and outdoor environment. (She walks on the line and repeats the word "parallelogram" many times. She knocks on the door and asks, "Is the bathroom occupied?" She imitates the way we have counted the group by counting by two's.) She demonstrates her spontaneous love of following commands (obedience and spontaneous self discipline).

Some children are almost needing sound to be reintroduced as music and rhythm, so that it is sensorial only, nonverbal, attracting the ear to isolated points of consciousness...the unique sound that is isolated to be appreciated, rather than the cacophonous dissonance deafening the child's ears. And so we play listening games to help discriminate, while also eliminating those sounds that are superfluous. (ie. background noise).

SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH WRITING

The person who speaks well has the capacity to communicate, to engage with others, to connect, and so forth. A very different phenomenon is the ability to write. When one has the ability to express oneself in written form, the thought becomes concretized. A writer, seeing the words, may go through many stages of revision, rewriting, perfecting, editing, deleting, rewording until the

sentiment desired is truly expressed. I'd like to offer an example. Often times, when people are thinking about taking training, nervous about the career change or the commitment, I suggest that they write out the autobiographical essays on our application. This process helps clarify and sort out some of the confusion or hesitation, leading to decisions that could not be revealed through spoken dialogue alone. In other words, writing can offer another means of reflection and contemplation. Writing can help someone be definitive and certain.

What else does writing offer? Writing can be an opportunity for creative expression, whether factual or fiction, with colorful metaphors, alliteration, and vitality. When one wishes to research and to compile information, writing is the system of storage and retrieval. Writing records the moment and makes it live for an eternity. Writing captures emotions; it finds pathways to wonder. Writing enhances experience; and takes all of us toward the transcendent. Writing expands thought, which can only result in growth. Each style makes an individual statement. But when we start with the child, we take a very simple route so that she has the possibility to express herself in written form. She begins with the Movable Alphabet, and, as she is ready, she uses paper and pencil as it is much more expedient, and she now has the ability to represent her words in an attractive manner.

The child has hopefully experienced adults' writing, where thank you notes, sympathy cards, and letters of correspondence are part of daily living. If this is not so, than our prepared environment needs even more to be a place where the child can see and experience the beauty of written expression on paper. Our society has changed a great deal. Penmanship used to be beautiful. Calligraphy was an art form known by many. Stationery stores were abundant. Presently, it is common for many to use computers, which is modeling writing, but lacks the character of handwriting that is unique to each personality. Handwriting has become mechanized. Montessori respected the significance of writing as a sign of intelligence expressed. Anna Maccheroni agreed:

What a difference between writing a story or a book and reading it. Some people can read a book in a day. To write it not a day but months, perhaps years, are needed. To write is to enter into the events real or invented to choose the most appropriate words. It is the work of an expert. Children at the age of five enter into this kind of superior activity, just enter. The explosion of writing through the 'inner way' so that the mind is never depressed, marks the beginning of this new epoch in the child's life. (AMI Communications, "Learning to write by the Montessori Method", p. 16)

The child already knows how to speak, so the Sound Games are entertaining to a small group of young children as they bring back the fairly recent recollections of sounds. Just two years earlier, it was the sounds that were practiced again and again, prior to the first intentional words that were spoken. The games have an appealing rhythm or beat, as one sound is emphasized. The children become conscious of each of the component sounds, having already mastered the whole, and now playing with the parts.

The child, fluent in speech, is offered a written symbol (Sandpaper Letter) to represent a sound often spoken. To see what *mmm* looks like, is engaging; the child's eye is caught instead of his ear. To have the opportunity to feel *mmm*, is yet another discovery; this symbol can be traced so that the movement of it can be experienced. The child can carry, hold, feel, manipulate something that previously was only a sound!

INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DICTATION OF STORIES

Parallel to, and sometimes preceding the movable alphabet story writing, oral stories dictated by the child to the adult, thus transcribed, build upon the child's experience with telling stories in Spoken Language. The child realizes that he can compose, even if someone else records.

Through this activity, his confidence grows, and so does his memory and logical sequence of thought.

A. “Whales” by Jeremy Kimble

Whales are big. Whales can be bigger than a dinosaur. Whales eat something called krill that look like little shrimp. They suck in a whole big glob of water and the water comes out of the baleen but the krill stays in. Whales have little bristles up on their baleen. When it gets real warm, it goes to Antarctica where it is really cold. If it's time to go, then the baby that just got born has to go with its mom.

[There's ships with people on it and they kill whales but I'm pretty sure whales don't like that. Whales used to be for beds and they could be used for nail polish and lipstick and perfumes. They could be used for cribs and dresses and buttons and corsets and brushes and walking sticks and chairs and combs and ropes.]

The flukes help them swim 'cause they go up and down and push the whale. The dorsal fin helps the whale to balance and if it didn't have a dorsal fin it will go tipping over. A humpback whale is one whale that has a dorsal fin and that's how it got its name. Whales like to splash because it's fun and because barnacles like little clams stick on to the whale and they feel ticklish.

Comparing to this baby whale a person baby would be a lot smaller than a baby whale. A baby whale and a baby person they both have umbilical cords. The thing that's different is that a mommy whale or else a daddy whale bites the umbilical cord off and on a person the umbilical cord gets cut off with a scissors –snip snip snip. The lady [female] is going to have a baby so she has to go somewhere where it's really warm. First his flukes come out. She or he gets pushed out by her mama. It learns how to swim and it opens its eyes and it quickly closes them because it just came out of her mama's body and because he came into a new world and it was brighter than inside the uterus. A shark could kill a baby whale to eat it because it likes to eat it, so the adults keep the baby in the middle so it doesn't get caught, because it's hard to see. Whales live in dark places.

Whales like to splash because it's fun and because barnacles like little clams stick on to the whale and they feel ticklish.

A whale whistles or else he clicks. The whale doesn't see or smell well so it clicks and if there's food by him then the clicking sound goes around and back to him again. Comparing to a humpback whale, it's as big as a bus. A whale is black. Whales could live in oceans and seas.

B. “Flowers” by Anne Timmerman

Leaves are falling off the trees in fall. We plant bulbs in the fall. We water them. After we water them, we put them in a dark place. The bulbs get sharper and sharper on the top. We sprinkle them until they get big. Plants need water and dirt and fertilizer and the sun to grow. The bulb keeps growing until spring. Buds come from the bulbs. They bloom. The flower's stamens fall off after they grow a long time. The pistil is fertilized by the bees. The bees step on the pistils. Pollen goes on the bee's feet from the stamens and after that the bee flies inside the flower. You can plant new plants from the seeds. We get new seeds from the pistils.

The child can now fluently play the last Sound Game, hearing each sound from first to last in a word, and knows many symbols. To be shown a box with all the familiar symbols (Movable Alphabet) with corresponding colors to the Sandpaper Letters, where letters can be retrieved to represent sounds so that the child can make words, is yet another

discovery. The child starts to communicate in this new manner, talking through symbols. Like a game, the child is able to tell the adult about the world without vocalizing anything, but just by moving and reaching, laying out the letters to express his thoughts.

[Here delegates looked at a slide offering an example with the Movable Alphabet and the child's list of favorite foods.] Note the rapport between the child and the adult, the building of confidence, the movement that engages the child, the personal interest list rather than using objects or cards. The child has the means to express her own thoughts, using the environment to obtain ideas, including classifications / themes. A child was working with his guide, and she was dictating random 3-letter phonetic words. She was called away, so I went over to assist. One word that he had made was "bat." I asked him if that was the mammal. He told me it was for playing baseball. His eyes lit up, and it was clear that he had a great love for the sport. I asked him what sounds he heard in the word "baseball." He was hesitant at first, not realizing that he had the skills necessary to make a long, multisyllabic word. Within minutes, he had made 14 words related to the sport, and with great delight. I quickly became extraneous.

The child follows the same progression that he did with his speech, starting with single words making lists from favorite themes, and utilizing words/names from all the opportunities he has had with the enrichment of vocabulary. *[In the slide of the child's Halloween Candy, we can see the child's application of phonograms, and the duplicate words due to the child's not reading yet.]* Due to the child's close affinity with food, writing ingredients, shopping lists, favorite meals, etc. is always inspired. Soon the child's words multiply, and the result is phrases such as:

- A. Answers to questions: What is X doing? Where is the Pink Tower?
- B. Names of sensorial materials (binomial cube, square-based pyramid)
- C. Class list
- D. Types of birds (redwinged blackbird, redtailed hawk, ruby throated hummingbird)
- E. Types of trees (sugar maple, pin oak, Japanese maple)
- F. Favorite desserts (chocolate mousse, raspberry cheesecake, crème brulee, rice pudding, hot fudge sundae)
- G. Beverages (peppermint tea, cranberry juice, strawberry milk shake, hot chocolate, shirley temple)

The progression naturally continues with sentences that are stimulated by:

- A. Questions and Answers
- B. Riddles ("Who Am I?")
- C. Jokes

And then paragraphs are made, some of which are almost haiku or other forms of creative writing. Recipes are often created and show the child's emergent reasoning mind, as she describes ingredients and the sequence in which they are used.

Remember all the indirect preparations of the Practical Life and Sensorial materials, and finally the Metal Insets. Dr. Montessori said that there were three signs to determine the child's readiness for writing: 1) lines drawn straight and parallel in filling in the insets; 2) recognition of Sandpaper Letters when traced with one's eyes closed; and, 3) the sureness and ease in composing words with the movable alphabet, due to knowing the symbols for sounds. (*Discovery of the Child*, 1967 Fides Publisher, p. 243.) For many children, there is a spontaneous fluidity of writing at the point in time when given a pencil. The child has ideas, thoughts, feelings, facts, rules, dreams, worries and wishes to express, and is unencumbered by the process. She moves from sentences to paragraphs.

Here is an example of a class Joke Book, showing the new acquisition of humor, as the child creates a play on words:

Q: *What do you get when you drop a triangular prism in the bath tub?*

A: *You get a wetangular prism.*

Because language is a powerful means of expression, this continues in a written form. Sentiments are conveyed of gratitude in this letter written by a child to Maria Montessori:

Miss Maria Montessori

Thank you for all of the materials that you made.

Love Samuel

Many examples show how the child is connected to the human family through the acquisition of written language. He writes an **apology**. (In this example, one child felt excluded from the others, and was very sad:

Dear Rebecca,

I do not want you to be, up, set so, do, you want to do, sum, thing with me this.

after, noon. Evri wun loves you, I will have a surpris, for you.

Love, Alix

Writing also is a means to record data. Children delight in factual diaries, where significant events in their daily lives are arousing their attention. In one Casa, the children maintained a class book recording the life cycle of an amaryllis.

Parts of a Leaf by Aaron Ruiz

(Note "through which", "leaf-like", and the personal comments as inserted conversation.)

The lamina is two things, I don't know the first one, but the other one is the green tissue of the plant. The veins are tiny tubes through which the water and food flow and if you put too much water in the plant, it will flood the veins. The petiole is the part of the leaf that holds the plant up to catch the sun and rain. Now let's go to the last page the stipules are small leaf-like growths at the bottom of the plant usually on each side. Bye, it's time to go.

Here is a story about **Woodland Indians** inspired by a children's book entitled, A River Ran Wild by Lynne Cherry.

The Eastern Woodland Indians lived in the woods. They lived in Villages. They knew how to sap and make it into syrup. They trap beavers and caught the wild turkey and fished in clear rivers. The people lived in villages. Their long-houses were covered with bark. Often they built strong stockades. The Woodland Indians traded with the French until the English came and had a war. They washed their clothes in the streams and rivers and the rivers were filled with fish and every part of a tree was useful to Indians.

And of course personal diaries capture the child's most intimate accounts of daily life, both factual and fictional. **School** by Clare:

I like to do metal insets a lot. I like the colors of the metal insets. I like to read to Miss Bricker. The book I like is called "Seasons." I like doing Phonograms with (wif) pens. I like work with Nicole. She and I like doing addition a lot of days. I like

do maps with Sharon. I like Michelle. I like do the birds cards by myself. I like rollin mats. I like to go in to music. I like Miss Bricker. I like Misa. I like Hannah. I like _____. I like Steve. I like Jed. I like everything.

READING

It seems that reading is valued as the hallmark of literacy in our culture. Parents and Administrators place high regard on this acquisition, and so children too absorb the culture of reading, if the environment has provided continuous models. There is a great diversity in home environments including families with various degrees of illiteracy, either without the ability to read or at best to the reading only of headlines, street signs, cleaning or cooking instructions, directions, manuals, or short news articles. Our society defines literacy as the ability to read at a fourth grade level. Here are some frightening statistics:

- *Reading apathy is apparent by 3rd and 4th grade. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (which Jim Trelease describes as the report card for the U.S.), 90% of students did not read a book or story recently.*
- *68% of adults reported TV watching as the #1 pleasurable pastime, even over friends or vacation.*
- *44% of adults do not read a book in the course of a year.*
- *54% of 7th graders cannot explain the meaning of a passage that is three paragraphs in length.*
- *60% of drop outs are functionally illiterate.*
- *85% of juvenile offenders have reading difficulties.*
- *60% of the prison population are illiterate.*

A principle to consider is, "What you love, the children will love." Research shows an enormous correlation between the experience of hearing another read literature aloud and one's likelihood of becoming a lifetime reader. To become one who chooses to read, is our goal, not just having the know-how. To experience pleasure and education of the heart as well as the head, is a wondrous gift offered through the world of literature. Studies that look to later academic success in school site the amount of time spent listening to interesting stories as the most powerful predictor. Children who grow up hearing books read aloud have acquired an affinity to the patterns of words, and are able to create mental images from the word-symbols alone which fosters anticipation, analysis, reasoning, imagination and the ability to ponder or contemplate. Reading aloud is suggested even when there is life in utero, with hopes that this continues throughout infancy, if not for life.

Throughout the school years, teachers and parents must read aloud to [children] them, always from quality literature, and always literature at a slightly higher language level than the child can handle independently. Hearing more advanced language structures as contained in quality literature prepares the ear, as it were, to feel at home with non-ordinary speech. It helps the child learn what is called, book language, and to develop a sense of story. A frame of reference about how stories are written and the patterns of books and language are developed from hearing literature read to them. They begin to recognize 'Once upon a time' or 'happily ever after'...It helps to internalize book language and the context of the sentence, and the

story provides verification of the child's ability to predict. ("Whole Books and Beginning Reading," Mary Maher Boehnlein, NAMTA Journal, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall-Winter 1990)

Children who hear adults laughing out loud while reading, or who see the intense concentration by the reader, are called to this activity, to imitate at first holding the book even upside down, but intrigued by the power of words, curious about the world of reading. Our role is to nurture this desire and to protect the child from any pressure to read.

Each of the reasons to read should help us to evaluate what enters the Casa environment. It should help us in our observations, looking for the intimate encounter that is possible when a child makes the choice to read. We can protect the sanctity of this act by ensuring that children are not "required" to read daily, but instead are enticed and enthralled with reading. We can make sure that we are not giving books that reduce the activity to the decoding of sounds alone, without any kind of inspiration or intellectual intrigue. The difference between the act of decoding, without real meaning or pleasure and total reading is similar to the comparison of *produce* (intentional play on words) in the hothouse, with a forced premature outcome, to that which is vine-ripened naturally; the flavour, the taste, etc. is totally different.

This is why we do not use sets of phonetic reading series, with its stilted language, which is discordant with child's absorbed patterns of language up to present. (*The following three examples are from* Mary Boehnlein, pp. 63-65, "Whole Books and Beginning Reading" NAMTA Journal, Fall/Winter 1990, No. 15.):

- *"The lack of complexity of language in basals and phonetic readers has two disadvantages; it makes comprehension much more difficult because the language is often unnatural, and it is an insult to the great work the child has accomplished in absorbing a rich language..."* Bruno Bettelheim says that what children read should be worthy of the effort they put into learning. *"The acquisition of skills, including the ability to read, becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life."* (p.4, The Uses of Enchantment, 1987)
- *"Only real books make real readers,"* says Charlotte Huck [Literature as the content of Reading Theory into Practice, 16(5), 363-370, 1977].

She further explains that they want stories of their own and of other persons, real stories where something happens to believable characters. Basal readers for beginning readers are not quality literature. You can read some basal reader stories backwards and not know that you have done so. But you can't read quality literature backwards and have it make any sense.... The joy of reading does not have to be delayed until the child has mastered symbol-sound relationships. In fact, for most children the overemphasis on this aspect of reading is the cause of failure in reading. If we do not make clear to children that reading is a meaning-getting process, rather than a grunt and groan process, the task becomes doubly hard. The first reading book we give children should be something the child wants to read and something the child can read with some ease and success. Books that have strong personal meaning are learned best, according to Huck. ...the greatest value of using literature ...is that children become hooked on books. They have a chance to become engrossed in an entire book. They may reread favorite books or favorite parts of a well loved book. This will help them become lifetime readers. ... Literature has the power to influence lives. Much of what a child learns in school, says Huck, is concerned with knowing; literature is concerned with feeling. It educates the heart as well as the head.

- Chukovsky, the Russian poet, tells us that the goal of the storyteller “...consists of fostering in the child, at whatever cost, compassion and humanness — this miraculous ability of man, to be disturbed by another being’s misfortunes, to feel joy about another being’s happiness, to experience another’s fate as your own’.” (Kornei Chukovsky, 1963, From two to Five. Trans. By Miriam Morton)

In the Casa, the experience of reading begins with the child making the connection that the synthesized sounds of words have meaning. With great delight, yet almost disbelief, the child is encouraged to know our thoughts through the guessing game of the **Phonetic Object Box**. “I am thinking of one of these objects. Do you know which one it is?” The emphasis is on figuring out what the other is thinking, rather than decoding the sounds, yet the process involves attaching sounds to symbols, fusing them, and producing a word. The word “reading” is avoided at this point, as we encourage the child to use the skills that are already familiar. (In fact, many children do not really believe they are reading until they read a book. It is as though the bound text validates the experience, even though the child has had many experiences with phonetic reading, adding on phonograms and puzzle words, and then the Reading Classification materials and Function of Word exercises.) “I am going to write you a message.” The child begins this process seeing cursive letters being formed, and comfortably announces each sound as the pencil flows from letter to letter. The child is invited to say each sound as it is written, even though the first sound is the identifying clue. The idea of deciphering what is in another’s mind without the thoughts being spoken is yet another way, a new way, to communicate. This is a phenomenal discovery. It is as though he has discovered a secret message just for him. The words Montessori used to describe this phenomenon were notable: she talked about the child being “aroused” and an “interest enkindled” whereby a deep stirring occurs within the child. This so much more grand, noble and worthwhile than decoding or “attacking” of words, and we should settle for nothing short of this. Again, to quote Anna Maccheroni:

More than once Dr. Montessori liked to remember when she was writing for those first children. She was writing a word and round her they were watching her hand, joyfully guessing the word...then the next word...then the whole sentence. One would say they were snatching word after word from under her hand. Try to enter in such a spirit of activity. You can do the same. Maria Montessori has left a method. She has not kept it as a secret, she has given it to us. And believe me when I say that, while a group of children was ‘guessing’, not only that group but the whole class was feeling a kind of uplifting peace. Even the youngest children, whatever they may be doing, feel the peace of ordered activity.

From Maria Montessori (The Discovery of the Child, p.251):

I was greatly surprised to see that the children, after they had learned how to understand the written cards, refused to take the toys and waste their time in playing and making those friendly gestures to their little companions. Instead, with a kind of insatiable desire they preferred to take out the cards one after the other and read them all. I watched them, trying to fathom the riddle of their minds. After I had thought about this for some time, the thought struck me that through some human instinct children would rather acquire knowledge than be engaged in senseless play, and I reflected on the grandeur of the human mind.

We have been looking at the spiraling continuum of language development. Every time the child has a new experience, in this case it is with reading, the influence is evident in the child’s speech and writing. It is a reciprocal interactive dynamic interrelationship. Writing may show new attention to accurate spelling with the applied knowledge of puzzle words and phonograms. It may include a new fascination with a particular part of speech. As an example, a child who had recently experienced the Detective Adjective Game wrote a letter to Santa Claus. She included a beaded bracelet that she made for Mrs. Claus, with a message that said, “This is for your beautiful

happy lucky wife.” We notice the effect in the new vocabulary, the punctuation, spelling, content or ideas, the sentence structure, and the style of expression.

Reading also leads to more reading, as many children discover that one idea is intriguing, and different books will offer additional information. Children can spend time reading the dictionary, even, as they discover the written form of the definition game, or they search for root words and the possible prefixes or suffixes. As with the child’s first intentional spoken words branching out into a fully developed expansive explosion of speech, we witness the same pattern in reading. From the first sounding-out to the full immersion into the world of books, the child discovers the richness of total reading. He finds himself travelling back in time, into the future, out into space and deep into the sea or earth, flooded by emotions ranging from admiration and respect, to compassion, curiosity and intrigue.

...the children came into relationship with books. It began with a really thrilling event. A child came to school full of excitement, hiding in his hand a crumpled piece of paper, and confided to a friend, ‘Guess what’s in this piece of paper.’ ‘There’s nothing; it’s a torn bit of paper.’ ‘No, there’s a story...’ A story in it? This at once drew an interested crowd. The child had picked up the paper from a rubbish heap. And he began to read, to read the story. Then at last they grasped the significance of books, and after this, the books went like hot cakes. (Maria Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, p. 153)

We celebrate the point of arrival, when it is hard to put a book down before it is finished, and there is a sense of completion, yet disappointment, when the final chapter has been read. An engaged or captivated reader is able to recognize a good author in that the writing leaves us wanting more.

The child is given aid on the path to total reading. From the building of vocabulary to the exploration of word order and eventually to the discovery of the different components of the sentence and how they may relate to each other C at first as simple as subject and predicate and then “accessorized” or embellished by adding adverbial extensions, indirect object, attributes and appositives C the child is offered a sensorial gradation of experiences that continue to build off what he knows. The questions help sort out much more meaning, as one interprets who, what, when, where, why, and so forth. The child’s reading stimulates thought as to how order affects meaning. As a result of the Reading Analysis materials and his previous work with transposing the Function of Words, he is likely to analyze whatever he reads with more thought. He is encouraged to read sentences that increase dramatically in length, finding them interesting because they are personalized and relevant to him. His writing will also show the use of more components, and the deliberate use of many clauses to specify or clarify the meaning of his thought.

Facts give new thoughts, new realizations, expanded knowledge. One begins to realize that the more one knows, the more there is to know. Learning is open-ended, unlimited. One could not possibly exhaust all that there is to explore in a lifetime. The enticement of a library begins, and calls to each of us to find out more, to crave further inquiry, to search for deeper understanding, fuller comprehension and wider horizons to encounter, appreciate and investigate.

LITERATURE

Although we are limited in time, I cannot help but mention a few points about serving the child’s intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual facets through the offering of a rich library. Books should be carefully selected.

Pleasure / Appreciation of Style

Well-written text can offer us pleasure. Alliteration, colorful imagery, the rhythm, the flavor and temperature of words can be delightful. One can read for the enjoyment of the expression as well as the appreciation of the new vocabulary. Some authors have the ability to bring tears to our eyes as we experience compassion, fear, empathy, joy and other emotions as though we knew the subjects personally, whether they are human or not.

Fiction allows us to enter fully into the lives of other human beings. Characters become more real than people we live with daily, because we're allowed to eavesdrop on their souls. A great novel is a kind of conversion experience. We come away from it changed...wiser, more compassionate, shook to the roots, haunted, humored, hopeful ...We are lead to think about ourselves. (A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children, Katherine Paterson, Plume/Penguin, 1995, pp. 68-69.)

Beauty

Books should have grace. This means that they should be elegant, or that they have beauty of form. The wording should be so beautiful that one appreciates the song that is created.

Poetry

Poetry is also eloquent imagery for the child's ear. Words in varied combinations create detailed impressions for the child, as a new way to perceive or express already known concepts. Rhymes are fun, and studies show a relationship between rhyming and reading. (A "red flag" for dyslexia is the inability to rhyme.) Children have a natural affinity for rhythm and rhyme due to how similar they are to the beating of their mothers' hearts. Many books are organized thematically, so that one can find poetry about a specific kind of animal or about plants, about seasons and celebrations, about activities such as fishing or cooking, and so on. Stories can be told about a person in rhyme form. **Haiku** in its simplicity attracts the child, and often stimulates his or her writing in the same pattern with some of the most profound truths. In the book, Bosho and the Fox, a fictional tale about this famous writer, revision after revision is necessary to perfect one's writing.

Seeds of Culture

As **biographies** are chosen for the child to read, the selection should include people who have contributed to the well-being of the planet. There are many wonderful people throughout history, from all different geographic origins, who have made the world better because of their inventions and discoveries. When we think of offering keys to the first plane child, we should have representations that help the child enter the pathway to culture. The leaders and teachers have been people who have developed machines, medicines, music, art, mathematics and so on. These inventions have made it possible for us to have a better life, with more harmony, equilibrium, safety, comfort, pleasure, efficiency and good health. The child reads about the brave, intelligent, creative human beings of all ages and all cultures who are his or her heroes. The child is thus offered opportunities to embrace other nations, races and religions without creating a special multicultural curriculum, but just by the richness naturally conveyed as we search for the books that focus on the accomplishments of humankind. The child feels gratitude and appreciation for the grandness of the human spirit, and the inspiration and encouragement to perhaps have a role to play in the future as well. The child who reads literature of this nature is inclined to feel awe and wonder. Rachel Carson, in her book The Sense of Wonder, states that each child should be granted

... a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile occupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength. (A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children, Katherine Paterson, Plume/Penguin, 1995, pp. 30-31.)

Katherine Paterson adds:

Children are born with a wholesome sense of curiosity... but wonder is more than curiosity. It demands an element of awe, a marveling that take time and wisdom to supply....If I want my children to develop an indestructible sense of wonder, then I must first develop my own...What I desire then, for myself and for my children is a face not estranged but expectant - a sense of wonder on the way to becoming both indestructible and contagious.

By observing and taking note of what calls to each child, we are able to help the child find out more about the world, so that he or she can become, belong, contribute, celebrate and embrace life as a gentle, holy spiritual gardener. Books can help sow the seeds of culture, so that the child can make a graceful passage from a formative state of being to an informed steward.

Conclusion

As Montessorians, our focus is on the total development of the child, so language development is in relationship to the spiritual, psychological and emotional, as well as the intellectual development. Physical development includes the coordination to control the writing instrument so as to have beautiful handwriting and the body language as part of verbal communication. The intellectual aspects necessary to aid each facet of language include the ability to construct ideas, concepts, abstractions, and insights to communicate both through oral and written language. The spiritual (emotional, psychological) unfolding of the child includes the qualities of confidence in one's own abilities and worth, and sensitivity and compassion for others C both necessary for respectful communication. All that we do must be mindful of the child's task, which is to become a well-adapted human being. In this first plane of development, the child is developing character and personality, forming an identity that is balanced and healthy so that she can grow into the responsibility of acting with kindness and steadfastness devoted to her own cosmic contribution. This challenges us to look at the unfolding of language in stages, rather than the teaching of a subject or as mechanics alone.

"The child's one hope lies in his interpreter. Here is someone who will unlock the garden of discovery to which the world has shut the door." (Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, p.133)

By guiding through enticement rather than the traditional instructional mode, the child takes off in the world of signs, ideals, and moral precepts, preparing the foundation for imagination and culture. Montessori writes in The Formation of Man:

The five-year old child is cultured not because he possesses written language, but because he is intelligent and will have learnt many things. In fact, our children at six years of age already possess much and varied knowledge in biology, geography, mathematics, etc.

The child embraces the world, and has the means to express this joy in all facets of language. The child has the capacity to experience this phenomenal journey, share it with others through spoken and written language, and appreciate as well the journeys of others by their own accounts because of his desire and ability to read.

As practitioners, you have daily observations of each of your children. Try to hold the image of each child in your heart, so that you are able to offer to him the keys for development. Remember what it means to be a guide, rather than a teacher, and remember that who you serve is the maker of the future. "The child is the hope and the promise, *our* hope and *our* promise, for a better humankind." This is our belief. With the realization that we only touch the child briefly in his/her

journey of growth as she develops as a caring, compassionate, generous, responsible, independent, self-directed, joyous human being, remember that language is a means of expression of the personality. Your role is to nurture the love affair between the child and the environment.

*The success of these results is closely connected with the delicate intervention of the one who guides the children in their development. It is necessary for the teacher to **guide** the child without letting him feel her presence too much, so that she may be always ready to supply the desired help, but may never be the obstacle between the child and his experience.*

A lesson in the ordinary use of the word cools the child's enthusiasm for the knowledge of things, just as it would cool the enthusiasm of adults. To keep alive that enthusiasm is the secret of real guidance. (...) Then we shall notice that the child has a personality which he is seeking to expand; he has initiative, he chooses his own work, persists in it, changes it according to his inner needs; he does not shirk effort, he rather goes in search of it, and with great joy overcomes obstacles within his capacity. He is sociable to the extent of wanting to share with every one his successes, his discoveries, and his little triumphs. There is therefore no need of intervention. "Wait while observing." That is the motto for the educator. (...)

*Our intervention in this marvelous process is **indirect**; we are here to offer to this life, which came into the world by itself, the **means** necessary for its development, and having done that we must await this development with respect. Let us leave the life **free** to develop within the limits of the good, and let us observe this inner life developing. This is the whole of our mission.*

These are the words of Maria Montessori, nearly a century old, and still relevant in the guiding of our work. (Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook, "Freedom," pp.131-134, New York: Schocken Books, 1965)