

## Reflection and Review of the 2013 A.M.I. Refresher Course

*By Matthew Simberg*

If you research the definition of spirituality, you will find that there is no definitive definition that is universally agreed upon. However, upon reading Mario Montessori's "The Human Tendencies and Montessori Education," he says that the Montessori Method will never fail because it is 'to help the development of the child and help the child to adapt himself to the conditions of his present (page 14).' How does one do this? Ultimately, one must make a conscious decision to observe and be aware. When making the choice to be aware, you are making a conscious choice to empower yourself. Deciding to empower yourself is deciding to align your 'self' with spirit or spirituality. If you have never thought of this before then mentally experiment with the possibility that you are a spiritual being having a human experience. Try to imagine that you are not just a human being having random spiritual experiences. Furthermore, if you are acting as if you are a spiritual being, then you will want to empower yourself, which leads to a responsibility to give the tools to the children that they need to empower themselves.

With all of that said let's use a working hypothesis. For our purpose at least, spirituality or being spiritual can mean to be aware. If we can agree on this then we can say that to be aware would mean that we also want to empower our self. Finally, to be spiritual is to work on being aware enough to empower ourselves and if possible give tools to those around us, particularly, our students. It is their choice to use the tools or to not use them. Being able to accept this can be very humbling.

At the 2013 AMI refresher course in Tampa Bay, Florida the elementary workshop was entitled Principles of The Prepared Environment Supports Cosmic Education. The adult, child and environment are a trinity that needs to be considered as one

thing. Alison Awes, the director of elementary training at the Montessori Training Center of Minnesota asks to consider three questions on a regular basis. The first question is "Does this work/idea support the natural development of the child? Secondly, Alison asks, "Does this work/idea help the child to think for themselves?" Thirdly, "Does this work/idea help the child to develop independence in both action and thought?"

These are very thoughtful questions to consider throughout the day in the classroom and also at home with our own children. In order to do these questions justice it is important to have a clear understanding of the characteristics and tendencies of the elementary age child. Dictionary.com defines characteristic as being or pertaining to, constituting, or indicating the character or peculiar quality of a person or thing; typical; distinctive: Red and gold are characteristics of the color autumn. Not limited to but in particular for our purposes the elementary characteristics are displayed before they are even aware of what they are. Meanwhile, dictionary.com goes on to define tendency as a natural or prevailing disposition to move, proceed, or act in some direction or toward some point, end or result: the tendency of falling bodies towards the earth. So, elementary aged children have natural characteristics and tendencies that are inherent in them which need to be nurtured at this stage in their life. Montessori identified these tendencies. While I am unclear as to whether or not Allison intended for the last one that I will mention to be part of Maria Montessori's list, I find that it is important to include either way.

First there is a natural tendency to have **order** both internally and externally. The elementary aged child's sense of order looks different than the years before him/her or after him/her. The internal order is where their imagination is forming they are gathering their thoughts and reasoning. Their external order is a bit messier than what you see when a child is 3-6 years old. They are not as concerned with a little mess here or there. However, modeling order in the classroom is important for them. It helps them to feel secure. If a child is working and concentrating, their area may be a little messy. However, let it be, as long

as materials are not being damaged and they are engaged.

The second tendency is to **orient**. Being oriented to their new classroom is so important. They want to know where things are and what their freedoms and responsibilities are. It is so important that the children have an area that belongs to them. There should be a space that is theirs which gives them an attachment to the classroom. Furthermore, the child has a desire to be oriented with the world. Geography, practical life, and grace and courtesy are so important at this age. They need to learn how to behave and interact in the world so they may be successful interdependent contributing members to society.

The third tendency is the desire to **work and manipulate**. They want to work and it is important to give them the perception that work is a good thing. Dictionary.com defines work as activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result. Work does not have to have the negative connotation associated with it that we as adults have adapted. In fact, in Mario M. Montessori's book "The Human Tendencies and Montessori Education," he says that an adult might be at work and claim to be so tired at the end of the day. Yet, he/she comes home has dinner and goes in another room and works on a hobby. If this person were truly tired they would go to sleep. Maria Montessori noted that when you do what you love, work nurtures the spirit. She observed children that would work on something for hours and seem to have even more energy than when they started. We should model this for the children.

The fourth tendency is to **repeat**. It is here that the child wants to repeat a task over and over again. The intent is often to master the task at hand. Sometimes you will find a child repeats an activity even after they have mastered it for the sheer enjoyment of it. However, it is here that the guide must make a judgment through careful observation. Is this work continuing to serve an inner need of the child or is there a sort of deviation occurring that the director or directress needs to redirect?



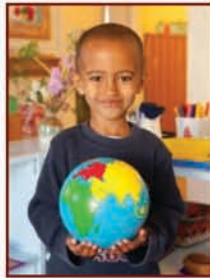


The fifth tendency is **exactness and perfection**. Doing something right brings satisfaction to the child and the adult. Presentations should be done with care for the child to model. They want to do it right. The child will work, manipulate materials, and repeat until they feel a satisfaction of exactness and perfection. It will serve the guide well to keep the purpose of what that they are teaching in mind when giving presentations in order to help the child better succeed in fulfilling the tendency of exactness and perfection.

The sixth tendency is **explore**. The child needs to explore within the classroom and with the materials. Sometimes they come up with things that we as guides have not thought of ourselves. Do not be afraid to let the child deviate sometimes. Something beautiful could come out of it. Also, the child needs to explore outside of the classroom as much as possible. They need to go to museums, supermarkets, libraries, and experience public transportation. Exploration at this age outside of the classroom with an adult is so important. Allow your children to explore outside of the classroom often.

The seventh tendency is to **abstract**. Most of us that went to public school learn abstraction and memorization. This is difficult. Especially when you consider the opportunity the child has in a Montessori classroom. It is here that they get to manipulate with their hands and then abstract the information to communicate it verbally or on paper. This leads to a great understanding. Giving the child the chance to abstract the information from their work is such a valuable gift.

The eighth tendency is to **communicate**. The elementary child gets a lot of language in the Montessori classroom. They receive it through storytelling and conversations from the guide. The guide offers the origins and meanings of words when giving lessons as well. At this stage, the child may manipulate letters to make words



and sentences, learn about sentence structure and create written as well as oral stories. The child of the second plane also loves to communicate in a social way. This is important for several reasons; however it is important that the guide uses good judgment as to how long they allow that to go on.

The ninth tendency is to build the **intellect**. In building the intellect, the elementary child is beginning to reason at a more abstract level and really able to use their imagination. They can project into the future and imagine what they want to do that day, next year or five years down the road. There is a desire to know things and to ask why.

Allison also spoke about love. The 2nd plane child has a desire and ability to love. They can care for themselves and the family and friends around them. Upon learning about people from other places that are far away, they can have love for them too. The child can also love his or her environment. This love for the environment gives the child the desire to keep it beautiful.

As I reflected on my experience at the refresher course and began to think about these tendencies, I started to think more deeply about the adult in the classroom. I thought more about the concept of self-realization and how this is what we want for the children as well as ourselves. Furthermore, if we are not working on ourselves constantly, we cannot expect to help the children to help themselves to do the same.

A Montessori teacher's career is truly a journey that can lead towards self-realization. Dictionary.com states that self-realization is the fulfillment by oneself of the possibilities of one's character or personality. The characteristics and tendencies of the child are also inherent in us either as being more developed or more deficient. Looking at ourselves is part of the work which will contribute to our ability to best serve the child.



We should keep in mind and understand one important concept. The children in our classroom are our mirror. As guides, that is the title of our great story or lesson. There are several keys to understanding this great story that is not told to us but is unfolded before us through our experience with the children. We must practice the art of observation, being aware of our environment and all that is a part of it, being mindful, and patience.

Dictionary.com defines observation as an act or instance of viewing or noting a fact or occurrence for some scientific or other special purpose. As guides, we are trained to be masterful observers. We do our best to not attach our own prejudices or judgments to what we see. Remember to observe something for what it is not what we think it is.

Awareness is defined by dictionary.com as informed; alert; knowledgeable; sophisticated. The guide has a duty to practice awareness. There must be a progress of awareness of oneself, the students and the prepared environment. Development of awareness encompasses all within and without.

Mindfulness is said to be a synonym of awareness. Yet, I look at being mindful as helping us to be more aware. To be mindful is to be conscious. Practicing mindfulness is practicing being present. To be mindful in the classroom is to be present with the children. This can be a challenge. However, when we can do this we realize how much more of a challenge the classroom is when we do not do it.

Patience helps us to have compassion for the children and our selves. Being patient helps us to succeed with observing, being aware and mindful. It gives us the opportunity to forgive ourselves when we have one of those days. Utilizing patience is the quality guides need to practice in order to endure and persevere when faced with that which is reflected to us by the children or that which we reflect for the children.