



## Montessori Letters

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**SUMMARY** *This piece compiles archival and ethnographic data to illuminate the triumphs and tensions of an alternative approach to teaching and learning. In reading research-based creative letters, which are written from the perspectives of the ethnographer and Montessori founders, teachers, and students, readers are encouraged to reconsider what it means, and what it takes, to educate for humanity. [creative nonfiction, Montessori education, reflexivity, comparative education, ethnography]*

### The Ethnographer

The child who concentrates is immensely happy; he ignores his neighbors or the visitors circulating about him. For the time being his spirit is like that of a hermit in the desert: a new consciousness has been born in him, that of his own individuality. When he comes out of his concentration, he seems to perceive the world anew as a boundless field for fresh discoveries. He also becomes aware of his classmates in whom he takes an affectionate interest. Love awakens in him for people and for things. He comes friendly to everyone, ready to admire all that is beautiful. The spiritual process is plain: he detaches himself from the world in order to attain the power to unite himself within it. To admire the vastness of a panorama, do we not leave the town? Seen from an airplane, the earth is better disclosed to our eyes. So it is with the human spirit. To exist and mix with our fellow men we must sometimes retire into solitude and acquire strength; only then do we look with love on the creatures who are our fellows. The saint in solitude prepares himself to view with wisdom and justice those social necessities which remain unknown to the masses of men. It is the preparation made in the desert that prepares the great mission of love and peace.

—Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

Dear Whitney,

Take care. You have good reason to admire the Montessori educational system. The below letters demonstrate the respect that is afforded and the independence that is fostered in the children, all via a system that expects and enables more than the combined efforts of its grown-ups. Much can be learned, and much of you can heal in seeking out and understanding that which was lacking in your own youthful experience. And yet.

Do not go so far as to romanticize this system. To put it on a pedestal because it offers what a younger you so desperately wanted: unflagging faith in a child and her potential.

Consider this: Maria Montessori designed an educational approach that would protect her students from the unnecessary controls and disruptions of adults. She succeeded, in part, because she protected the Montessori *system* as much as her approach protected her students. But is this system so protected, are these children so sheltered, as to render them incapable of transitioning smoothly to more mainstream environments? Much of daily life frustrates one's efforts to concentrate, or work independently at one's own pace, *especially* if that person is a child. Upon leaving Montessori, will these students be unable or unwilling to scale the high walls that Maria built and descend to engage with and thrive in schools and systems and a life that is as frenetic as it is inclusive?

Consider this, too: What happens when a student does not thrive in a Montessori environment? This system does not pretend to work for everyone. Should you blame it? You, the budding educational scholar who stubbornly advocates for public schools, those schools that are mandated to teach and care for *every and any* student? You hail from a family that did not align itself with Montessori's philosophy. Montessori was not accessible to you, nor is it accessible to children and families that cannot or do not adapt to its structures, its freedoms, its environments and expectations. How do you reconcile the moral code that you stand on with the fact that Montessori is unflinchingly unavailable for some?

What should you do, then? Should you turn your back on Montessori and henceforth only learn in and from traditional public schools, which, because they must be good for *everyone*, are often good for no one?

I repeat: please take care. You should not let past hurts color your glasses rose, nor should you let your present concerns redirect your scholarly gaze. Persist in your study of Montessori, but complicate it with more perspectives and with more scrutiny around who exists and thrives in this space and who does not.

Remember this system's imperfections even as you assure others of its promise. The Montessori approach does not solve all your mysteries—be they professional or personal—but it does show the possibility, the necessity, of a more dignified way of teaching and learning.

~your key informant

## The Founders<sup>1</sup>

Children themselves have furnished us with practical, positive, and tested norms for constructing an educational system in which their own choices are a guiding principle and their natural vivacity prevents mistakes.

—Maria Montessori [Founder President of Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)],<sup>2</sup> *The Secret of Childhood*

An innovator of Maria Montessori's stature needs neither the assent of the world to every particle of her thought nor the defense of zealots who panic at any form of criticism directed against her.

—Nancy McCormick Rambusch [Founder President of American Montessori Society (AMS)], *Learning How to Learn*

Madame, there is no such thing as a Montessori 'type' school; there is only a Montessori school.

—Mario Montessori [General Director of AMI], to Nancy McCormick Rambusch

January 1, 1949

Caro Mario,

It is a new year, my son. Though I feel as old as the year feels new, I begin 1949 with hope. In the none-too-distant past, our world was ravaged by two monstrous wars. It horrified and grieved me to see such rampant terror, hatred, and brutality. Yet an ever-expanding group of people now more clearly understand to whom we must turn for a brighter future. When we want to infuse new ideas, to modify or better the habits and customs of a people, to breathe new vigor into its national traits, we must use the child as our vehicle; for little can be accomplished with adults.

Mario, I write you this letter in secret, to be read only after I am departed from this world. These past few years have been a flurry of travel, writing, lecturing, and training. In light of these demands, I fear that the fundamental principles upon which our approach is based can, at times, grow hazy. May this letter serve as a gentle but urgent reminder of all that you must safeguard. It is only you, Mario, who can maintain the integrity of our great work.

You must always place immense faith in children, in their natural tendencies to work and to learn with great energy. Let the center of gravity forever be located in the child.

To ensure such faith in, such focus on, her students, a Montessori teacher must serve as a loving directress. She must prepare the environment so that it affords each child liberty within limits; where students have great choice and autonomy, but no choice, once made, would harm a child, his learning, or those who learn alongside him. Only when the child, the directress, and the prepared environment are in place is it possible to unveil the child's natural personality.

For these children to perfect that which nature provided them, they need protection and a peaceful, orderly setting. The directress must exercise restraint with her words, she must strive to never interrupt the children at work, and instead to do everything in her capacity to protect that concentration which is in a fledgling, fragile state.

Our methods offer children a prescribed way of doing something, which, though not the only possible way, works every time if followed precisely. This meticulous and repeated manner of doing something permits hand and mind to become linked. Students come to internalize, and eventually incarnate, the virtues that will preserve peace and order.

My dear son, let me remind you of our humble beginnings. Our first school opened on January 6, 1907. As yet I had no special system of instruction. I had nothing more than fifty extremely poor, ragged, and obviously timid children, many of whom were weeping. Now, after the passage of time, and the increased coherence of our approach, the diffusion of our schools throughout the world has shown the universality of child conversions, be a child impoverished or pampered, from Italy or India.

Remove the obstacles in these children's way, Mario, so that the future can be brighter than the present. Use our methods to guard that spiritual fire within man, to keep his real nature unspoiled and to set it free from the oppressive and degrading yoke of society.

Con tanto amore,  
Mamma Maria

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18 West Putnam Road  
Greenwich, Conn.  
November 19, 1962

Mr. Mario Montessori  
Association Montessori Internationale  
Koninginneweg 161  
Amsterdam, Holland

Dear Mr. Montessori,

I wish to frankly address some of the tensions between us, which I imagine are as apparent to you as they are to me.

First, permit me to remind you of the important ways in which AMI and AMS—you and I—are similar:

Like you and the late Dr. Maria Montessori, I believe that the love of children must be coupled with true respect for them, if working with them is to free their inner potentialities. Like you, I recognize that self-learning is the key to that inner discipline so necessary for anyone who will educate himself to the hour of his death. Instead of taking charge of her students' learning, a teacher should provide an environment where a child can focus, and choose his work and execute it to his own satisfaction. With a suitable environment, a humble teacher, and material objects adapted to their needs, children are capable of extraordinary things.

Now I must remind you of the fundamental ways in which we differ:

Forgive me, but Dr. Montessori, who was so critical of the annihilating effects of authoritarian childrearing, utilized that same authoritarian model in transmitting her message. She considered the receivers of her message as blank slates upon which she would write the salient word. Her model of diffusion only works if one has uncritical disciples committed to the "work." I am not, and have not, such a disciple.

Dr. Montessori's approach to education will only be seriously discussed in America's educational conversations if its contextualization comes from the recipients, not the AMI messenger. To be effective, American Montessori

education needs to be a plurality of possibilities. We must value parents as critical collaborators, and our teachers must be bright, university-educated professionals, who are trained in practical knowledge instead of simply being initiated into an exceedingly closed culture.

Perhaps a reminder of the ways in which our contexts differ will increase your sympathy for my attempts to adapt Montessori education to my country's complex culture, thereby facilitating more widespread acceptance.

Dr. Montessori wanted everything—support, learning materials, and teacher trainings and certifications—to flow through AMI, through you. This is understandable; her work transpired on a continent that was decimated by war. The Montessori approach—and the system that sustains it—were her solution to the bleak reality in front of her. For her solution to succeed in that context, she needed to shield and control it.

My time and place are different. The United States is currently bursting with expertise, ingenuity, and promise. Kennedy is our leader and the air buzzes with possibility. In this context, we must extend the freedom that we afford our students to those adults who guide them. It is no longer sensible to have a hierarchical system controlling educational environments that Dr. Montessori, herself, structured to be horizontal.

Americans, with their deep-seated eclectic penchant, will not necessarily accept uncritically the ideas of Montessori, nor ought they. My country's eclecticism balks at your didactic precision. Our fragmentation resists much of your order and cohesion. Our inclusion defies your exclusion and protection.

I'm not asking to change that which Dr. Montessori created, I am simply asking to relate it to American expectations. AMS needs a diffusion model that is based on partnership, that is not one of transmission alone, but of transaction. This, sir, would be much more congruent with Dr. Montessori's educational philosophy.

Sincerely,

Nancy McCormick Rambusch

President, American Montessori Society

### The Teachers<sup>3</sup>

**Researcher:** With those prospective parent meetings, what are some of those indicators that tell you the family may be an inappropriate match for the school?

**Head of School:** One of the major ones is if a parent is here and only wants their kids here through preschool because they're going to go to public kindergarten. We'll not take them. . . And I think that's one of our major points of discussion, and it's more major now than it used to be, because in the past three years, the public school now has a full day kindergarten, whereas before it was half day, so now they have full day, and it's free. . . We do a lot to try to help parents understand that when children are learning, before the age of five it's done subconsciously, and all of those subconscious things come to the surface during that five-year-old year. The children will lose some of the things that they've picked up, it won't have time to be cemented in their brains. And one of the main things is when you have a mixed-age classroom, the children form a community, the oldest children help the youngest children. . . and the little ones so look forward to being the leaders. And they know that it's the five-year-olds who are doing the most complicated and the most intriguing work, and they can't wait till they're

up to that work. And a child who's taken out before that doesn't have that chance to give back to the community. . . So if we have a parent, which we do right now, one parent who has two children in our school, and they decided that they want their oldest child, who is four now, will be five next year, to be in— they picked the school of choice that they want, and the public school has told them, 'if you put them in kindergarten, you have a spot, but if you wait till first grade, probably you won't have a spot' so they're taking their child out, which, I had to explain to them means that when their toddler is ready to go into the primary room, we will not enroll them because if you take a child out, then we don't want the siblings either. Harsh, but it's too important.

—Interview, March 21, 2016

**Teacher, Recounting Anecdote to Researcher:** A child moved up from the primary room and he was not reading quite phonetically, so when he got into the elementary room, very quickly he just realized that he could read. . . within a couple months of being in first grade, he exploded into reading. So all he wanted to do was read. So I would pull him into presentations, and he would be so polite. He would sit there, he would listen, and then I'd say 'and you can do the follow-up work.' And he would say 'I'll do it later, I'm going to go back and read.' And so I had this struggle where, do I force him to put his book away? And do these math things? I can see that he's not practicing, so he's not moving ahead, necessarily, but I was like, I'm just going to bite my tongue, I'm going to keep inviting him to presentations, exposing him to things, but we'll see what happens. So, he read and read and read and read. Second grade he came back, and in the first couple of days he said, 'ok, [teacher], last year I did a lot of reading, and I realized that I don't know all the math that my friends know, so what shall we do?' and I said 'well let's start with this' and so then he himself got himself on track. . . And so, which goes to show why, one reason our program is a three-year program, because had he left our school— and this is one thing I had to be sure— trust that his parents were going to bring him back, had he left our school after first grade, he would not have known how to do complex addition problems. But my faith was in the fact that children want to know, if there's not imposition put on them, their natural instinct is to want to know as much about everything that they can know.

—Interview, March 14, 2016

from: Emma Jackson <ejackson@privatemontessorischool.org>

date: Sat, Apr 22, 2017 at 3:26 PM

to: Ryann McPierce <rmcpierce@publicmontessorischool.org>

subject: **Potential Fifth Year Student?**

Hey friend,

How was your spring break? Carrie and I were bummed you couldn't make it to lunch. We ate pupusas and marveled at the fact that it's been five years since she trained you and me.

Something came up in staff meeting at school this past Wednesday, and I'd love to pick your brain about it, maybe over coffee next weekend? You know attrition is an issue here at Grand Oaks, probably even more so than at your school. One of the reasons is we're private, and so families pull their kids out at kindergarten or 6th grade so they can get into public elementary or middle schools. (I get it. . . no tuition is appealing, but argh! You know as well as I do that if the child leaves before their third year in that class, all the foundational work of the first two years never gets cemented!)

Anyway, my director of ed told me that a family is interested in transitioning their fourth grade child to Grand Oaks next year, so he'd be in my class for his fifth and sixth years. Administration says it's my call, and I said that I need to meet the child before making any decisions.

I'm already conflicted, Ry, because my classroom is too small. I'll only have 25 students next year, and so the whole class would benefit from more children. BUT. I'm worried that I won't be able to serve this child in the way that he needs.

Remember the child I told you about, Adia, who transferred to our school last September? She's fourth year, and so we decided to admit her—even though she had no previous Montessori experience—because upper elementary is when students start to transfer their work from concrete materials to paper, anyway, and she would have the full three-year cycle in my classroom. Adia has made a lot of progress, but she needed me a LOT those first several months. She's used to relying on a teacher, and lessons...only now is she really starting to understand she can choose her own work.

I worry that this new child won't have the habits that are first developed in Montessori primary classrooms, and so he'll need support that I can't necessarily give. He may not SEE the choices before him, the peers who can help him, the materials that will enable him to teach himself. He may only SEE me, and will thus be sorely disappointed at one to two lessons a week from a teacher who cannot possibly direct every step of every student's individualized learning! A teacher who would not do so, even if she could, as that's the biggest disservice of all...to be continued over coffee (I hope!).

Em

Emma Jackson

M.Ed., Montessori Elementary Education (Ages 6–12)

Loyola University Maryland

from: Ryann McPierce <rmmpierce@publicmontessorischool.org>

date: Mon, Apr 24, 2017 at 7:18 AM

to: Emma Jackson <ejackson@privatemontessorischool.org>

subject: Re: **Potential Fifth Year Student?**

Hey Em,

Of *course* I'll have coffee with you this weekend. I'm sorry I missed you and Carrie, though sometimes I feel as if the adaptations I make in/for public Montessori are anathema to her. When will the day come where there are trainers who have lived the reality of public Montessori???

While we're deliberating for you, might we vent for me? Tis standardized testing season, after all. Public Montessori teachers know what to expect by now, which I guess is a small comfort. Kindergarten students score high, it being their third year in the primary class. But for my children in the lower elementary class, I can expect middling scores in first grade, and then a *huge* dip in second because of the level of abstraction that the tests expect.



We know that scores bounce back in fourth and fifth grade, when the level of abstraction on the tests is in line with the work done in upper elementary, but that doesn't help me as a lower el teacher, does it?!

What do I do, Em? You *know* I'm thrilled to be in a school that offers free Montessori education to those children who could benefit from it the most. This is how the method started and it's where the method needs to go. But there are days when I struggle to be flexible enough to meet the demands of the public sector. *Then* there are days when I struggle to forgive myself if I've met those external expectations *so* much that I strayed from the core of Montessori.

How much time do I spend teaching second grade children how to do 127 tens and 16 ones on paper, for example? They can do this ten times over with the golden beads or the stamp game. They *know* it conceptually, so how much time to spend preparing them to do it on paper for a test, even though the algorithm won't advance their understanding just yet?

Maybe I'm cranky because spring break wasn't long enough, but I'm sick of all the extra *thinking* (and doubting) that's required in the public sector. To keep this school open, the teachers constantly have to decide what's non-negotiable Montessori, what tested skills are actually worth spending time on, and what should simply be fudged.

It's a worthy battle, Em, I cannot think of a worthier one. But I'm exhausted.

Ryann McPierce

Lower Elementary Lead Teacher (Ages 6–9)

Carver Montessori Public School

## The Children<sup>4</sup>

**Researcher:** Reflecting back on your Montessori experiences, evaluate the ways in which Montessori schooling shaped you, if at all?

**Adult Participant:** I think in that sort of wandering around my learning sense. That's played out in different ways. In [public] elementary school, that was accidental, and I was getting chastised for it because I just assumed I could do what I wanted, when I wanted. By the time I got to [public] high school, I think it was a little bit more reactionary, I was still hanging onto "mm, I know a better way of doing this, so I'm just gonna do it." Interestingly, I sort of got away with it, in a way that I think then informs the way that I am now. Just this sense of knowing my own best learning practices better than my teachers did.

—Interview, November 9, 2015

**Researcher:** So you already told me about your schedule last year at your Montessori school. What does a typical day at your public school here look like?

**Child Participant:** *Always* after lunch we have math, like there's never any other subject after lunch other than math.

—Interview, November 1, 2015



September 6, 2016

TO: Michelle

♥Adia

Dear Michelle,

How was your first day of school? Who did you play with? Am I still your best friend even though I don't go to Twin Lakes now?! Today was my first day at Grand Oaks Montessori. Mom was right. It is really really different.

Ms. Stacey walked me to my class. I saw some little kids walking down the hall. They were carrying blue baskets full of THEIR OWN DIAPERS! My preschool teachers never made me do that, did yours? I wonder if those kids put the diapers on all by themselves. GROSS!

Ms. Emma told the class my name when everyone was sitting on a big green rug. Some of the kids in my class are a lot older than me and you, and A LOT taller. This boy Isaac sat next to me. He wears glasses and smells like eggs. He whispered that he would help me with my work when I needed. Ms. Emma says I can help kids too, if I know how to do something and they don't. I hope that happens soon. I don't want to always be the only one who needs help!

This classroom is so crazy. I can sit wherever I want! Even on the floor!! I can work on the rug OR the purple pillows in the reading corner OR the group tables that are next to a bunch of materials. Wherever! I didn't even have to look at Ms. Emma the whole time. Isn't that cool?

Today I wrote and drew a story about YOU! When I was drawing your picture, a girl named Jasmine asked me to be her friend. The name of her best friend is Angela, but Angela left Grand Oaks last year. So I said sure. DON'T WORRY! Mom says you and me can still see each other on weekends.

Jasmine said that next year AND the year after I would for sure be in the same class as her! AND with Ms. Emma! I hated it when we changed classes every year. Remember when you weren't in the same class as me in first grade? And remember how Ms. Hall didn't know that I hate to do math in front of other kids, but I love spelling big words out loud? Maybe this school is going to be OK. I just wish you were here.

I have to go. Mom and dad said that I can help cook now, even when we use the stove. Ms. Stacey told them that was a good idea. I miss you soooooo much!

XOXO Adia

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**TOP SECRET!!!!!!!!!!!!**

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TO: Michelle  
 ♥Adia

September 7, 2016

Dear Michelle,

Today was good and bad. Sometimes I REALLY wanted to be back at Twin Lakes but mom says Montessori is better for me because I get to try things all by myself and make lots of decisions.

First, I got out my journal. I looked for a big ☺ at the top of yesterday's page. Nothing! I asked Jasmine why Ms. Emma didn't write or draw anything. Jasmine told me that she probably doesn't want to destroy our work by writing all over it. I like getting a ☺ because mom puts it on the fridge.

After I finished my story, I decided to go find state map cards, because yesterday I saw a boy named Max working with those. But Max was working with them again today, so I walked over to him and took some of the cards. Max told me that wasn't good behavior, and so did some other kids around us. They told me that Max and me could share the materials or I could pick something else to do until he was done. I said I wanted to share because he got the cards yesterday. Max said OK. Ok, you can't tell your mom or dad this, but Ms. Emma wasn't even there with us! I don't think she's going to call my mom or send me to Ms. Stacey. I wish she had been there. I like her better than Max.

Hugs, Adia

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9/6/2016

Dear Jasmine,

I want to come back to Grand Oaks Montessori!!! ☹ My mom saw me crying when she picked me up today. She looked really sad but she can't send me and Lucia to Grand Oaks anymore. She said it is too much money and she thinks Lucia isn't learning math fast enough to be ready for middle school. I miss you and Max and Nandi. I miss being in the same class as my big sister so I can see her whenever I want.

Mr. Lee yelled at me lots today. First, he yelled because I left to go to the bathroom during writing when he was talking to the whole class. He came running after me and said I have to have a hall pass.

Then I got yelled at during math. Everyone has to do math after lunch everyday. Even if you don't feel like it! I liked doing math when I wanted at Grand Oaks. Ms. Emma never cared when I did it, as long as I would sometimes listen to her presentations with a few other kids. I was tired when we worked on math today. I didn't know how to do the fractions problem and there are no materials here to help me! So I started ripping up

pieces of paper to help me solve the problem but Mr. Lee said I was making a big mess and to much noise. I hate Mr. Lee.

I didn't move all day because I always stay at the same desk. It even has a nametag with my name on it! I think it will be my seat for all of fourth grade.

Write back soon,  
Your best friend Angela

9/7/2016

Dear Jasmine,

Today was better! I didn't get yelled at as much! Mr. Lee even liked something I did. When we got out our homework, he saw the binder I made at home last night. I made a section for each subject. Each section is a different color. He asked me if my mom made me do this. I said no. I wanted to do it because that way I won't lose things.

But Mr. Lee didn't like my math homework as much. I drew pictures on my worksheet to help me solve the problems last night. He thought that was pretty messy.

The schedule was the same today. I don't think it ever changes. We read for thirty minutes every morning all by ourselves. I'll read so many books this year!! Oh! Did I tell you that everyone in my class is the same age? There are no big kids around to help us, so Mr. Lee helps us a lot. He even tied my shoe at recess today! The teachers at Grand Oaks never tied my shoes, they would wait for me to try and try again. It was nice of Mr. Lee to help me! I had more time to play at the ball wall that way. Maybe I don't hate him.

Mom says I should get used to my new school because it is more like the schools I'll go to when I'm older. Maybe it's good that I'm here, that way middle school won't be so scary. Are you scared of middle school?

Write back!!!  
Your best friend Angela

### **Postscript**

Dear Whitney,

Take stock. You've studied Montessori education for over two years. You travelled to Connecticut for archival research. You interviewed current and former Montessori students, teachers, and leaders. You conducted four months of pilot research in a Montessori school last year, then moved out-of-state to become a part-time assistant, a participant observer, in another Montessori school for your dissertation fieldwork. Next year you will move again, this time to be a participant observer in a Canadian Montessori school. And yet.

Though this mountain of data fuels your conviction that this educational approach is the most respectful, the most empowering, and the most trusting you have encountered, you still see more questions than answers scribbled on post-it posters, cluttering the walls around your disheveled desk. It is precisely *because* this educational approach is so very humane that you continue dwell on these questions.

In reading about the origins of the Montessori method, and the tempestuous split between AMI and AMS, you wonder: *to ensure the freedom and creativity of children, must we restrict those things, in part, for adults?* Nancy wanted the Montessori system to extend some of the independence and choice it afforded children to its teachers. But is it necessary to prescribe and specify down to the very last material, the very last movement, because, through holding teachers constant, only then can we truly let children vary? Such logic did not fade with the deaths of Maria and her son; you heard it at a parent education event just the other day.

In discussing external pressures with Montessori teachers, you wonder: *when wanting the best for the most amount of students, must access and integrity be irrevocably at odds?* Is it more humane, more just, to assure children the most pure form of Montessori, but in doing so, turn some children away, and lose others too early because societal pressures and realities knock ever louder at the door? Or is it better to accept all children? And perhaps keep them for longer with the assurance of free education that is integrated in the public sector, but in doing so, offer children a version of Montessori that is necessarily distracted in its fight to keep up with external demands? Which is the more ill fated compromise?

Finally, though you asked this before, observing Montessori students makes you ask it again: *how will these children fare upon leaving Montessori schools and entering a society that chronically distrusts and disrespects its youth?* Is it ultimately a disservice to empower children, to recognize and hold them to their immense capabilities, if we are to then release them into a world that is not prepared to extend them such faith and dignity?

These questions and tensions are not easily resolved, and Montessorians can navigate them far better than you ever could. What is your role, then?

Only this. Tell your version of the Montessori tale in order to extend a mirror to society. By recounting what Montessori students can do, what they are expected to do, you shine a light on your audience's deficient assumptions around children's capabilities. Through descriptions of Montessori teachers' restraint, which may make many uncomfortable, you suggest that perhaps our constant control and intervention disrespects a child's active and able role in her learning, in the classroom, and in this world.

This is what you can do, dear Whitney, what you must do, to challenge the world to better receive these children once they have scaled those walls. Once they have returned from their preparations in the desert.

Whitney (your key informant)

## Notes

1. Letters in this section are based on the writings of Maria Montessori and Nancy McCormick Rambusch, as well as archival letters between Nancy McCormick Rambusch and Mario Montessori, Maria Montessori's son. Sources used include the following (in order that they shaped the text of this section): Maria Montessori 1995, *The Absorbent Mind*, Henry Holt and Company; Maria Montessori 1966, *The Secret of Childhood*, Fides Publisher, Inc.; Maria Montessori 2008, *The Montessori Method*, Wilder Publications, LLC.; Nancy M. Rambusch 1962, *Learning How to Learn: An American Approach to Montessori*, Helicon Press; Nancy M. Rambusch 1992, "Montessori's Flawed Diffusion Model: An American Montessori Diffusion Philosophy," *Princeton Center for Teacher Education*; Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline M. Cossentino 2006, "Establishing an American Montessori Movement: Another Look at the Early Years," *Montessori Life: A Publication of the American Montessori Society* 18. For specific page references drawn on, please contact the author at [whegseth@umich.edu](mailto:whegseth@umich.edu).

2. Two major Montessori organizations that are found in the United States are Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), and the American Montessori Society (AMS). AMI is considered the more classic approach, which adheres to the materials and method as outlined by Maria Montessori in her writings. From its outset, AMS aimed to adapt the Montessori approach to American culture. AMS differs from AMI in a few ways, namely regarding materials, teacher training, and prerequisites for teacher training. Due to these differences, Mario Montessori (AMI) and Nancy McCormick Rambusch (AMS) parted ways in 1963. Today, the two organizations enjoy a collegial relationship.

3. Letters in this section are based on interviews and observations of multiple AMI Montessori teachers and school leaders, who work in different schools and regions. Interviews were conducted after extended time in the field.

4. Letters in this section are based on interviews with two former Montessori students, as well as extensive observations in AMI public and private schools, and one observation in an AMS school.