

# What's the Difference? Best Practices and the Montessori Secondary Program

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**Quote from a college graduation announcement: “(Montessori) Secondary is where I learned how to learn, learned how to work with people, and how I wanted to live my life.”**

*This article is the result of years of study, both formal and informal; hundreds of hours of traditional and Montessori classroom observations; reading and digesting articles and books on secondary education (only a few of which are referenced), Montessori education, adolescent brain research, leadership, and best practice in education; and most enlightening of all, twenty years of probing conversation, queries, and new awareness developed with Penny Cichucki, Sheila Coad-Bernard, Betsy Coe, and Barb Scholtz – four of my closest colleagues and friends.*

One of the many things the five of us have noticed is that upon first observation, the Montessori secondary classroom may look like any wonderfully planned and orchestrated best teaching practice secondary classroom. For that reason, it makes sense that many Montessorians are unclear about what Montessori at the secondary level should look like. In an attempt to invite dialogue and conversation rather than creating a closed-ended definition, we have created a list we call “What Will I See in a Best Practice Secondary Classroom?” The sections following this list discuss ways in which Montessori at the secondary level is unique and different from the traditional classroom.

## What Will I See in a Best Practice Secondary Classroom?

- *Student-centered classroom* with a sense of community.
  - The classroom set-up is versatile so that students can work individually or in groups. Teachers teach in a variety of modes: whole class, small group and individual lessons (Feinstein, 2010).
- *Seminar* used as a tool for respect, listening skills, the development of insight and understanding, and a building block for community (Roberts & Billings, 1999).
  - Students in small or large group conversations reference text and respond to one another's comments.
- *Curriculum* developed by passionate teachers that encourages both convergent and divergent thinking (Zimmelman, Daniels, Hyde, 2005).
- *Multi-layered projects* that have differentiated assignments and allow for a variety of modes of learning.
- *Blocks of work time* that last for at least 1¾ hours. These blocks of time allow for collaborative projects and hands-on activities and are not intended for longer lectures.
- *Variety of instructional and assessment practices* including clear objectives, rubrics, and self-evaluation (O'Meara, 2010).
  - Students are engaged in projects that interweave subject areas. There is evidence of field studies and project work displayed in classrooms.
  - An observer may peek over the students' shoulders and notice interesting packets of project work they are engaged in.
- Student and teacher interactions that exhibit *courtesy and respect*.
- Focus on *service learning* with the support of instructional lessons.
  - Meaningful service work happens when students are prepared for the work of the heart.

Every authentic Montessori and best practice traditional classroom for the adolescent will exhibit these components.

## What makes it Montessori at the Adolescent Level?

Montessori philosophy and the spiraling curriculum for students through age twelve lay a strong framework for Montessori's later writings on Erdkinder (her concept of students living on the land and learning self-sufficiency). This system's approach to education is unique to Montessori and, at every level (3-6, 6-9, 9-12, middle school and high school), differentiates it from best practice for traditional settings. Because of this scaffolded approach, Montessorians understand that careful preparation of each teacher at each developmental level of education is essential to meet the needs of the child.

Secondary teachers are prepared in Montessori teacher education programs in many areas that build on Montessori practice for the younger child. This includes executive functioning, self-reflection, time management, the advanced application of the three period lesson, and eventually long term planning and implementation of projects. The immeasurable needs of the adolescent must also be addressed by the guidance of wisdom, compassion, and clarity on the part of the adult. Just as the adult creates a safe haven for the human infant's "absorbent mind," now the adult creates an environment for the social newborn in which the potential for self-construction and "valorization of the personality" is optimized. (This YouTube link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfGsQN1GII0&list=PLFB81B46845AB1919&index=4> shows two middle school programs in action.) The adolescent is the social infant, and as such is treated with great care and tenderness.

The following five broad categories discuss aspects that differentiate the Montessori secondary classroom from standard best practice.

### 1. The Third Plane of Development – Valorization of the Personality

In the Montessori secondary classroom, the environment for the adolescent is planned with the concept *Valorization of the Personality* in mind. Valorization is Montessori's term for the adolescent's process of becoming a strong and worthy person. Valorization comes gradually to the adolescent as she realizes she is useful and capable of effort. This is accomplished by the work of the mind, hands, and heart. It happens when adolescents have appropriate responsibilities and expectations and when they are able to experience the joy that comes from successfully meeting challenges. Character building occurs as the result of restitution when they have made poor decisions.

Just as the younger child is in a time of life to develop the characteristics of *normalization*, the adolescent is in a sensitive period for developing the qualities of *valorization*. Those qualities include *joy, selflessness, optimism, confidence, dignity, self-discipline, initiative, independence, helpfulness, good judgment, and the ability to work with others*. By keeping in mind these characteristics, teachers work with students to create an adolescent community that will enhance and encourage the development of valorization.

### 2. Developmental Themes, The Nobility of Work, Hope and Progression of the Human Spirit

Adolescents are engaged in hands-on work that connects the developmental themes and concepts learned in class. Here developmental theme means thematic curricula based on developmental characteristics of the adolescent. These themes help integrate the different subject areas and make the studies relevant to the life of the student. Whether these studies involve field work (studies and research that takes place outside the classroom), in-class research, or other class work, cleaning the school, or picking up trash, the adolescent learns that all work is noble.

Secondary teaching methods exemplify a Montessori staple – whole to part to whole learning. Just as with the younger child, Montessori curriculum has a big picture context intended to create meaning, pique the curiosity, and draw the adolescent into the work.

These big picture ideas and concepts studied in class reference the adolescent development theme (for example, *Balance, Energy, Interdependence*, etc) and are often linked to field studies. The adolescent work of the hands may involve building projects, like Habitat for Humanity, hiking and backpacking, and

other physical challenges and adventures that alternate with periods of rest and relaxation (Montessori, 1996).

The adolescent work of the hand is a receptive time for learning to use tools, work the land (in this case, often the school campus), and perform minor repairs and maintenance to buildings and equipment. Sometimes the work of the hand can help students develop skills for which they can be paid. The money students earn can be applied toward meaningful, practical expenses – like paying for their own school field studies, tuition, or another important financial obligation. This type of earning, saving and spending is a cycle that enhances the process of valorization and is not to be confused with saving for personal luxuries.

### **3. Cooperation and Community – Micro-Economies, and The Sensitive Period for Understanding Society**

It is integral to the Montessori method to de-emphasize competition and emphasize cooperation. This is one way in which to promote a sense of generosity and abundance rather than scarcity and an unhealthy anxiety. Activities and lessons are designed to encourage students to experience and understand, “Everybody does better when everybody does better.”

Multi-age classrooms are still important in secondary – for core subjects in middle school and for as many courses in high school as possible. Multi-age grouping is necessary for diversity, flexibility, and leadership opportunities, and is integral to Montessori classrooms of any age. Mixed ability classrooms require skill in differentiated instruction and support the well-being of each individual and the community of the school and are essential to all core courses, though often electives are offered for academically advanced or for students with learning challenges (Gamoran, 1992). At the same time, opportunities exist to pursue a student’s personal interests with opportunities for choice and research. While cooperation is emphasized, so must the possibility for encouraging an individual’s unique potential and curiosity. (O’Meara, 2010)

Sheila Coad-Bernard uses Life Skills classes for her middle schoolers to keep the ideas of cooperation and community central to discussions. Students reflect often on the gifts and responsibilities that come from being a member of their own middle school community and are increasingly able to extend this understanding with the question, “What is my connection to, and responsibility for, the world outside my school?”

### **4. Service Learning, Stewardship, and the Cosmos**

Another running theme in Montessori classrooms is the care of the environment. An observer will notice charts even in secondary classrooms for classroom maintenance and jobs. Everybody in a Montessori school feels responsible for the care of the environment.

Care of the environment sets the stage for the adolescent to develop responsibility. As responsibility is cultivated in adolescents, they begin to see themselves as more mature. Micro-economies are an important bridge to adulthood. While earning money for a worthwhile endeavor leads to valorization, so does any activity that encourages focus of attention and care. Given the particular sensitivities of the adolescent the chance to develop stewardship means service in action. That can mean care for the classroom, the school community, the land, the town or city. Service is an essential component to an adolescent program. We can see that the adolescent comes from the elementary program with a seed of responsibility to society, so the study of society is important and working to serve the society is also important at this time. It meets a great need of the adolescent to work with big ideas and issues in the world and with big hearts on service projects.

I recently listened to a high schooler tell about a moment in a field study when she had the overwhelming realization that she was just a small, small spec in the universe and simultaneously that she was an important part of something very big and wonderful. Her face was bright and her expression was full of joy as she recounted this story. She was clearly receptive to this moment in her life because of the work

she had done to serve others and the lessons in cosmic education that she had received from elementary through secondary school.

A Montessori education with cosmic education as a touchstone, and an adolescent program that features prepared and supervised service learning, holds the potential for several key values to be awakened in the child's inner spirit. Those include a sense of justice, the ability to challenge authority in a respectful manner, the value of hard work, the desire to have a low impact on the planet and to place a low value on materialism, the ability to empathize with all races and cultures and religions of the world, and the need to celebrate the differences in humanity (Montessori, 1992).

## **5. The Teacher in the Adolescent Classroom – A Passionate Guide for Deep Thinking, Respect, and The Dignity of Humans**

In addition to having a love for the adolescent and a passion for the subject area being taught, a Montessori adolescent teacher understands the Montessori elementary curriculum, not so that she can teach them like a trained elementary teacher, but enough to be able to refer to the child's previous learning and can make appropriate references and extrapolations for secondary instruction. It is a joy to witness the bright faces of 12-18 year olds when they are in a lesson that references the trinomial cube, the fraction materials, sentence analysis, or the Timeline of Life.

There are so many threads that weave into the secondary program from the Children's House and elementary program. One consistent observation of Montessori classrooms at any age is that student-teacher interactions exhibit courtesy and respect. This includes using soft voices in the classroom: teachers and students speak appropriately for the situation, a little more loudly when addressing the whole group and more softly when in small group.

From the youngest students to the oldest, Montessorians guide whole to part to whole learning. For the older student that means there is a big picture context intended to create meaning, pique the curiosity, draw the adolescent into the work, and create the relationship to other concepts and ideas. Montessori spoke of this as the essential principle of education. (Montessori, 1996)

Adolescents want to know, "Why are we studying this?" and the Montessori guide encourages her students to question and query. Discussions with peers, guided by a skillful seminar facilitator, create a lively and provocative quality that can give students a healthy sense of how to challenge and support diverse opinions and ideas (Roberts & Billings, 1999).

Montessori students are given the structure and tools to research, investigate and mediate. They are invited to approach issues at hand as problems to be solved and are taught the tools to solve them. So here interdisciplinary academics are presented not only to create meaning for content, but to encourage wonder, hopefulness, and deep thinking. They also create the opportunity to include the work of the heart and the hand.

Montessorians develop a skill in creating academic work that fosters a sense of hope and progression of the human spirit. This curriculum includes action in stewardship of the earth and humanity. All aspects of education now guide the adolescent toward respect for the nobility of all types of work and the dignity of humans – two essential components of a humane society.

### **Three Montessori Secondary School Teachers Tell Stories**

**Barb Scholtz:** *I was trained as a Paideia teacher and taught seminar for many years. My first year as a Montessori middle school teacher I wanted to incorporate some of the big ideas from cosmic education into my science class. My community classroom of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders had been studying the periodic table, parts of the atom, and history of atomic theory and I wanted to invite the students to take a deeper interest in these topics. I found two portions of two chapters from an out of print science reference book on atomic structure and chemical bonding and did my homework to prepare for the seminar.*

*As the time for the conversation approached, the students formed two circles and I sat between them to listen in, take notes, provide clarifying terms, and help as needed with probing questions. At one point I pulled out the atom board with its colored beads to help the students explore the concepts and to illustrate the text for those who were confused. The seminar began to develop a quality a teacher always hopes for – a life of its own. Ideas and concepts that had previously been memorized and struggled with were suddenly new, original to them, as if they were the first scientists to make the discoveries. I found great readings and my guidance helped set the stage, but it was their own thoughts and questions that drove the group's desire to know more in a way that could not have been handed to them in a traditional way.*

*The students posed big ideas and questions, but with an air of curiosity, not necessarily that there would be apparent answers. "Why do we generally believe what scientists tell us, but question what we learn from religion?", "Why do we believe what we learn at church and question that the scientists tell us?", "Do we have to have faith in order to believe in science?", "What is space?", "How do we even know space is really there?" Together we marveled at the capacity of human beings throughout time to observe phenomena, organize concepts, record data, create charts and graphs, and to try to help us understand the universe, our planet, ourselves. Who will have new insights? Where will new insights take us?*

*There is something different about seminars in a Montessori classroom. There's the potential to tap into a different quality that's been cultivated in Montessori students. They are curious. I can't underestimate the importance of the preparation of the students in Children's House and later in the elementary classroom. I know that made a huge difference. Even then, I don't think my middle school classroom would have become the vibrant community it was if I had not developed my own appreciation for the mystery, the big picture, and the wonder through my preparation as a Montessori teacher. And it took time for the Montessori-ness of my classroom to show up. Up until this point, I had had to go on faith that eventually the beauty of the Montessori method would unfold in my classroom, and it was that particular seminar that made me a believer in Montessori. It gave me confidence in my role as facilitator and guide, and it launched my journey to develop greater depth and direction for the rest of my years in the classroom.*

**Penny Cichucki:** *It was the first year we had used Joseph Campbell's Heroic Journey. The final event was a combination of "city challenges" as well as "outdoor adventures" culminating with a "counsel" of caring adults. For our students, who live in a suburban area outside of Chicago, going into the city of Chicago by train and navigating on their own, walking or using public transportation to get to several designated destinations and then back to the train station to catch the last train of the night back to familiar surroundings was a unique challenge. Some had been in the city many times, others quite infrequently, but all were certainly not in their comfort zone especially when they almost missed the train.*

*Upon arriving back in familiar territory they were faced with a new challenge. They were taken to a farm with several acres and had to sleep outside, overnight, with only a sleeping bag for warmth, no tent, no s'mores or any of the usual camping gear or food. Fortunately the weather cooperated and it was a clear night though a bit chilly. They slept outside watching stars and listening to the many sounds of the night. For some, who had camped frequently this was less of a challenge, although none had camped without a tent or adult company. For some who had never had such outdoor adventures, it was definitely a rather fearful experience. They had to be brave to make it through the night.*

*Early the next morning, they were greeted with a big breakfast and a gathering of mentors and parents. Each individual student met with a "counsel" of caring adults. (Their parents were not among the counsel.) The counsel had questions for them about the entire Heroic Journey experience. These young adolescents were so articulate and emotional about the challenges they had met and the pride they felt in having been brave enough to face and succeed in their personal journey to adulthood. At the end of the counsel each student was given a small pine tree to plant wherever they wished as a symbol of their new role in life.*

**Betsy Coe:** *I think reflective learning is important – allowing/honoring quiet think time and building upon comfort with quietness and stillness cultivated from Early Childhood classroom on. In hustle and bustle of today's world, practicing to continue to honor and experience the merits of taking time to think*

*and reflect remains invaluable. This involves learning dialogue skills at the high school level and incorporates practicing being comfortable with pauses, with quiet in order to reach deep into one's thinking as well as opening of heart space – cultivating empathy at a deep level.*

*One very bright, intelligent, logical thinking student I recall, new to Montessori as a sophomore voiced disdain one day during health time, a 25 minute time period continued from middle school to 'be with the self' reflect, take quiet walk, do Tai Chi, draw, etc. He was put-off by teachers asking him to refrain from using this time to read an assignment for a class that was due. "So I'm being told not to do my English assignment right now and just sit here and do nothing," in essence is what he said. "Yes, that is what we are asking."*

*The next year, this student as a junior, after more practice in learning to honor this "down time," selected Viktor Frankl to research in our TOK course and wrote at the end of the year of TOK:*

*To sum up what I have learned and my thoughts on TOK class, I chose to say "Blur the lines." ... There is, of course, a reason for the phrase I chose and the arrangement of the words on the paper. Throughout this class, I found myself seeing fewer barriers in my thoughts. What were once separated ideas in my mind at one time became a fusion. I started to view things as merging with each other. In part, this was because of many subtle similarities in what I was studying. I realize that many of the things humans distinguish and isolated (religion, philosophy, doctrines, systems of reasoning) are really quite similar. The "lines" or barriers, placed in my mind started to "blur." The boundaries began to dissolve.*

*I believe that this breaking of barriers is a good thing. Many of these lines have been placed in my mind by other peoples' perceptions and ideas, whether I am aware of it or not. This is natural and unavoidable, but I believe that when we can remove some of these lines, we can open our minds just a little bit more.*

*Upon blurring the lines, I felt I could see more connections between things (this sounds spiritual, but I am speaking on more empirical terms). Similar to systems thinking, the connections yield causes and effects I wouldn't normally think of. I previously saw two events or ideas as unrelated and mutually ineffective that I now view as inseparable and consequential to each other. My view has expanded ...*

*As a senior, this student, strong in science and math, has determined to conduct research on happiness and has already begun this search with collection of historical and present perceptions, in this culture and around the world, on how happiness might be measured or ascertained. His questions and curiosity multiply as his research goes deeper into the subject; he exhibits freedom and openness to think, to explore.*

### **Montessori – Moving Beyond Best Practice**

Montessori teaching extends best practice by creating a context for the academic work. This is not always easy to observe. Montessori knew that the adolescent needs the work of the hands to help her understand her power and the concrete effect she can have in the world. She needs the work of the heart so that the flowering of social justice can grow. The potential of these experiences is maximized when adolescents have the chance to work in a community of learners. The community does not need to be a large one, but living and working with a group in which they learn to practice accountability to a community is essential for the application of the valorization principles. All of the work during this period will shift the plea of the child in the period of normalization from "Help me to do it myself" to the plea of the adolescent in the period of valorization, "Help me to think for myself" (Montessori, 1996).

The Montessori adolescent environment provides opportunities for the student to experience academic challenges that open her mind to new ideas and ways of thinking beyond what is currently considered Best Practice in Education. Just as with every other level, creating a Montessori experience at the secondary level is only possible when teachers participate and complete a Montessori teacher education

program. Credentialed training programs lay the groundwork for the transformation of the teacher. This is the only way to learn, over time, to create a community of learners that extends a best practice classroom and makes it a Montessori Secondary program – one in which the qualities that are difficult to observe are palpably there.

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