

Pride and the Montessorian

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Maria Montessori cautioned Montessori practitioners to beware of pride. Here is her oft quoted statement.

Anger is the principle defect, but it is cloaked by pride which lends it a certain dignity that can even demand respect. (*Secret of Childhood*, p.151)

As I travel around the country conducting staff development sessions, parent night talks and classroom observations, I am struck by how often pride ensnares the Montessori practitioner.

While pride frequently manifests itself in the adult imposing his or her will on the child in daily activities

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in the prepared environment and also in toxic staff gossip and cliques, I have noticed pride increasingly encroaching into disturbing new areas. Many Montessorians now bring their personal views as well as advocacy for their causes into the prepared environment.

Most Montessorians hold passionate views on children, how the world should work, and how each one chooses to live a personal life. This is what brought most of us to Montessori in the first place. It is the kind of passion that can change the world, admirable and honorable indeed. Montessori herself spent her later years in advocacy of her global issues. However, there is a time and place for advocacy and I submit that subjective adult values are inappropriate for the Montessorian to impose on children, especially on those children who are in the period of the absorbent mind. Our role is to guide the child to his understanding of the world rather than to bend him to our understanding of it. Montessori said that teaching is a work of inhibition, a work of the will, which is difficult to follow. It does not matter which political values one holds, it is unprofessional to reveal them to the children, much less impose them on them.

Montessorians hold a powerful influence over the young child and Dr. Montessori cautions us to influence

with restraint and humility. Our quiet modeling is an effective component of the prepared environment whereas inserting adult advocacy there amounts to pride.

While there may be many examples of advocacy of various political leanings afflicting Montessori schools and all are equally inappropriate, here are a few that I have personally witnessed.

- entire school lobbies transformed into crepe-paper rainforests, implying that adult concerns about the rainforest are properly the concerns of the 3-year old;
- numerous line-times where Montessorians share with the little children how sad the **adult** feels that the polar bear, the native peoples, the panda bear are becoming extinct leaving the young child to feel bad too;
- political opinion couched as fact about abstract concepts such as global warming, pollution and trash imposed on children under six years old with admonitions that those children take personal political action;
- advertising personal political views, such as displaying political bumper stickers/political pins on the cars and person of Montessori adults;
- personal opinions couched as unbiased political discussion and fact, and then engaging in one-sided political statements, jokes, snide remarks and derision of the political opponent (and anyone who supports the opponent).

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What of the young child who (or more likely whose family) holds a minority political view at school on inauguration day with adults and children cheering and weeping with joy?

Maria Montessori said that “we must help the child to act for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit.” (*Education for a New World*, p. 69) The Montessori adult expressing personal opinion flies in the face of guiding the child to think for himself because at the early childhood level it is the Montessorian that the child imprints. Therefore, it is the Montessorian’s responsibility to remain professionally detached.

To be clear, children engaging in lively discussions on numerous topics occurs spontaneously in Montessori prepared environments at all levels and curriculum guided discussions indeed have their proper place

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starting at the elementary level. The elementary children would learn how to do the research, how to differentiate fact from opinion, how to question sources of information and how to challenge those who proffer an opinion as a fact. It could include classroom discussions and formal debates with rules in place to model for children how people explore the merits of opposing positions. The adult’s role in such discussions and debates as well as generally is as guide,

facilitator and touch-point for the child’s connection to the wider world. It is irrelevant to this work what the adult’s position is on an issue; indeed it is an obstacle to scientific inquiry of the phenomenon being observed, the child. There is no place here for adult pride.

Here is Montessori on the consequences of adult pride on the developing child.

The adult makes himself the touchstone of what is good and evil in the child. He is infallible, the model upon which the child must be molded. Any deviation on the child’s part from adult ways is regarded as an evil which the adult hastens to correct. An adult who acts in this way, even though he may be convinced that he is filled with zeal, love and a spirit of sacrifice on behalf of this child, unconsciously suppresses the development of the child’s own personality.

Secret of Childhood, p. 16

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