

My Montessori reading journey

My work took me away from Montessori and back again



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I recently read an article written by AMI Primary trainer Sarah Werner Andrews (“Refining our Practice as Montessori Teachers: Cultivating a Deeper Understanding of the Method, Ourselves, and the Child”, *NAMTA Journal*, Winter 2020) where she encourages us to “rediscover Montessori.”



She had been inspired by a 2010 presentation from Italian Montessori scholar Raniero Rengi that closed with this statement: “*To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori. Montessori is waiting for us.... In the future.*”

This is a description of my own experience as a teacher and struggling with my practices related to teaching of reading. My journey to refine my practice required patience, but brought me back to the genius of Dr. Montessori.

I have been working in a public

Montessori school since 2008, a challenging and rewarding situation. The demands of the public school, rooted in outcomes-based learning, can feel contradictory to the Montessori method. At times, my practice as a Montessori guide was thwarted, and I must admit I struggled with feeling that “Montessori is not enough” and fell into a cycle of trial and error with other methods, practices and learning tools. Reading instruction was no different, and the pendulum swing in the public sector added to a sense of fluctuation and seeking for strategy outside of the Montessori method.

I had always felt comfortable with the Montessori approach to reading and writing, which is rooted in language development—production of phonemes and a lot of what is now included under the term “the science of

introduce alphabetic symbols. Examples include the “I Spy Game,” rhyming objects or pictures, matching pictures or objects, and of course extensive vocabulary with a rich use of proper nomenclature. A child’s oral language skills are so beautifully addressed in the Montessori classrooms throughout all of our areas with beautiful cards, books and attractive lessons; all based in reality. Research has shown that strong oral language supports later literacy development.

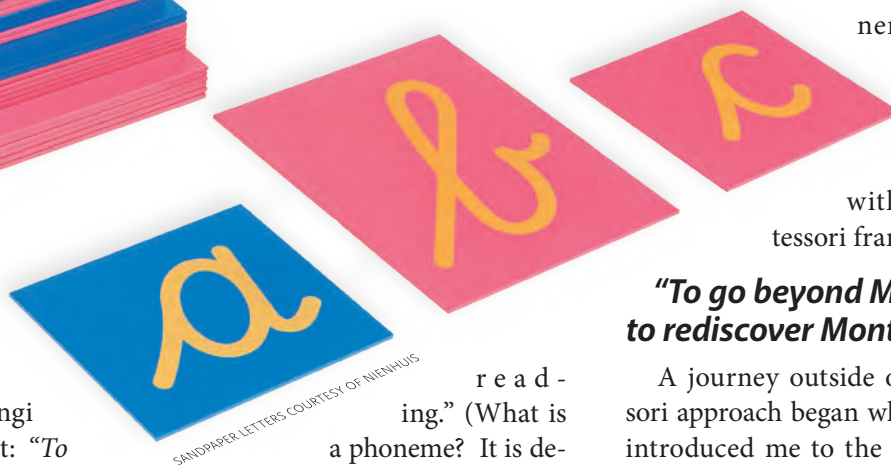
But the Montessori materials, however beautiful and developmentally appropriate, do not always provide a comprehensive path to fluent reading for each student. Data on fluent reading informs us that many students struggle in this area. We all want our young children to learn how to read, and the public school setting brings standards and outcomes that must be met in a timely manner. Thus, my search to improve ‘reading instruction’ within the Montessori framework began.

“To go beyond Montessori is to rediscover Montessori.”

A journey outside of the Montessori approach began when a colleague introduced me to the work of Diane McGuinness (*Why Our Children Can’t Read and What We Can Do About It* along with Miscese Gagen (*Right Track Reading*). Both authors write beautifully and extensively about the widespread problems of reading instruction, poor reading outcomes in our elementary schools, and problems

reading.” (What is a phoneme? It is defined as “the smallest unit of sound in speech.” For example, the word ‘cat’ contains the three phonemes /c/, /a/, /t/.)

The Montessori language lessons and our understanding of a sequence is a wonderful approach to the teaching of reading. The lessons include ‘pre-reading’ which encompasses many important concepts before we



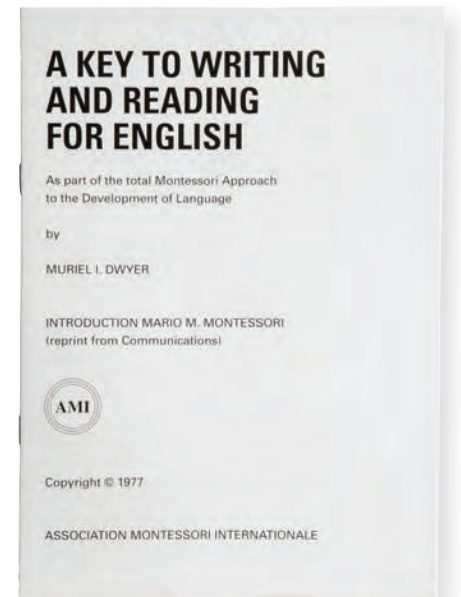
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with various teaching methods. They also offer clear, legitimate paths to offer instruction that is rooted in the phonetic reading instruction. I began to change my practice; shifting my teaching strategies based upon my reading and attempting to match the demands for “small group” instruction. I was conducting parent education sessions, and working to educate supervisors and decision makers in the district regarding the value, and urgency, of phonetic reading practice.

In the Summer of 2020, I enrolled in a course called *Sound-Write: First Rate Phonics*. This was a summer course and offered a deep and wonderful understanding of phonetic instruction called “linguistic phonics.” As I studied and read, it became clear that this was exactly what Dr. Montessori had

We in the Montessori classroom have the basic Sandpaper Letters, with the beautiful distinction of vowels and consonants, paired with the Green Sandpaper Letters to introduce digraphs, phonograms and alternative spellings.

As I continued in the course, the content brought my mind to *A Path for Exploration of Any Language*, Muriel Dwyer’s program also known as *A Key to Writing and Reading for English*. Muriel Dwyer outlines a program that aligns surprisingly well with the “new science of reading.” It was helpful for me to review the Dwyer approach for reading which included her understanding of the complexities of English which is partially phonetic, unlike Italian which was Dr. Montessori’s primary language:



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understood. The course is rooted in science and research pertaining to synthetic phonics; teaching the connection between phonemes and graphemes explicitly. This sounded to me very much like the Montessori Sandpaper Letters.

What was I learning? The same principles I had learned in my Montessori teacher training: “It is vital to train children, first, to hear individual sounds in spoken words.” (*The I Spy Game*). Then, “to map those sounds in words to their graphic representations.” (*The Movable Alphabet*). Researchers Eileen Ball and Benita Blachman had written in 1991, “developing an understanding of the link between the sounds of speech (phonemes) and the signs of print (letters or spellings) is the basic task facing the beginning reader and writer.”

- Spoken language (vocabulary, poems, fingerplays)
- Hearing the sounds of language and all sounds within words (I Spy, other sound games)
- Writing or encoding (Sandpaper Letters, Movable Alphabet, Metal Insets, Green Boards)
- Reading (phonetic word reading, puzzle words)
- Reading Classification (non-phonetic words, little books, Phonogram Folders, Phonogram Dictionary, Spelling, Function of Words, Word Study, Reading Analysis)

The link between spoken language and reading/writing development is there, as well as an important pre-reading period including a link between the graphic symbols (Sandpaper Letters again!) and the sounds that

each represent. Early Reading, Puzzle Words, and ultimately the complexities of the English language including all 44 sounds (Reading Folders) are all present.

Interestingly, I had been awe-struck with the idea of the Movable Alphabet when I undertook my Montessori training. My instructor, Sue, said “Montessori understood that writing precedes reading in natural development.” The idea was new to me, but it seemed logical, and it has since been confirmed many times over. Montessori understood, early on, that encoding and decoding are reciprocal processes.

Good reading instruction is based on understanding the sounds or phonemes we hear and utter. Words are built up from there—individual phonemes blended together in a specific manner. My learning curve reiterated the idea that reading and writing are done “one sound at a time.” Internationally recognized language researcher and writer Patricia Kuhl refers to young children as “linguistic geniuses.” Reading is a form of problem-solving, which has as its purpose

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communication. Reading and writing are social tools for getting things done. Research has shown, repeatedly, the close relationship between phoneme awareness training and learning to read and spell.

The course focused also upon the sensory motor experience as it relates to reading and writing. Maria Montessori puts it this way in *The Absorbent Mind*: “The hand is the instrument of man’s intelligence.” The course itself called for the children to learn to say the sounds aloud when writing and to form words physically by moving symbols. This tied in exactly to the beauty of the Movable Alphabet along with the importance of letter formation and the link between the hand and the idea that motor activity becomes transformed and internalized into mental operations.

I learned the value of more explicit instruction for some children. I learned that “reading” is in fact not natural for many young children, and direct instruction is important. Many children require support with phonemic awareness, letter formation, alphabetic principle, building words, reading words,

and a need for practice as he/she moves toward fluent reading. As Montessorian and BrainHealth Initiative faculty Julia Volkman says “practice makes permanent,” and practice with correct reading skills and exercises is vital.

My own journey through various proponents of phonetic instruction was valuable; it deepened my understanding of how children learn how to read. It empowered me to speak to all of the “whys” of what we use and the power behind each material on our language shelves. My journey also brought me back to the “genius” of the Montessori materials and sequence. Dr. Maria Montessori understood many components that manufactured curricula often neglect.

For a time, I had lost sight of the depth of the Montessori method and what it does offer. My school district, and the curriculum, began to change and swing towards a phonetic based approach. We began to understand the value of the Montessori lessons, but also a need for a deeper understanding that we may not reach each student within a prescribed time period. In my case, a Montessori classroom, coupled with

a deeper understanding, improved my practice as well as student outcomes. This is an important shift for all of the students including those in classrooms outside of our Montessori programs. The nation seems to be catching on to what Montessori knew all along.

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