

# VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

## Montessori, Imagination, and Young Children

Sarah Werner Andrews, AMI 3–6 Trainer

*“We often forget that the imagination is a force for the discovery of truth.”* Maria Montessori [1].

The emphasis on “play-based” curricula for early childhood education, contrasting with the reality-based experiences in Montessori environments, has led to misconceptions [2] summarised by this contemporary psychologist, “Although Montessori made important contributions to early childhood education and many of her ideas continue to be influential today, one of the major criticisms of her approach is the total focus on intellectual exercises and exclusion of imaginary play.” [3] She continues, quoting an article about Montessori from the New York Times Magazine written in 1965, “Children in ‘pure’ Montessori schools are virtually restricted to materials she devised, which are intended to suppress fantasy and imaginative play. Children should not make believe, Montessori proclaimed; to encourage them along such lines is to encourage defects of character.” [4]

Montessori was not opposed to children’s play or pretend, but she did rally against the pervasive attitudes that relegated children *solely* to the realm of pretend and took advantage of their credulity. Throughout her lifetime she wrote beautifully and extensively about the imagination, and what she wrote aligns perfectly with contemporary research, showing once again, Dr. Maria Montessori was a woman ahead of her time.

To some degree, Montessori professionals perpetuate these misunderstandings themselves; discussion of imagination is largely confined to the elementary age, and many 3–6 teachers are themselves conflicted and confused about imagination, fantasy, and pretending in the classroom. It is important for Montessori educators to understand how imagination develops in the early years of childhood, and that spontaneous “pretending” is a healthy indicator of the development of imagination. This knowledge enables teachers to observe accurately and constructively, and know when to redirect and when to step back in order to fully support the development of imagination during the years from birth to six.

Imagination is based on children’s foundational knowledge about the world. In very general terms, the infant’s developing mind has “systems” to organize and process the characteristics and properties of objects and situations in order to construct an understanding of the real world. The human mind has a natural drive to seek out patterns and put new information into context with previous experiences. This is similar to what Montessori referred to as “The Mathematical Mind” – ordering and classifying information.

*“The true basis of the imagination is reality, and its perception is related to exactness of observation. It is necessary to prepare children to perceive the things in their environment exactly, in order to secure for them the material required by the imagination. Intelligence, reasoning, and distinguishing one thing from another prepares a cement for imaginative constructions.” [5] (Montessori 1918)*

Neuroscience shows that while many neurons fire during a novel experience, with repetition, only a smaller subset of neurons process the stimulus. In order to provoke the imagination, we need new experiences that force the brain’s perceptual systems out of standard patterns or categorisations [6]. Exploration stimulates the imagination, and since children’s minds develop through experimental exploration of their environment, exploring new possibilities is an essential element to how young children learn through imaginative play.

When children pretend, they draw on the causal framework of understanding they built up during infancy. Imagination relies on a solid foundation of real-life experiences, accompanied by ample opportunity for exploration and experimentation- this *includes* exploration and experimentation through pretending or imagining alternative outcomes.

In 1949 Montessori wrote, *“The child’s mind between three and six can not only see by intelligence the relations between things, but has the higher power still of mentally imagining those things that are not directly visible.” [7]*

It is neither necessary nor helpful to “teach” the child to pretend or imagine. Children construct their imagination through their own efforts and experience, as a uniquely human aspect of their mind. Joyful learning comes when children make discoveries and connections themselves. This principle underscores the Montessori approach to presenting lessons and materials, and it is also why we should not dictate how/when children are to use their imaginations. Instead, Montessori advises that we *“prepare an environment which will allow the child to exercise his efforts and aid the development of his imaginative intelligence.” [8]*

If teachers don’t understand how imagination and pretend can manifest as purposeful activity, they are thwarting an opportunity for discovery and development just as if they slapped the child’s hand reaching out to touch a beautiful object. “Don’t pretend!” is the mental equivalent of, “don’t touch!” The child will do what nature tells them they must; whether it is touching or pretending – it is only the adult’s response that makes the difference between construction and destruction. It takes a nuanced understanding of the developmental purposes of the Montessori materials to make this distinction.

*"The power to imagine always exists, whether or not it has a solid basis on which to rest, and materials with which to build. But when it does not elaborate from reality and truth, instead of raising a divine structure, it compresses the intelligence and prevents the light from penetrating." [9] (Montessori 1918)*

## REFERENCES

- [1] Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, "Through Culture and Imagination," p. 176–177, 9th ed. Kalakshetra, (1949).
- [2] In the introduction to *The Science Behind the Genius* (2005), Angelina Lillard writes, "For psychology researchers, attitudes toward Montessori are mixed: some know enough to appreciate it, others misunderstood a small aspect and dismiss the entire approach. Very few know more than a smidgen about it." (p.viii) Paul Harris, eminent developmental psychologist, in an interview with the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2002) mentions Montessori in connection with outdated Piagetian thinking using "the stubborn auto-didactic model" rather than imagination. In a study assessing make-believe play and self-regulation, a Montessori classroom was used as a setting that "actively discouraged make-believe" (although the author stated that not all Montessori classrooms do) and when the children "lapsed into make-believe," the "teachers often interrupted, drawing them back to workstation pursuits" (Berk, Mann, Ogan 2006, citing study by Krafft and Berk, 1998).
- [3] Marjory Taylor, in her book, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, p.53, (1999).
- [4] The New York Magazine article titled, "Let the Child Teach Himself" by R. Gross and B. Gross.
- [5] Some words in this passage were omitted for clarity. Montessori (1918). *The Advanced Montessori Method* vol. 1, "Imagination," p. 196.
- [6] Gregory Berns, a professor of Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences at Emory University and the Chair of Neuroeconomics. He is interested in how brain-imaging technologies can be used to study the neurobiology of human motivation and decision-making. His most recent book is *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently*.
- [7] Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, "Through Culture and Imagination," p. 176, 9th ed. Kalakshetra, (1949).
- [8] Montessori, *Unpublished London Lecture #24*, (1946).
- [9] Some words in this passage were omitted for clarity. Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method* Vol. 1. "Imagination," p. 205, (1918).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Werner Andrews is the AMI 3–6 Director of Training and Pedagogical Advisor at Montessori Northwest in Portland, Oregon. Sarah is an AMIUSA Consultant, an AMI Examiner, editor of the book, *The Montessori Approach to Music*, and has presented at Montessori conferences around the world. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Music Performance, an M.Ed. from Loyola University, AMI Primary and Elementary diplomas and is an Oregon Registry Master Trainer. Sarah began her work in Montessori education in 1987, with many years teaching experience at both the primary and elementary levels, as well as experience in administration. She is currently on the board of directors of the North American Montessori Teachers Association and Montessori Northwest. Sarah is a recipient of the Oregon Montessori Association Susie Huston Memorial Award for Outstanding Teaching, and a former OMA board member. She and her husband, Dave, have lived in Portland since 1991, and have two wonderful sons, Julian and Evan, who are great reminders to listen, keep learning, and not take life too seriously. Sarah enjoys botany, music, croissants, a great book, historical documentaries, and the AMAZING story of the Bretz Floods. See a list of Sarah's [publications and presentations](#).

From the Voices of AMI Training Series  
Association Montessori Internationale © 2024  
Please credit Association Montessori Internationale  
and the named author(s) if using text.

