

# VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

## On Developing the Capacity for Independent Thought and Judgement

**Sarah Werner Andrews, AMI 3–6 Trainer**

Montessori education fosters the ability for children to think independently and make reasoned, moral judgements within themselves and in community with others. This is not by chance; Maria Montessori lived through the havoc wreaked by fascist leaders Mussolini and Franco. She saw the destruction of society and moral life and witnessed firsthand how those who supported fascism were swept along in the tide that became their own undoing. Today, we are also in a time of crisis in truth and leadership, and many of us feel adrift, unmoored in a sea of intolerance, bigotry and shockingly audacious lies coming from the highest levels of global power.

“The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed.” (Hannah Arendt, Truth and Politics)

It is easy to lose faith or develop cynicism towards the pursuit of truth. As teachers and leaders we cannot afford to do so, because it is our responsibility to nurture in the children of this world the capacity to develop truth. And we, in turn, need the children to keep alive our hope for a future we can all live with.

Montessori education gives children the means to “take their bearings in the real world,” every day, all through the day. Just how do they “take their bearings”? It is through their body-based senses, through their hands, through their own minds, and through the multitude of decisions that they make all throughout the day, every day, that children find their bearings in this world.

We hear “children in the first plane are concrete, sensorial learners”, or “the hand is the instrument of the mind” so often that we can forget the critical importance of these words: it is through their physical experiences that children develop abstract thought. Their own experiences give them opportunities to make sense of what they see, touch, feel, and experience— and to find their own truths. This truth-making requires constant practice in making small decisions, and small judgements:

**In myself:** What do I want to do today? What do I like to do? What do I need in order to do this work? Am I finished with this? Do I want to keep working on it?

**In Practical Life:** Is this soil wet or dry? Is this cloth dirty, or can it be used again? Is this a plant whose leaves can be cleaned with water or not?

**In Sensorial:** Is this rough or smooth? Which cube goes first? Which one goes next? Is this an exact match or is it a little bit different? How else can I make a pattern with these shapes?

**In Language:** Could this happen? But is this what we did? Does this make sense? Do you like it? Which way do you like it better?

**In Math:** How many ways can I make this quantity? Is this 36 or 63? Did I find the exact right answer, or was I incorrect? How can I find the right answer?

**In Community:** Is there space for me to join the line, or do I need to wait? Is this person working? If I take two snacks, is there enough for everyone else? Who can I ask for help? Who can I help? How can I make this ready for the next person?

The individual truth-making we foster in the children is not only physical, it is intellectual. And it is not only intellectual, it is social. Because the child is constructing themselves in community, we foster interdependence alongside independence. Interdependence means that my independent needs, thoughts, and desires are judged and balanced with the needs, thoughts and desires of the others in the community. Through making judgments and decisions in community with those around them, children cultivate a collective empathy and moral sense in tandem with their individual truth making.

It is not surprising that in 1933, Montessori schools were banned in Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's Italy soon followed in 1936. Montessori saw the potential for social disruption of fascist regimes, when she lectured in 1939,

"If we go on with this education, which gives the child gradual independence, his personality will acquire the capacity for clear judgment...When we are able to judge for ourselves independently, we cannot fall victim to the enthusiastic words or fanatical reasoning of another person. This capacity for self-judgement can only be achieved only by a methodical and gradual formation of the mind from earliest childhood."

What Maria Montessori wanted was not just an educational method, but reformation of society itself – a society founded in human decency and educated in human truths.

## 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 AMI consultant, coach, examiner, editor of the book, *The Montessori Approach to Music*, and presents at Montessori conferences around the world.

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