

# Big Work: Goodness, Vocation, and Engagement in the Montessori Method

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the origins, uses, and effects of the rhetorical construct of “work” in the Montessori method. Grounded in analysis of classroom interactions in a Montessori primary (3–6-year-olds) classroom, I argue that Montessori’s conception of work substantially revises prevailing assumptions about the nature of childhood, the roles of teachers, and the purpose of schooling. In this way, Montessori rhetoric and practice serve as an existence proof of an alternative educational worldview. This close look at how an alternative rhetoric is constructed in and around the practice of Montessori education sheds new light on both the specifics of the Montessori worldview and, more generally, the ways in which reform rhetoric shapes perceptions, reifies assumptions, and choreographs the policy and practice of educational reform.

## INTRODUCTION

The first time my husband and I met the teacher who was to become our son’s Montessori “directress,” we were startled by her use of the term “work” to refer to children’s activity at school. Immediately, our thoughts leapt to images of tedious manual labor, of wage earning, of 19th-century ideals of industriousness and productivity. Nevertheless, the overall package overcame that initial impression and we enrolled our son in the school. My curiosity about the method deepened, and in the ensuing 4 years, personal interest has crystallized into formal research (Cossentino, 2004, 2005; Cossentino & Whitcomb, 2003). Observing in Montessori classrooms, talking with Montessori teachers, and reading Montessori’s own words about her method have led me to look closely at how the concept of work is constructed within this frame. This article reports the results of that examination.<sup>1</sup>

Grounded in analysis of classroom interactions (both verbal and non-verbal) in a Montessori primary (3–6-year-olds) classroom as well as in Montessori’s own voluminous writings, my argument begins with the

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proposition that work is an especially useful lens for examining the theory and practice of Montessori education. In contrast to the play-centered approach favored by many early childhood educators (Beatty, 1995; Kramer, 1976), Montessori placed deliberate and emphatic emphasis on the concept of work. From the holistic project of development to the very ideal of active, purposeful engagement, work is cast as the means as well as the end of Montessori education. In undertaking this examination, I aim to discover how practitioners (students as well as teachers) both use the term and make sense of the concept (in part by using the term). In elaborating my argument, I explore the manner in which work is invoked by practitioners as well as by Montessori herself not as drudgery but rather as vocation.

In discerning the meaning of work in Montessori practice, I identify and analyze multiple codes embedded in the term—technical, social, moral—and I examine the manner in which practitioners use these codes to enact Montessori’s distinctive vision of intellectual, social, and moral development. In considering the rhetorical possibilities of work as an educational construct, I conclude that Montessori did, indeed, introduce a new conception of work to the lexicon of education. It is a holistic or “cosmological” (Cossentino, 2004, 2005) conception that reaches for individual as well as universal “goodness,” casting reform as an intellectual, social, and moral/spiritual act. Grounded in her own spiritual formation, most notably but not exclusively, as a Roman Catholic, Montessori elaborated a theory of “good work” (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) that separated work from the workplace, linked human development with social progress, and in the process substantially revised prevailing assumptions about the nature of childhood, the roles of teachers, and the purpose of schooling.

While Montessori’s alternative vision has flourished as a coherent, international educational movement for nearly a century (over 5,000 Montessori schools exist in the United States alone), within the context of U.S. educational reform her worldview has remained largely eclipsed by a prevailing rhetoric of schooling that links work to task completion and economic productivity (Anyon, 1981; Egan, 2002; Martin, 1992; Willis, 1981). Grounded in utilitarian conceptions of schooling, current reform rhetoric, particularly that of the standards and accountability movements, creates a narrow problem/solution frame focused almost exclusively on achievement. This close look at how an alternative rhetoric is constructed in and around the practice of Montessori education will shed new light on both the specifics of the Montessori worldview and, more generally, the ways in which reform rhetoric<sup>2</sup> shapes perceptions, reifies assumptions, and choreographs the policy and practice of educational reform.

### Work, Reform, and Montessori's World

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) was born into and lived her life in a world in turmoil. From her earliest years in Risorgimento Italy to her struggles as the first Italian female to graduate from medical school, to her final years solidifying her legacy in the Netherlands, Montessori witnessed—indeed participated in—a dramatic series of social, political, and intellectual events that transformed the world. Hailed as an educational prophet, a feminist, and a social reformer, the *Dottoressa*, as she was known in her time, sought nothing less than to remake a world ravaged by war, poverty, and injustice into a more harmonious and loving place. Her focus for achieving this goal was the child, and the means was work. “A child’s desire to work,” she said, “represents a vital instinct since he cannot organize his personality without working” (Montessori, 1936/1966, p. 186).

For as long as Montessori has been known in North America, her focus on work has been criticized by American educators (Hainstock, 1978; Kramer, 1976). In 1910 (3 years following the opening of the first *Casa dei Bambini* in Rome and 3 years prior to Montessori’s first U.S. visit), Jenny B. Merrill, supervisor of Manhattan kindergartens, published a series of articles on Montessori, with considerable attention devoted to comparing the Italian method with Froebel’s recently introduced notions of play-based kindergarten. Referring to Montessori as “an Italian modification of Froebelian methods,” Merrill noted that Montessori’s educational materials were “too scientific,” and lamented their tendency to miss “the play spirit” (1910/1911, p. 10) of the Froebelian kindergarten. William Heard Kilpatrick (1914) attacked what he viewed as Montessori’s failure to attend to the child’s “complex social environment,” focusing especially on the “worthless” of Montessori’s specially designed didactic materials:

What little value remains to the apparatus could be better got from the sense-experience incidental to properly directed play with wisely chosen, but less expensive and more childlike playthings. (Kilpatrick, 1914, p. 52)

For Kilpatrick, a disciple of Dewey, Montessori seemed to fit the very model of the type of formal and symbolic education that progressives crusaded against.

The criticism extended to Europe, especially Great Britain, where Montessori had established a movement despite the rising popularity of both Froebel’s kindergarten and the infant school movement. Charlotte Mason, a leader of the infant school movement called the method a “calamity.” Arguing that Montessori replaced knowledge with “appliances and employments,” she claimed that the focus on precision and work came “at the expense of another and higher sense:

No fairies play about him, no heroes stir his soul; God and good angels form no part of his thought; the child and the person he will become are a scientific

product... but song and picture, hymn and story are for the educational scrapheap. (Mason cited in Kramer, 1976, p. 238)

Reflecting contemporary social and educational concerns for expression, liberty, and creativity (Alcott, 1830; Dewey, 1916/1966; Parker, 1896), Mason articulated a critique of the method that still persists today. Work and play are framed as either/or endeavors. Work is associated not with “desire” but with “productivity” and “employments.” Play, by contrast, is “the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage [childhood]” (Froebel, 1892, p. 31).

As the critiques mounted, so did Montessori’s output of writings and lectures about the method (Kramer, 1976). In those writings she elaborated a theory of work that, in part, appears designed to distinguish her approach to development and pedagogy from that of her European and American contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Central to that theory was the notion that development is both natural and effortful. Development, she claimed, is “the child’s work” (Montessori, 1949/1995). Work also serves as the bridge between development and pedagogy, with pedagogy providing the proper design of an environment within which to work as well as the protection of the child’s concentration once work is underway. She claimed that children were intrinsically motivated not only to engage in work but to repeat it to exhaustion. And she asserted that the combination of free choice, or what she called “spontaneous activity,” and repetition fostered deep and sustained concentration, which rendered the whole process joyful and appropriately satisfying. In contrast to what Montessori (1936/1966) called the “idle occupations” (p. 122) of play, the “vital instinct” to work surges in children, who are devoted to the construction of their personalities. Healthy, or “normal,” development, she declared, is both achieved and manifested in the child’s deep concentration on work freely chosen.

The impetus for her move toward the education of young children came from earlier experiences as a physician working with “mentally defective” or “abnormal” children. While in a postdoctoral post in the university’s psychiatric clinic, she became aware of the theories of Jean Itard and Edouard Séguin, both of whom devoted their careers to devising pedagogical methods for educating the “ineducable.” By 1900, she had become the director of a practice demonstration school, established by the National League of Retarded Children. It was there that she first began designing and manufacturing the teaching materials that have since become the most concrete manifestation of the “method.” Building on principles first established by Séguin, Montessori’s materials aimed to sharpen the senses and teach the skills of everyday life. The graduated blocks, rods and cylinders, the skeins of different colored thread, the sandpaper letters and numbers, which have become emblematic of Montessori learning the world over, all originated in the desire to create educational materials that would at once

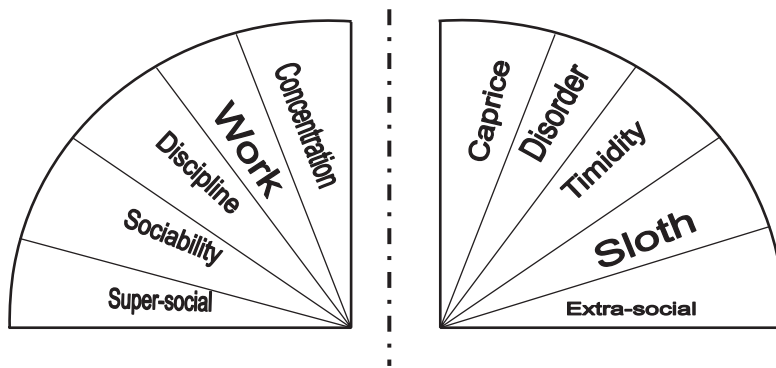


FIGURE 1. Normal and deviated character traits in children.

draw the child to engagement through the senses and enable him to keep his mind focused on mastery.<sup>4</sup>

The more she worked with these “deficient” children, the more concerned she became about society’s tendency to cast off those who lack power: the old, the infirm, the ignorant, and most especially, children. By 1907, she had shifted her focus from medicine to education, and opened her first school for young, “normal” children, which she named the *Casa dei Bambini* or “children’s house.”<sup>5</sup> In her first book, *The Montessori Method* (1909/1964), she wrote of her realization: “After I had left the school for deficient, I became convinced that similar methods applied to normal children would develop or set free their personality” (p. 33).

Montessori’s focus on “normalization,” which she considered the primary work of the children’s house, is among the most perplexing and misunderstood aspects of the method. Yet, it is a cornerstone of her theory of human development as well as her philosophy of social progress. The normalized child, she claimed, is a child who, by virtue of an environment that has allowed him to develop normally, has achieved the self-discipline and control (physical and mental) necessary to a healthy life. And the path to normalization is work. Figure 1, Montessori’s own illustration, shows the spectrum of normal versus “deviated character traits” in children (Montessori 1949/1995, p. 204).

In one of her last books, *The Absorbent Mind* (1949/1995), she sketched a theory of normalization attained through work with the central, dotted line representing “concentration on something specific”:

It is the line of normality. Once the children begin to concentrate, all the lines to right of this mid-line disappear, and there remains only one type which has the characteristics shown by the lines on the left. The loss of these superficial defects is not brought about by an adult, but by the child himself, who passes into the central line with his whole personality. . . . The transition from one state to the other always

follows a piece of work done by the hands with real things, work accompanied by mental concentration. (1949/1995, p. 204)

Here the outlines of a conception of work as effortful activity focused on “real things” that has the power to bring about “mental concentration” become visible.

The healthy formation of personality, or what Montessori called “normalization,” can only be achieved through this conception of work as engrossing and transformative. Through concentration the child transforms her personality from “defective” to “normal.” She replaces the “vices” of sloth, timidity, and caprice with the “virtues” of work, sociability, and concentration. Work, in other words, is both the path to and the manifestation of a particular conception of “goodness.” In contrast to other conceptions (see Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), Montessori’s vision aims for the “perfection of the self,” and elevates particular virtues as emblematic of perfection.

Montessori’s multilayered conception of work overlaps in some important ways with current understandings of play (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1933/1976). Work in a Montessori environment is child, rather than teacher, directed. It is designed to “set free” rather than mold the child’s personality. Because it is driven by a natural desire to develop through exploration and eventual mastery, work, in this scheme, is also joyful, even a site of “optimal experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rathunde, 2001). Yet the differences between play and work are just as pronounced. The defining conditions of work are that it is both natural and effortful. Work is not an escape from “real life,” but rather a path toward its fulfillment.

Most evident in the exercises of “practical life,” Montessori’s concern with reality stemmed from her observation of children happily choosing to manipulate her specially designed brooms, mops, and dressing frames over interactions with play toys. “It was the children themselves who showed that they preferred one another’s company to dolls, and the small ‘real life’ utensils to toys” (1949/1995, p. 169). Beyond enjoyment, Montessori also identified educative value in the repetition of exercises, pointing once again to perfection:

Repetition is the secret of perfection, and this is why the exercises are connected with the common activities of daily life. If a child does not set a table for a group of people who are really going to eat, if he does not have real brushes for cleaning . . . he will never attain any real ability. (Montessori, 1948/1967, pp. 97–98)

The freedom to repeat as many times as necessary occurs in what Montessorians refer to as “work cycles.” The child’s internal work cycle is the sequence of activity entailed in choosing, doing, and completing work; the conclusion of a work cycle is determined not by the completion of a given

task, but by the child's psychic needs. Repetition is a central feature of the internal work cycle and concentration is always the hallmark of true work (as opposed to task completion). The external work cycle, by contrast, is that period of time observed exclusively for the child's work. In most Montessori schools it consists of a lengthy (usually three hours) period of uninterrupted work.

Repetition of movements further allows the children to "perfect all their acts" (Montessori, 1948/1967, p. 97), which, for Montessori, entails the development and refinement of both physical and mental order:

Development cannot be taught. . . . We leave the children free in their work, and in all actions which are not of a disturbing kind. We eliminate disorder, which is bad, but allow that which is orderly and "good." (Montessori, 1936/1966, p. 183)

The progressive effects of joyful work, freely chosen, are meant to lead to a particular vision of "goodness."<sup>6</sup> And that vision not only links virtue to concentration, discipline, and order but also links human development to social progress. "When we let the infant develop, and see him construct from the invisible roots of creation that which is to become the grown man, then we can learn the secrets on which depend our individual and social strength" (Montessori, 1949/1995, p. 238). The tight alignment between the individual construction of an orderly, peaceful personality and the collective construction of an orderly, peaceful society makes the Montessori scheme much more than a pedagogical method. Montessori's "cosmological" (Cossentino, 2004, 2005) system unifies the technical, social, and moral/spiritual dimensions of development in a coherent worldview, which is embodied in the child at work.

While the work of the first plane of development (birth to 6) sets the stage for future health and happiness, the process of normalization is only the beginning of Montessori's vision of "good work." That vision matures as the child develops and her work grows more complex. Montessori's conception of education in the second plane of development (6–12) leads the child into the worlds of abstraction and morality. Building on the indirect preparation provided by the children's house, the elementary curriculum, or what Montessori called "Cosmic Education," holds as a central aim the child's discovery of his "cosmic task" (Duffy & Duffy, 2002; Montessori, 1948/1973). Here, Montessori's own cultural heritage, first as a Roman Catholic and later as a devotee of Theosophy (see Kramer, 1976, pp. 341–345) is most evident. Drawing implicitly from both the catechism and the ancient Indian doctrines of the union of the human soul with divine consciousness and karma, Montessori framed work as both the outward manifestation of a moral system governed by virtue and the inward means of attaining a virtuous life.

Work, in other words, constitutes the central act of Montessori practice, which entails intellectual, social, and moral/spiritual development. The



virtues of the normalized child both enable and mirror the social cohesion indicative of a healthy community and the spiritual unity necessary for a peaceful world. Both the “call” to work and the way in which that work is carried out constitute what Montessori (1936/1966) called a “new structure of goodness.” A closer look at how Montessori’s ideas are enacted in a contemporary children’s house follows.

### **LIFE IN THE CHILDREN’S HOUSE**

Data upon which this article is based were collected in the course of nearly 2 years of participant-observation in a medium-sized (126 students) Montessori school in the southeastern region of the United States.<sup>7</sup> The school is comprised of a toddler program, serving 10 children ages 18 months to 3 years; three children’s houses, serving children ages 3 to 6 years old; and an elementary program, serving 50 children ages 6 to 12. It is the school my son has attended since 1999. My fascination with the method, in fact, originated in an acute dissonance brought on by my experience as a traditionally educated parent of a Montessori child. The Montessori worldview did not conform to my assumptions about childhood, learning, or schooling. Though my son’s teachers and I shared the identity of educator, we spoke dramatically different languages. What seemed natural to them felt alien to me. My research began as an attempt to resolve that dissonance.

I began slowly, observing in classrooms, conducting informal interviews with the school’s administrator and teachers, reading Montessori theory. The more time I spent in the classrooms, the more questions arose: Why did the classroom appear to be governed by so many rituals (changing from outside to inside shoes, learning to roll and unroll a mat in a particular way, requesting a teacher’s attention by touching her shoulder rather than raising a hand)? What did those rituals mean to those who practiced them? Why was there so little discourse between student and teacher, and why was what little discourse there was conducted in what seemed to me like a stylized manner? What did the special Montessori terms (*directress*, *normalization*, *spontaneous activity*, *work*) mean? In order to answer these questions, I entered the culture of this school as a participant-observer.

Since July of 2001, I have served as the school’s administrator (head of school), a position I accepted in order to gain access to what I understood to be a culture largely inaccessible to outsiders or “non-Montessorians.”<sup>8</sup> In the ensuing 2 years, I have conducted numerous observations in all of the school’s classrooms, participated in many (though not all) of the rituals and routines of school life, and spent hundreds of hours talking with teachers, students, and parents of this school about all manner of issues related to Montessori education. Central to many of those conversations has been the topic of work—its definitions, purposes, and effects. In order to create a coherent portrayal of the work of the children’s house, I



augmented data collected in the course of participant observation with more focused observation in a single classroom.

Throughout the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003, I conducted a series of observations in Children's House 3, the school's newest and smallest classroom, serving 16 3–6-year-olds. The "directress"<sup>9</sup> of this classroom, Beverlee, is a 16-year veteran of the school, who has earned Montessori credentials for work with infants and, more recently, 3–6-year-olds. I had no particular reason for choosing to focus on Children's House 3. Rather, my attention evolved organically from a visit early in December during which I witnessed an array of speech events related to work.

In attempting to both characterize the discourse style and catalog the variety of speech events in the classroom, I analyzed both discourse and nonverbal activity. Because I assumed that the term *work* was freighted with multiple layers of meaning—indeed, that work constituted a central trope of the method—I paid special attention to speech events in which the term was either explicitly uttered or implied through a proxy term such as concentration. However, discourse analysis (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979; Stubbs, 1983) in the traditional sense was difficult to perform because of the sporadic and formalized way in which talk occurred in this and all the school's children's houses. Rare were instances of extended verbal interaction between students and teachers or between students and students, and Mehan's (1979) celebrated sequence of Initiation, Reply, and Evaluation (IRE)<sup>10</sup> was practically a nonexistent phenomenon.

To complicate matters further, in an effort to respect the norms of the classroom—norms that place a premium on protecting the concentration of the children—I recorded interactions manually rather than with the aid of an electronic recording device. Because my method of gathering data was ethnographic observation, I began by recording speech events as they occurred in the context of classroom interactions. And because extended verbal interaction was rare in this classroom, I was able to record many (but not all) instances of talk verbatim. I listened especially for sequences that included the word *work*, and I sought to discern the various codes that were embedded in those individual speech events. By *code* I mean an interpretive system within which signs, such as words or images, come to have meaning (see Barthes, 1957/1987; Saussure, 1986). Codes are primarily cultural phenomena. That is, they are signifiers of culture-bound meaning and markers of culturally constructed identity. In this case, the construct of work is heavily freighted with codes: technical, social, moral—all of which govern the organization and representation of life in Montessori classrooms.

I attended first to the morphology and syntax of speech events containing the word *work* or a proxy (such as *concentration*). I examined those speech events within the particular culture of the classroom, then within the wider social and cultural context of the school and the Montessori movement at large. I regarded interactions I witnessed in Beverlee's classroom as instantiations of the ideology Montessori herself expressed in

published work about the method. Finally, I attended to the manner in which teachers as well as students moved easily among the multiple codes of the method to construct a cosmological understanding of education unified by the construct of work as vocation.

### **Setting the Stage**

Beverlee and her assistant, Theresa, arrive each morning at 7:30, fully 1 hour before the morning “work cycle” begins. During that hour, Beverlee prepares the room for the day’s activity. On Thursdays, a parent visits for “cooking work,” in which children take turns participating in the preparation of various foods from around the world. Part of the Practical Life curriculum, cooking work (along with dressing, pouring, spooning, and polishing work) plays a central role in classroom life. Its emphasis on large and small motor development and self-care reflect two goals central to what Montessori called the “first plane of development.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to the practical life area, the room features an array of child-sized shelves loaded with meticulously placed trays of “work.” There is language work—sandpaper letters, a model of a farm (used for identifying and analyzing word functions), a movable alphabet, nomenclature booklets, and picture stories. There is sensorial work for smelling, touching, listening, and discerning size and shape. There is math work—spindle boxes, ten/teen/hundred boards, addition and subtraction strip boards, red and blue rods, and a bead cabinet filled with color-coded strings of beads used for work on counting, addition, and, later, decimals. Finally, there is geography work, which consists of a large cabinet of “puzzle maps.”

In the center of the cozy, tidy room is a large, carpeted area that serves as a gathering as well as a workspace where children lay out small, cotton mats, which serve as individual work areas. Children are taught early on that mats are to be respected, as symbols of work: There is no walking on mats (particularly other friends’). One friend’s mat does not overlap another friend’s. Mats are kept clean. The unrolling of a mat signals the start of an episode of work, and work is only complete when the same mat is carefully rolled into a neat cylinder shape and placed in the basket whose purpose is solely for keeping mats.

As children begin arriving, between 8:30 and 8:45, Beverlee greets each of her “friends” at the door with a handshake and a smile. In lilting West Indian cadences (Beverlee is a native of Trinidad), she nearly sings “good morning.” She is careful to make eye contact with each child, cocking her head to the right and raising her eyebrows. The welcome/transition ritual continues as each child makes his or her way to cubbies and changes into slippers, or “inside shoes.” The slippers, all of the teachers tell me, help keep the noise level low and the sand from the play yard out of the classroom. I notice that the act of changing from outside to inside shoes

also seems to ease the transition from home to school life. Once the slippers are on, it seems, work may begin.

### **The Morning Work Cycle**

On this December morning, the room is festooned with Swedish flags, and sprinkled throughout the classroom is work that corresponds to the Swedish theme. There is lingonberry jam and pickled herring for tasting, star chimes for listening, and an array of Swedish toys and decorations on loan from the home of 5-year-old Torun's family. Most students move independently about the classroom either selecting new material from the shelves or returning to yesterday's work, which has been left intact on the carpet with a laminated name card indicating both to whom the work belongs and that it remains in progress. Some children linger around Beverlee. After a few minutes she concludes they need some prompting, and she says quietly, "You may find work now."

In this way, the students will proceed through the next 2 hours. Beverlee and Theresa will attempt to make themselves "present but invisible" (Montessori, 1949/1995), and the children will be encouraged to persist independently in their individual work cycles. Beverlee will observe the whole scene, taking notes on each child's work, especially his or her ability to complete the "take, do, finish" sequence indicative of the work cycle of a normalized child.

Forty-five minutes into the cycle, many children are in the process of selecting their second work of the morning. Three have paused for a snack of orange quarters, which they share at a specially prepared "snack table" complete with placemats and napkins. Theresa is circulating, silently noting those who have become distracted, but not drawing attention to them. Instead, she announces those who have found work. "Jordan has work out," she says quietly. "Katherine has work out." "Are you choosing challenging work, Ethan?" she asks a 5-year-old. Ethan does not reply. Instead he smiles as he unrolls two mats and places them side-by-side. He then walks over to the map cabinet and selects the large map of South America. He places the map on his mat, and slowly, methodically begins removing pieces using both the knobs in the center and the outlines of the shape. Meanwhile, Katherine, 4 1/2, has moved her own mat in order to make room for Ethan's "big work."<sup>12</sup> Beverlee and Theresa continue to circulate, keeping alert to children in need of direction and a distance from children who are concentrating.

Two minutes later, 3-year-old Jona, one of the youngest friends in the room, unrolls a mat. Ethan spies him and says, "Hey, Jona, that's not a good place. Your friends are gonna walk on that." Jona, without eye contact, responds to Ethan's announcement by putting his work away. To which Ethan replies, "I didn't say you had to put it away. Just move the mat, that's all." Jona moves across the room to a space near the front door.

Fifteen minutes pass, and Ethan is now struggling with the map. He is going through many tries to fit the shapes together, but he does not seem to be looking at the “control map,” the self-correcting guide that children may use to check their work. He walks over to Theresa and places his hand on her shoulder to request attention. After 15 seconds, Theresa says (without verbal prompt from Ethan), “Looks like you almost got it. Go back and look at the guide.” He returns to his mat, sighs, and begins again, still not referring to the guide. Three-year-old Donovan sits down next to him, and Ethan, without removing his gaze from the map, says, “You can watch me, but don’t touch.” He tinkers a bit more, then returns to Theresa, “I really need your help,” he says this time. But Theresa resists the urge to solve the puzzle for him (an urge I am struggling with even in my nonparticipatory role). Instead, she says, “Go back and really look at the map guide, and see if you can figure out where the pieces fit in the continent.” This time, he follows her instructions, turns the piece, and fits it into its place.

Donovan seems pleased at this development; he walks to the map cabinet, selects a map of the United States, and lays it out next to Ethan. Ethan does not acknowledge Donovan. Finally, Jordan, the oldest child in the room, approaches Ethan’s mat to tell him about the history of the puzzle. He listens quietly as she talks about the countries and her difficulties with learning to solve the puzzle. Then she says of the last remaining piece, “I can help you with that.” She places it in. “Thank you,” Ethan says. “You’re welcome,” she replies.

In this way, the morning proceeded until approximately 10:30, when children began to change back into outside shoes for outside play. Throughout this study, I have noted that the word *play* is used liberally whenever the context is out of doors. Inside, however, seems always to be reserved for work. Puzzled by the distinction, I posed the question to a group of elementary students, all of whom had spent at least 3 years in one of the school’s children’s houses. Two responses stand out. One explained that “Play is when you get hot and tired outside; work is when you don’t get tired.” Another clarified, “When you play, you get rid of energy. When you work, you keep your energy.” While these informal comments cannot be considered representative of a valid sample of “normalized” children, I, nonetheless, noted a remarkable consistency with what these boys said and Montessori’s (1936/1966) own description of the “work of children.” “A child,” she said, “does not become weary with toil. He grows by working and, as a consequence, his work increases his energy” (p. 197).

### **Challenging Work: The Afternoon Work Cycle**

While the morning work cycle is a period of intense, uninterrupted individual work, the afternoon cycle is more variable. In Beverlee’s room, midday is dominated by play yard activity, preparing, sharing, and clearing

lunch, and one more session outside. Following the post-lunch play session, Beverlee's students will divide into two groups: nappers and resters. Nappers, children 3–4 1/2 will proceed to the nap room for a 90-minute sleep. Meanwhile, the resters will collect long padded mats and place them around the classroom for a brief, 20-minute rest. When rest is over, "challenging work" begins. Alone with her "older friends," Beverlee regards the afternoon as a flexible session in which she may choose to "introduce more challenging work to an older child or to do an extension of something he or she has done previously." The afternoon cycle is also a time "to have a group session of reading or a discussion of something, maybe landforms, or a particular country we are all studying."

In early May, the classroom has switched its geographical focus from Sweden to Australia. When I arrive in the classroom at 2:00, the 5- and 6-year-olds are gathered around Beverlee as she finishes reading an excerpt on marsupials. "I'm going to finish reading this," she says, "and then we're going to go to our work." Two minutes later, she finishes the pages, stands up, and walks over to the cubby area, the top of which serves as her own workspace. There she has placed "work plans," or lists of work to be completed by the "older friends." "I see my friends have some special work out," she announces casually, referring to the in-progress mats left over from the morning. "Jordan and Torun [who were working on a map of Australia] may go back to theirs. Ethan may go to the farm." Katherine, without prompt, unrolls a mat and begins working on the movable alphabet. Beverlee consults with Hoon Ho and Sydney, who have work to do in their journals. Sydney takes a seat alone at a table. Hoon Ho walks over to a poster of animals to consult. "Miss Beverlee," he says, "can you show an opossum?" "When you are writing in your journal on Australia," she replies, "maybe you can include that as one of your favorite animals."

Gradually, each child finds his her or her rhythm, and the afternoon wears on. By 2:25 the room is quiet, except for the sound of Torun's and Jordan's quiet humming of "The Dinosaur Song." This goes on for about 60 seconds (it takes nearly that long for me to locate the source of the sound), and Beverlee remains focused on Sydney's journal work. When she finishes with Sydney, she walks over to the girls, kneels down, and whispers, "I know you are enjoying this song, but could you please try to be quieter? Our friends are trying to do their work."

Five minutes later, Sydney joins Torun and Jordan, and is soon followed by Ethan. All four children are looking at the map of Australia and naming animals native to specific regions. "Is this your work?" Beverlee asks Ethan. He nods, and she moves on to Katherine, who has been working diligently with the movable alphabet the entire time I have been in the room (35 minutes). Katherine looks up and smiles at Beverlee, who comments, "I see you are concentrating quietly."

Curious about Hoon Ho's work with his journal, with which he struggled all afternoon, I return the next day to record follow-up activity. On this day,

Hoon Ho's work plan includes a session with the movable alphabet. Repeating the previous day's ritual, Beverlee makes eye contact with Hoon Ho, nods her head, and whispers, "You can come up, Hoon Ho." He stands up and walks over, and stands next to her as she reads from his work plan, "You need to do the movable alphabet." With that, he walks over the basket of mats, selects one, and unrolls it on the rug. Next he walks over to the shelf, retrieves one of the sleek, birch boxes that houses the alphabet, places it on the mat, opens the box, then gets up and walks over to the window sill to begin manipulating a miniature Zen garden.

The movable alphabet is one of the central materials of Montessori's phonics-based literacy curriculum. It consists of a box of stenciled letters (lowercase and uppercase), which children may move around to compose words. The exercise requires Hoon Ho to walk to Beverlee, who pronounces a single word, and then to walk back to his mat to attempt to spell it phonetically. Beverlee notices that Hoon Ho has taken a detour on his way to her but says nothing. Gradually he gravitates toward Beverlee, who is seated next to Torun. He places a hand on her shoulder, and Beverlee slowly enunciates the word "baaand," elongating the central phoneme. She looks directly at Hoon Ho while she does this. He nods, returns to his mat, and selects the letters, *d-a-n-b*. He repeats the process, touching Beverlee's shoulder as he approaches. He waits 20 seconds for her to finish with Torun. Beverlee then turns to him and says, "glaaad." He walks back to his mat and forms the word *glab*. As he finishes, Beverlee sits down next to him and gives the next word: "saaand." He writes *sanb*. Beverlee's stance toward Hoon Ho remains neutral, even a bit distant; she does not acknowledge the transposition of the letters *b* and *d*.

While Hoon Ho carries on with the exercise, Beverlee moves on to another child. Finally, he finishes the entire list and waits for Beverlee to review the words placed on his mat. This is a silent process in which Beverlee studies Hoon Ho's mat, begins writing the correct spelling on small strips of white paper, and places each strip next to the appropriate word. The only verbal instruction to Hoon Ho is "match these words to your words." He follows her instruction, examining the letters and replacing the *b*'s with *d*'s and the *d*'s with *b*'s. He moves quickly and purposefully through this portion of the work. He finishes, and puts his work away.

Later, Beverlee tells me that she has been noticing Hoon Ho's struggle to remain focused on his work. She is trying to provide opportunities for him to become engaged in a piece of work and remain so through completion. In keeping with Montessori's exhortation to "follow the child," she observes his actions, paying special attention to types of work that "call" to him. Despite his slow start, Beverlee reads Hoon Ho's engagement with the movable alphabet as a sign of what Montessori called a "sensitive period" for reading. Following his cue, in the coming weeks she will invite him to do more reading work. What about the transposed *d*'s and *b*'s? Did it not concern her that he repeated this error throughout the entire exercise

without feedback, which may have enabled him to correct himself. “Ah,” she tells me, “then he would not have been correcting himself. I would have been correcting him. He corrected himself when he checked his work.”

I selected the foregoing descriptions of life in Children’s House 3 both because they contain multiple sequences of speech that feature the word *work* and because the two central actors, Ethan and Hoon Ho, demonstrate what I understand to be the multilayered meaning of work in the Montessori frame. The notion that work is effortful but not drudgery is demonstrated by Ethan’s persistence with the puzzle map. He struggles, seeks assistance, and performs multiple attempts before eventually solving the puzzle. That he solves it with the help of a peer rather than a teacher suggests that in this classroom work belongs to the children. The notion that work is spontaneous, but not without structure or discipline, is demonstrated by Hoon Ho’s meandering path through the exercise of the movable alphabet. He is free to move about the room, stopping at the Zen garden on his way to Beverlee, but, eventually, he returns to his work. He is most consistently engaged in the self-correcting exercise of “matching the words.”

While the children are the central actors or “workers” in the classroom, the teacher’s role is significant in establishing and maintaining the frame for that work. Theresa’s steadfast resistance to solve Ethan’s puzzle made it possible for him to appreciate the value of persistence and the satisfaction of completion. Similarly, Beverlee refrained from intervening in Hoon Ho’s spelling in order to allow him the opportunity to, first, get focused (and remain so), and then to correct his own mistakes. In both cases, the teachers’ actions were designed to protect the fragile phenomenon of concentration. Had Beverlee insisted that Hoon Ho attend to his work, or if she had intervened when she noticed the transposed *b*’s and *d*’s, the interruption alone may have been enough to shut down his engagement.

In other words, a good deal of the action I recorded in these descriptions might be characterized as “nonaction.” Beyond circulating, it is easier to name what Beverlee and Theresa do not do in the course of directing student work. They do not chastise students whose concentration wanes or offer praise for correct or complete performance. They do not engage in extended conversations with children. Perhaps most important, they do not interrupt students who are engaged in work. Yet the Montessori teacher’s reticence to intervene should not be interpreted as indifference or uncertainty about how to act. Rather, the tendency to stand back is a deliberate act, what some call “the protected lesson” (Bettmann, 2003), which radically alters the role of the teacher. No longer is the teacher the source of knowledge. Instead, she is the “directress” of attention, and the attention always focuses on the work.

Within the role of directress, much of the pedagogical action has taken place before the children arrive: Preparing a developmentally pitched, child-oriented environment designed to induce engagement and concen-



tration constitutes the most obvious deployment of the Montessori directress's pedagogy. Less obvious, but no less critical, are detailed observations both Beverlee and Theresa make of each child. These observations serve as the primary cues for intervention, which consists almost exclusively of inviting an individual child to engage in particular work and then protecting their concentration once it begins. While discourse occurs in ways that suggest that talk is not a central pedagogical tool, a closer look at how that discourse unfolds reveals that discourse, especially as it is framed by the construct of work, shapes experience for teachers as well as students.

### DISCOURSE IN THE CHILDREN'S HOUSE

In describing the nature of teachers' work with regard to the communicative function of language in the classroom, linguist Michael Stubbs remarks:

Teachers have to devote a great deal of time and effort simply to keeping in touch with their pupils—not only because of the far-from-ideal communication conditions in the average school classroom, but also because of the very nature of teaching. They have to attract and hold their pupil's attention, get them to speak or be quiet, to be more precise in what they say or write, and to try keep some check on whether at least most of the pupils follow what is going on. (Stubbs, 1983, p. 43)

Implicit in all this “attracting,” “getting,” “keeping,” and “checking” is an abiding concern with control (Ballenger, 1992; Cazden, 1988; Hymes, 1962; Mehan, 1979; Stubbs, 1976). Moreover, most classrooms rely on talk as the primary medium as well as message, and this produces what Stubbs (1976) describes as the “radically asymmetrical” (p. 162) nature of teacher talk versus student talk. Along with attracting attention and checking for understanding, most often in whole-group situations, teachers are constantly initiating, limiting, correcting, editing, summarizing, and specifying classroom discourse.

Cazden (1988) attributes this asymmetry to the teacher's role. She found that in most classrooms, teachers “talk two thirds of the time [in the Initiation and Evaluation slots of the three-part IRE sequence], initiate almost all interactions, . . . and interrupt but are not interrupted” (p. 160). It is the teacher's role (at least as defined in “the average classroom”), she concludes, to control both behavior and talk itself.

While the above rings true to my experience as a student, a teacher, and a researcher in “average classrooms,” it is almost completely alien to what I have witnessed generally in Montessori classrooms and more specifically in Children's House 3. Most obviously, in comparison to average classrooms, talk in the Montessori environment is minimal. Teachers modeled less how to talk than how to remain quiet. I never saw a teacher initiate a sequence

of talk; initiations were either prompts, “I see my friends have some special work out,” or directives, “You may find some work now.” On the rare occasion when I recorded a teacher-initiated question, “Are you choosing challenging work, Ethan?” no response was given, nor did it seem to be expected. Student interruption was controlled (choreographed) by the teacher through the “hand on shoulder” ritual. Which is to say, students were expected to seek help from teachers whenever they needed it, but they were also expected to exercise respect for the ongoing work of others. It was not uncommon for children to wait up to 60 seconds for a teacher to conclude a thought before responding to a child with a request. Teachers, by contrast, never interrupted children at work.

At first glance, the elaborateness of gesture and the economy of language seem to suggest that discourse plays a minor role in this classroom. A closer look at how both the structure and function of language correspond to the scripts of Montessori practice, however, reveals a limited, but nonetheless, pivotal role for talk.

### **Montessori Teacher Talk**

What Cazden (1988) calls “the teacher talk register” is a potent feature of all Montessori classrooms. As she defines it, the register links speech to role: “A register is a conventionalized way of speaking, in a particular role, and is identified as a marker of that role” (p. 159). In the case of Montessori teaching, the teacher talk register is more than conventional. It is scripted by Montessori herself. “Let all thy words be counted,” she said, quoting Dante, in describing how to give “a perfect lesson” (Montessori, 1909/1964, p. 108). Calling for economy as well as intentionally stylized pacing and intonation, the Montessori teacher talk register may be best understood as “ritualized” (Cossentino, 2005; Cossentino & Whitcomb, 2003). The conventions of Montessori teacher talk are both explicit and heavily freighted with symbolic meaning; Montessori teacher talk constitutes a deliberate enactment of the central values of the method. The primary function of speech is to place emphasis on student activity. And this function is achieved through limited vocabulary, prescribed discursive interaction between teacher and student, and a strict prohibition against interrupting students at work.

The limited vocabulary is dominated by the word *work*. Both Beverlee and Theresa used the term to signal the start of activity (“You may find some work”), to acknowledge activity underway (“Jordan has work out”), and to distinguish teacher-directed from student-directed activity (“I’m going to finish reading this, then we will go to our work”). I counted 20 separate speech events in the above description of the work cycles in Children’s House 3. Of those 20, 10 contained direct reference to the word *work*. Four more referred indirectly to work through proxy, “I see you

concentrating [working] quietly,” or implication, “Hey, Jona, that’s a not a good place [for your work]. Your friends are gonna walk on it.” I interpreted the repeated references to work as both a means of enacting the mechanics of the method and a multilayered symbol of the central tenets of Montessori philosophy: respect for the child’s work of forming his or her personality, appreciation for the fragility of the act of engagement, fierce protection of the child’s concentration once it is attained, and belief in the power of work to lead to “goodness.”

As a technical move, uttering the word *work* structures discourse in the classroom. Once incorporated into the practitioner’s vocabulary, it forms the nexus of a structurally simple, but symbolically dense, script. The message of this script is clear and invariant: Work belongs to the children; work is the focus of the classroom; work is revered. Repeatedly uttering the word, moreover, constitutes a linguistic instantiation of the pedagogy necessary to support a child-centered, activity-based approach to learning. In narrowing the teacher’s discursive repertoire, the repeated reference to children’s activity as “work” seems to minimize the teacher’s presence in the environment. Similarly, less talk (and less thinking about that talk) seems both to slow the pace of activity and to allow the teacher to shift her focus from what she says to what individual children are doing.

Style is equally distinctive. While the three children’s house directresses have unique linguistic markers, they draw from a common menu for syntax, pace, and tone. All three, for instance, refer to students as “friends.” Beverlee says “my friends.” The Children’s House 1 directress says “our friends.” And the Children’s House 2 directress omits the pronoun altogether, preferring “friends” and sometimes “younger” or “older friends.” All three greet arriving students with a handshake and a smile accompanying a warm, “Good morning.” And all three speak in slow, clearly enunciated phrases or simple—rarely complex—sentences. This can sometimes produce a mechanical, staccato cadence, which seems to have the effect of stylizing the speech in ways that have prompted some observers (Katz, 1992) to label the Montessori teacher talk register “unnatural.”

Of course, all teacher talk registers are stylized. However, the Montessori register differs from the traditional register for teachers of young children in significant ways. “In the children’s houses,” Montessori declared:

The old-time teacher, who wore herself out maintaining discipline and immobility, and who wasted her breadth in loud and continual discourse has disappeared. In her place we have substituted the didactic material, which contains within itself the control of errors. . . . The teacher has thus become a director of the spontaneous work of the children. (Montessori, 1909/1964, p. 370)

Absent from exchanges is praise or overt concern with command and control. Students, rather than teachers, are the primary interrupters. Montessorians deploy a limited vocabulary and refrain from extended verbal

interactions. Teachers do not aim to capture students' attention through elevated tones or volume. Rather, they aim to deflect attention so that the focus of the room is the children's activity. They often achieve this deflection of attention through the use of a quiet, neutral-sounding monotone.

Mastering the *how's* as well as the *why's* of this script is central to Montessori teacher preparation. Prospective Montessorians practice when and when not to speak, how to modulate their voices so as to project a calm, neutral stance toward the children, how to enunciate clearly so that children may absorb the proper pronunciation of their rapidly expanding vocabularies, and how to avoid IRE sequences through the proper deployment of the "three period lesson."<sup>13</sup> Novices report that learning to teach in this way, which is dramatically different from the ways in which they themselves experienced early schooling, is difficult (Cossentino & Whitcomb, 2003; Shreves, 2003). Yet, learning to modify their "ways with words" (Heath, 1983) constitutes a principal means of achieving the "transformation" necessary to practice the method. In this way, talk is both a technical and a cultural move.

As a cultural move, uttering the word *work* constitutes a key enactment of the ideology of Montessori practice. Within the term multiple messages are encoded: concentration, order, independence, and respect. Depending on the code, the term *work* carries different meanings. As a social code, work helps define the teacher's pedagogical role as designer, observer, and protector rather than attractor, monitor, and controller (Gordon, 1993). As a moral code, work stands for the achievement of the cardinal virtues of concentration, order, independence, and respect. And as a technical code, work refers to the precise movements comprising both teachers' and students' repertoire in the classroom: how to roll and unroll a mat, how to walk so as not to step on others' work, how to treat time and space so as to enable rather than impede concentration. In the course of a morning in the children's house, both students and teachers will shift seamlessly among technical, social, and moral codes, referring to work in multiple conceptual contexts. This code-switching<sup>14</sup> enables Montessorians to enact the multiple dimensions of the method through the use of an economical and dense script. Within that script, work can mean independence as well as cooperation, discipline as well as liberty, concentration as well as respect. Work represents the central activity of the classroom, the state of concentration that is a hallmark of that activity, and the virtues of the normalized child.

In its capacity to represent the means as well as the end of Montessori practice, work becomes a trope for the method itself. In other words, the construct of work serves as a unifying figurative scheme (Gibbs, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which practitioners use to conceptualize their experience as Montessorians. Because its meaning is so distinctive within the Montessori frame, work serves as both a marker of cultural identity and a shorthand for the complex, child-centered ideology that governs Mont-

essori practice. Its repeated utterance in the speech of teachers and students serves as a multilayered, metonymical speech-act: a reinforcement of the values of concentration, order, independence, and respect; a demonstration of the value of repetition in learning; and a reminder that students are the primary actors in the classroom and that their actions have consequence. When a practitioner incorporates the term *work* into her lexicon, she is forming a register that identifies her less as a teacher than as a Montessorian. Which is to say, she identifies herself as a subscriber to Montessori's cosmological worldview, and aims to enact that worldview in daily classroom interactions.

### Montessori Student Talk

Most distinctive about student talk in Children's House 3 was how prominent it was by comparison to teacher talk. The children constantly interacted with one another, and unless their talk became loud or distracting, they were permitted to communicate freely. I recorded no instances of children responding verbally to a teacher-initiated utterance. The examples of student talk I recorded in Children's House 3 fell into two categories. The first was peer exchanges. The second was queries directed toward the teacher. In all cases, the discourse referred to directly to work.

Consider the following exchange between 5-year-old Ethan and 3-year-old Jona:

Ethan Hey, Jona, that's not a good place. Your friends are gonna walk on it.  
 Jona [begins putting work away without verbal reply]  
 Ethan I didn't say you had to put it away. Just move the mat. That's all.

The "it" in this case was the mat upon which Jona had begun laying out work. Ethan, the older friend, authorizes himself to give instructions to his younger friend. Jona, in turn, acknowledges his subordinate status by silently following those instructions. The structure of the exchange is a slightly modified IRE sequence, with Ethan initiating, Jona replying silently, and Ethan concluding the interaction with an implicitly evaluative declaration.

Ethan, in other words, is playing the traditional teacherly role of monitor of student work, a role that is consistent with the norms of a classroom in which "older friends" are socialized to "teach" younger friends how things are done.<sup>15</sup> At no point during this exchange did either boy look toward or otherwise refer to either of the adults in the room. The interaction was brief, direct, and proceeded without incident. Because it did not disrupt the attention of any of the participants, I interpreted the interaction as appropriate within the culture of this classroom.

On a structural level, the interaction demonstrated in this speech event suggests that children in this classroom are expected to speak with author-

ity. They are expected to initiate exchanges. They are expected to address one another as peers and to acknowledge differences in status that are evident in a multiaged classroom. But the content of the interaction suggests that the children have internalized even more complex cultural meanings associated with work. Here work is associated with both concentration and respect.

Through substitution, both boys acknowledge that the mat is a symbol of work and that it is to be treated with care. The mat marks the physical space in which work will occur and its proper placement will either enable concentration or impede it. In pointing out that “your friends are gonna walk on it,” Ethan is at once reinforcing the prohibition against walking on others’ work and attempting to assist Jona in avoiding the violation of this prohibition. When Jona seems to misinterpret the intended message, Ethan attempts a repair, “I didn’t say you had to put it away. Just move the mat.” The coda, “that’s all,” both concludes the interaction and signals to Jona that the task is manageable. Ethan is clarifying his role as well as his intention. He does not wish to disturb Jona’s work. Rather, he aims to help Jona find a place more appropriate for doing his work. Care should be taken in where one chooses to work. Work is not to be “stepped on.”

For the children in this classroom uttering the word *work* is a means of both establishing and fulfilling their intentions as purposeful learners. For both teachers and students work is closely linked to the central Montessori value of concentration, which is further linked to the values of order, respect, independence, and, ultimately, self-mastery. The noun and verb forms of the word carry distinct, but overlapping, messages. In its verb form, work is an act of personal agency. Students select their own work and complete it at their own pace with minimal adult intervention. In its noun form, work is an object of reverence, even joy. The choice of student work is often based on an impulse prompted either by the example of an older friend (as in the case of Donovan laying out the United States map next to Ethan’s South American map) or a “match”—ideally spontaneous, but at times teacher-suggested—between the educative (usually sensorial) properties of the object and the immediate developmental needs of the child.

Because it accommodates multiple meanings, pronouncing the word *work* is a dense and flexible speech-act for students as well as for teachers. The symbolic density of the term lends economy to Montessori speech, making talk a subtle but defining feature of the method, reinforcing the pedagogical focus on the child’s activity. Limiting discourse also results in a quiet room, which both enables concentration and reconfigures classroom dynamics. Whether collective or individual, work is a shared concern of all who dwell in the environment. Indeed, within Montessori’s holistic conception of development, work is the means not only of personal growth but also of harmonious social relations, concordance with nature, and, finally, a “good” life.

## CONCLUSION: BIG WORK

This brief look at discourse in a Montessori primary classroom helps isolate cognitive and cultural features of the classroom environment. These features, in turn, highlight how both students and teachers construct their respective roles and how, within those roles, students and teachers act out a pedagogy that is strikingly different from that of traditional classrooms. Discourse, further, is used to both highlight and construct what Montessori (and others) called “The New Education” (Beatty, 1995; Depaepe, Simon, & Van Gorp, 2003; Montessori, 1949/1995). Aiming to “rewrite our understandings of who children are and the worlds they occupy” (Macbeth, 2003, p. 257), she created a method of instruction that radically reconfigured classroom dynamics. That reconfiguration is equally visible in the physical design of the space and in interactions between teacher, student, and content. Montessori classroom discourse both reflects and contributes to the reconfiguration of relationships and ideas.

In theory, development is the child’s destiny and work is the means and manifestation of the fulfillment of that destiny. In practice, work in a Montessori classroom is designed to call the child to deep concentration in real-life activity—dressing and washing, preparing and sharing a snack, tracing and labeling a map. In the course of that activity the very young child takes on the monumental task of constructing her own personality. As development continues, that task grows more complex and the child’s work encompasses not just personal development but the betterment of humanity. It is the blending of individual self-perfection with collective effort to move toward “the construction of a harmonious and peaceful society” (Montessori, 1949/1995, p. 3) that constitutes the “big work” of Montessori education.<sup>16</sup>

The proposition that it is “normal” for a child to be invested in his own development, to attain and sustain deep concentration, and to find joy in order and work is as startling today as it was when Montessori first announced it nearly a century ago. This “new” conception of childhood is operationalized in the rhetorical construct of work. Whether using the term as a lens for interpreting classroom interactions or as a method for structuring those interactions, work animates nearly all activity within the Montessori frame. For educators attempting to discern the significance of the construct, its ubiquity raises questions: What distinguishes Montessori’s conception of work from play or other notions of developmentally oriented engagement, such as projects, explorations, or constructions? What is the source of Montessori’s holistic conception of work as vocation? Is there a place for such a conception in a contemporary reform culture that promotes a view of work as task completion and economic productivity?

In isolating the various codes embedded in the term, and in analyzing their deployment in both classroom discourse and the writings of Montessori, I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which those codes both



delineate and unify the technical, social, and moral/spiritual dimensions of the method to form a holistic vision of work as vocation rather than drudgery. That vision, which is grounded in reality and embodied in deep concentration, emerges finally as a manifestation of moral and spiritual formation—or what Montessori called “self-perfection.” At times this version of work looks a good deal like play. Indeed, for Montessori work and play are not mutually exclusive phenomena. Ultimately, however, the two constructs diverge. Two critical points of distinction are effort and outcome. While the effortful construction of the self may include play, the enterprise of “self-perfection” is too focused and purposeful to be associated with the diversions and—sometimes—subversions (Dewey, 1910; Sutton-Smith, 1997) of play. Self-perfection, furthermore, involves not just individual development but social harmony, which Montessori viewed as an ultimate “good” and, therefore, purpose of education.

The ultimate outcome of work is the remaking of society. But that “great work” (Montessori, 1949/1995) always begins with the very young child. E. M. Standing, one of Montessori’s early biographers and a loyal disciple (also a convert to Catholicism), elaborates her regard for the inherent “goodness” of the child’s work:

He (the child) does not hurry as we do toward the end of action because for him the end of action is the action itself. His whole being is expressed in his work; he loves it, lives it, rejoices in it, preserves in it, repeats it—because it is the means by which he perfects himself. (Standing, 1957, p. 145)

The normalized child as the exemplar of goodness alludes to the sources of Montessori’s conception of work.

As a non-Montessorian confronting the logic and language of Montessori education, much about the system initially baffled me. At the outset I, like Kilpatrick, considered myself a follower of Dewey’s, and I was perplexed by the emphasis on quiet order and individual, rather than group, activity. As I looked more closely at interactions between students, teachers, and the environment, however, I began to detect what Noddings (1984, 1992) calls an “ethic of care.” And I began to read classroom interactions as densely freighted symbolic acts aimed at fulfilling moral and spiritual as well as intellectual goals. Like all interpreters of culture, I brought to my analysis an array of existing frameworks for making sense of what I encountered in Montessori classrooms. I was first drawn to the resemblance of the intellectual dimension of the method to Constructivism. The preponderance of child-directed activity, the emphasis on engagement, and the array of manipulative materials all corresponded to existing points of reference from my life as a researcher and a teacher. However, the moral and spiritual references did not seem to match what I assumed to be the progressive bent of the method. The mission of participation seemed to be replaced by that of peace. Social cohesion substituted for social intercourse. Dewey’s

(1916/1966) “embryonic democracy” became the “spiritual embryo” (Montessori 1936/1966). In both the breadth and certainty of this moral vision, I recalled my earliest experiences not in school but in church: Montessori reminded me less of Progressivism than of Catholicism.

The emphasis on cosmic order and human perfectibility, the elevation of selected “virtues,” and, indeed, the ritualized nature of classroom interactions all struck a familiar chord from my Catholic upbringing. Whether or not Montessori herself read the *Catechism*, her definition of work reads almost like a transcription: “In work, the person exercises and fulfills in part the potential inscribed in his nature” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, p. 643). Reflecting her upbringing, the hallmarks of a “Catholic worldview”<sup>17</sup> are visible in a particular and at the same time universal vision of good work. “The ‘good,’” she claimed, “are those who ‘move toward the good’ built up through their own efforts and through orderly and useful external works” (Montessori, 1948/1967, p. 307).

The call to live a virtuous life is manifest first in the child’s call to the materials of the prepared environment and later in the deliberate discovery of one’s “cosmic task.” That a single word, *work*, represents the call to engagement, the act of concentration, and the fulfillment of natural potential testifies to the elasticity of the concept and its attending power as a rhetorical construct. To view the Montessori method through the lens of work is to notice two aspects of the method that offer insight into not only Montessori education but also the process of reform itself. The first is the substantively radical nature of her vision. The second is the coherence of that vision.

Current calls for educational reform, most recently embodied in the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act, aim, notably, for coherence. They are also governed, in part, by a competing rhetoric of learning as work. That is, like Montessori’s rhetoric of work as vocation, work as task completion and productivity both expresses and constructs a distinctive worldview. For advocates of reform levered by standards and accountability, work is a central trope, which is to say it expresses both the means and end of education. However, this version of work is grounded in an entirely different set of technical, social, and moral codes. Within this frame work is “hard,” and “good work” is equated with “high expectations” that students will display “good work habits,” “be on-time, and do their homework” (Olfman, 2004/2005; Get Educated, n.d.). Work, in other words, is a job. It is first the student’s job to work hard, be on time, and do homework. Schoolwork, in this frame, sets the stage for later, wage-earning, work. And that work is likely to take the form of a job that will require hard work and punctuality.

Where Montessori locates the central problem of education in the consequences of misunderstanding the nature of childhood, the prevalent rhetoric of U.S. educational reform reifies the very assumptions Montessori aimed to dispel. Work is a purely instrumental enterprise designed not to

optimize the experience of youth but to “govern the young” (Finkelstein, 1989) according to the expectations of the adult world in which they live. Within this frame, the central problem of education is located in society’s collective failure to achieve results. And the solution is to work harder at targeting, motivating, measuring, and reporting acceptable levels of achievement. For teachers, parents, and, ultimately, the federal government, the “steady work” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988) of educational reform is embodied in the role of “monitor” of results, which are measured by standardized test scores.

Beyond the potential for getting and keeping a “good” or well-paying job, schooling aimed principally at getting and keeping acceptable test scores offers little in the way of “goodness.” The rhetoric of work as a job constitutes a worldview that amalgamates the historic purposes of U.S. education (assimilation, access, social reconstruction) into the singular goal of achievement. While the rhetoric does borrow from competing worldviews—the phrase “no child left behind” originated in the writings of Marian Wright Edelman, who used it to promote a child advocacy agenda focused on equity, compassion, and justice—the message ultimately remains narrowly focused on productivity. When teachers, parents, and policymakers are exhorted to banish “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (Bush, 2000), the unassailable “good” of equity is couched in terms of standards and rigor, which are codes not for justice or compassion but for the work ethic. Hard work, then, is the means as well as the end of the worldview constituted in the rhetoric of work as job.

Also absent from this rhetoric is a coherent vision of what reformed educational practice might entail. Attempts to “align” standards, curriculum, and assessments gesture toward the goal of coherence. But the failure to link the action of educational practice with an elaborated vision of educational purpose produces an anemic rendition of coherence that, at best, barely skims the surface of what is actually involved in teaching and learning; at worst, it produces a muddle of disconnected “best practices” that are more likely to confuse than to guide practice. In contrast to Montessori’s cosmological system in which the elaborated scripts of good practice mirror an equally elaborated vision of both human development and a good life, the reigning assumptions of educational policy hinge on a simplistic and circular logic of work as achievement and achievement as work.

Surely the work of educational reform is bigger than that implied by the rhetoric of our current reform culture. Surely the traditional purposes of U.S. education—purposes that link learning to freedom and democracy, truth and beauty—remain part of our collective enterprise as citizens and human beings. Yet many policymakers, practitioners, and researchers continue to behave as though the rhetoric of the standards and accountability movements constitutes the big work of educational reform. Efforts at compliance and resistance routinely work within the frame set by this rhetoric.

Policy debate centers on the content of tests, procedures for reporting results, and rewards or sanctions attached to those results. School leaders redesign curriculum frameworks so that they align with assessments, and teachers reconfigure lessons so that they align with frameworks. Research aims to discover strategies that “work” at helping students perform well on standardized tests, incentives that are likely to attract and retain a “quality” teaching force, and approaches to leadership that will enhance the “capacity” of districts, schools, and classrooms to achieve.

For nearly a century, the Montessori method has served as an existence proof of an alternative educational worldview. Governed by a coherent rhetoric of work as vocation, that worldview reaches deep into the technical core of teaching practice as well as outward into the social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of living in community, the world, and the universe. Montessori’s cosmological worldview is both Catholic and catholic, which is to say the method reflects both a distinctive theological vision of “goodness” and a quest for universal “good.” Is there room for Montessori’s Catholic worldview in our current reform culture? Probably not. For nearly a century, the method’s implicit religiosity and explicit essentialism have assigned it to the margins of American educational thought, and our historic commitments to secularism and pluralism are likely to keep it there. However, there is, I argue, room for—indeed a need for—a catholic vision of educational purpose. And there are hints that the desire for such a vision is present in our current reform culture. Recent calls to reframe tropes such as “teacher quality” (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002), “scale” (Coburn, 2003), “collaboration” (Gray, 2000), and “accountability” (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Behn, 2002) aim for deeper, more multidimensional interpretations of these concepts. They also confirm the central role of rhetoric in constructing as well as expressing perceptions of both how things are and how they ought to be.

For contemporary educational reformers, the most enduring lesson of Montessori education may be its very endurance as a method and a movement. That staying power is due, in large measure, to the constancy with which the movement has watched its words. Cued by Montessori’s deliberate creation of a unique lexicon, Montessorians routinely bring language into the service of educational practice. That is, they use the rhetoric of the movement to frame both their intentions and their actions. They command the tropes that constitute their worldview. And they employ those tropes in the construction of cognitive schemata, cultural identity, and moral outlook. In other words, the case of Montessori education demonstrates how constructs like work frame both the policy and practice of educational reform. Closer attention to the languages of reform—of teaching and learning, childhood and schooling, policy and practice—may help educators define an expanded educational worldview, conceptualize a shared vision of “good” practice, and reclaim the big work of educational reform.

## NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank the students and faculty of the Williamsburg Montessori School, especially Beverlee Mendoza, for their invaluable assistance in researching this article.
2. In this article I distinguish discourse (naturally occurring speech) from rhetoric (language designed to persuade or otherwise govern the thinking of listeners or readers) (Barthes, 1957/1987; Bourdieu, 1984; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Discourse occurs in speech events such as informal conversations or classroom interactions. Rhetoric, by contrast, codifies meaning and attempts to create coherent messages. Those messages may be established in formal speech events such as speeches or policy statements or more subtly in overarching themes captured in figurative language (or tropes) that govern everyday discourse.
3. See Montessori (1966, 1948/1967) for discussions of the distinction between what she called “scientific pedagogy” and Froebel’s kindergarten. See Montessori (1949/1995) for references to Dewey’s concepts of “occupations.”
4. Montessori consistently referred to children using the masculine pronoun and teachers using the feminine. To avoid sexist language while at the same time maintaining readability, I alternate the masculine and feminine in my own references to children.
5. The *Casa* is sometimes translated as “home” rather than house. See Martin’s (1992) treatment of the *Casa* as a “schoolhome.”
6. See Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) for a similar treatment of “goodness” in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American high schools. Like Montessori, Lawrence-Lightfoot regards “goodness” as culture-bound phenomenon grounded in loving, respectful human interaction. Unlike Montessori, who aims to banish imperfection, Lawrence-Lightfoot embraces it, deliberately averting a normative conception of goodness.
7. WMS is affiliated with American Montessori Society (AMS). In contrast to the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the professional organization founded by Maria Montessori, AMS represents the more “progressive” wing of the movement. Nonetheless, Montessori practice varies from classroom to classroom as well as from school to school. The practice depicted here has been identified by some as tending toward the traditional rather than the progressive. So that readers may judge for themselves, I have attempted to include as much detail as possible regarding student/teacher interactions.
8. See Cossentino (2005) for a fuller treatment of the cultural implications of being an “outsider” or “non-Montessorian.”
9. *Directress* is Montessori’s term for teacher, which she coined to suggest her vision of the teacher as someone who guides or “directs” rather than controls student attention.
10. See Mehan (1979) for a full examination of the Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE) sequence, a structural feature of classroom discourse produced by the tendency of teachers to ask questions whose answers they already know. See also Macbeth (2003) for a discussion of the significance of Mehan’s formulation.

11. Montessori sketched four planes of development, birth to 6, 6–12, 12–18, and 18–24, in which the developing person moves progressively through successive stages from sensory motor to abstraction and moral development. These planes roughly correspond to Piagetian stage theory. Montessori asserted that the first plane was the most important for establishing skills and habits necessary for future development, and also the most neglected.
12. “Big work” refers to the child’s most absorbing, challenging work of the morning. It is typically the climax of the morning work cycle, and often takes place after several shorter periods of engagement followed by rest or what Montessori called “false fatigue” (1909/1964). The concept of “big work” is distinct from “great work,” which most often refers to the general purposes of Montessori education. See note 15.
13. The three-period lesson, outlined in detail in *The Discovery of the Child*, details the manner in which new materials should be presented to the young child. The sequence consists of first showing the child the new material, then asking the child to show the teacher that same material, and finally asking the child to name the material. Each stage is accompanied by a script: (1) “This is . . . ,” (2) “Show me . . . ,” (3) “What is this?”
14. I use Gumperz’ (1982) term somewhat liberally here to refer to the seamless shifting among interpretive systems that characterize both student and teacher talk animated by the construct of work.
15. I note, as well, that the speech pattern is inconsistent with those established within the classroom, suggesting that Ethan has been exposed to IRE sequences in other dimensions of his life, and further confirming the dominance of IRE sequences in interactions involving children whether in or out of school.
16. What I refer to as “big work” is most often called “great work” by Maria Montessori and her followers. While “great work” is the more common term, the teachers I studied preferred the more colloquial “big work.”
17. The phrase “Catholic worldview” is a prominent fixture in discussions of Catholic theology, and refers to a set of distinguishing characteristics (e.g., theistic, Trinitarian, Eucharistic, sacramental, hierarchical). See Cunningham (1987) and Zanzig (2000) for introductory discussions. McGreevy’s (2003) historical treatment of tensions between “core” American values and the Catholic worldview sheds light on the tendency among American Montessorians to secularize the movement.

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