

DESIGNING MONTESSORI DISCIPLINE FRAMEWORKS FOR ALL SETTINGS

by Katy Myers

During the process of conceptualizing the school of which she is the founding principal, Denver Montessori Junior/Senior High School, Katy Myers' driving question was, "What exactly is Montessori high school?" Her answer to this question gets to the heart of the mission of many Montessori high schools. She concluded that her high school must be guided by the principle that "adolescence is the sensitive period for social justice." In presenting how her thinking developed from this point, Myers offers an essential understanding of the work, at both the junior and high school levels, that is centered around empowering adolescents with the tools they need to have the agency to make social change.

It's exciting to be up here and talk about Denver Montessori Junior/Senior High School (DMHS), as I feel that a number of you were with me at the start of this journey. Four years ago I had the opportunity to present here at the NAMTA refresher about the creation of DMHS. Being a public school with innovation status allows us to have all of the benefits of being a district school and also provides us with a large number of waivers that makes it possible for us to be a fully implemented Montessori adolescent program.

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Now, four years later, we have a solid junior high school with 126 seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students, and this year we opened our high school with 25 tenth graders. All of my teachers have been through the NAMTA/AMI Montessori Orientation to Adolescent Studies or are attending this summer. Several have started Montessori training at other levels as well. This is the first year of our high school, so I think we are the most recent among the four high schools presenting in considering brand new high school design.

After many years of doing this work, I am a firm believer that we must fully take into account our population and our place as we design our high schools, and thus there will necessarily be a wide variety of paths our different schools take depending on those factors. DMHS is located in Northwest Denver. In our student population, 73% of our students identify as Latino, African American, or other nonwhite, and 50% of our students qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. A significant number of our students will be the first in their families to attend college, should they choose to attend college. Nearly all of our students have come up through the Montessori elementary schools within Denver Public Schools.

Due to our innovation status, we have the ability to create our own schedule and curriculum. There are very few obstacles or limitations put before us. We really do have the freedom we need to meet our mission and vision.

A year ago we were deep in the creative process of high school design; the number one question, as always, was what exactly is Montessori high school? What makes it different than the many excellent progressive and strong academic programs already in existence? What do we have to offer that makes it worth the incredibly hard work necessary to bring about a program where the stakes are so high, and where parent buy-in is truly an upward battle?

While here at the refresher course last year, I had an amazing epiphany. It happened during one of the breakout seminar groups when we were talking about high school. During the back and forth, Chris, our friend from the Philippines, made the point that he felt as if the upper plane of adolescence was the “sensitive period for social justice.” Suddenly all the lights went on for me. In *From Childhood*

to *Adolescence*, Dr. Montessori writes that during adolescence, it “is the time, the ‘sensitive period’ when there should develop the most noble characteristics that would prepare a man to be social, that is to say, a sense of justice and a sense of personal dignity.” After hearing Chris, it all crystallized for me. *Adolescence is the sensitive period for social justice*. And, if that is the case, then our high school program must be designed under that guiding principle.

If one were to believe, as I do now, that adolescents are entering into a sensitive period for social justice, then our job at DMHS is to create the prepared environment that gives adolescents the agency to act upon their social justice impulses and that provides them the momentum to continue to act as they enter their next phase, whether at university or in a career.

And so, the next light bulb that went off for me was the understanding of the purpose of our farm schools and junior high school programs. I realized, and again this is my opinion, that the purpose of these lower adolescent programs is the direct and indirect preparation that instills agency in our students, the agency to act in socially just ways. The farm, the microeconomy, the occupations, the integrated humanities projects, the creative and physical expressions, all of these initiatives give our students the tools they need in high school to start to meaningfully engage in civic action. The definition of *agency*, as stated by Merriam Webster, is the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power. I repeat, the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power. But in order to exert power, one has to feel that they have power to exert. That is the work that I believe we start at the earliest stages of Montessori education, but that, I feel, we explicitly address in our adolescent work. Suddenly, the deepest purpose of our junior high became clear to me, which is to foster agency within our students. That is why it is so important to focus on the entire syllabus to guide us in creating opportunities to build agency in our adolescents.

A rigorous academic program is no longer just to meet state standards so that we can stay open, or to ensure that our students get into great colleges. We do rigorous academics in high school because it brings literacy and therefore power to our students.

I brought my epiphany home to my very talented high school team, and it deeply resonated with them as well. It became the guiding question as we designed the high school. What is power, and how do we foster it with our students? Literacy is a form of power. An illiterate person, no matter how intelligent, will struggle to be heard. We realized that literacy, and not just reading literacy, but literacy in all subject areas was crucial: historical literacy, scientific literacy, mathematical literacy and, of course, language literacy. That understanding changes the *why* of academics. A rigorous academic program is no longer just to meet state standards so that we can stay open, or to ensure that our students get into great colleges. We do rigorous academics in high school because it brings literacy and therefore power to our students.

University degrees are another clear path to gaining power. But in order to get a degree, one must be prepared for university. What does that mean? For our students, it is beyond a good test score. It is navigating the complex financial aid systems, overcoming the belief that college is for other people, and addressing the various systemic realities that make the path to college harder for first-generation college students. And so, within our framework, we have intentionally created systems where our students will attend college classes their junior and senior years. This creates challenges for our community, but it makes the path to college *graduation* (which is a much different subject than starting college) more possible.

The next framework we address is the power to go out to the community and to learn how to become change agents. Rachel, our program director, put into our schedule regular Wednesday going outs, where the students hold their classes in different parts of the city. This includes our local colleges, incubator sights, and libraries that are also hubs for activism. Students learn to navigate the local transportation systems and are exposed to a wide variety of adults involved in social activism and not-for-profit entrepreneurship. Students then become inspired to join some of these organizations, and we ask that they bring back news of the work they are doing.

Rigorous academics, preparation for college, ability to engage in the community—these are the philosophical frameworks that are now the foundation of our high school. And so, when we talk about

curriculum, AP, concurrent enrollment, electives, international trip, service work, etc., we start with the understanding that our students are entering into the sensitive period for social justice. How are we creating our program to address these needs? How do we cover the timelines necessary for our students to be historically literate, and yet do the deep dives recognizing the heroes and the heroic movements that have evolved our civilization? How do we cover the vast scope of scientific skills, vocabulary, and concepts that foster scientific literacy, while also doing the meaningful research and experiments that address the significant scientific challenges our world is facing?

We are still in creation mode. The high school team has created a guiding document that we will use to measure how well our academic units and other programmatic offerings are meeting the mission and vision of our school. It is still in draft mode, but it explicitly calls out social justice, literacy in that subject area, opportunities for community partnerships and service, and preparation for success in university, along with the well-known Montessori values of choice, rigor, relevance, and contribution to community. It is with this document that we will hold our discussion of future high school curriculum, schedule, AP, and concurrent enrollment. With every next step, we will ask this guiding question: *How are the decisions we are making helping to build agency in our students so that they have the power to act upon their desire to change the world?*

