

Those Mysterious Montessori Materials: The Great Lessons

by Tim Seldin

Many parents and schools focus on basic skills: reading, writing, and math. But the basics are truly keys that allow learners to get access to the real curriculum, which should be thought of as an interwoven tapestry of the sciences, technology, literature, society, and all of the things human beings have done throughout history.

If children are exposed to a rich curriculum in a way that feels inviting (and not stressful) they tend to become excited about learning how the world works. This is what makes children want to read and do research. It's what helps them to understand how and why we use mathematics.

Whether it's business economics, anthropology, archeology, the story of famous lives, architecture, engineering, invention, the true curriculum is endless.

Our goal is to sow seeds of wonder and to ignite children's curiosity, interest, and imagination.

In Montessori, a key part of how we approach this is by helping children to see that we are all members of the human family. Our roots lie in the distant past, and history is the story of our common heritage.

Without a strong sense of history, we cannot begin to know who we are as individuals today. Our goal is to develop a global perspective, and the study of history and world cultures forms a key cornerstone of the Montessori curriculum.

We use many learning strategies to begin this journey, beginning with stories, but also using timelines, illustrations, and hands-on experiences to help children begin

to imagine how the world as we know it came to be.

Montessori described this as a "Cosmic Curriculum," which may sound odd at first, but is meant to imply a child coming away with a broad sense of the birth of the universe, earth science, the formation of life, and how human beings met their needs and developed societies and the cultures of the world.

These studies begin simply but weave together everything from astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, archeology, linguistics, mathematics, geometry, architecture, industry, trade, and civic life.

Montessori's Cosmic Curriculum helps children to see how everything is interconnected in the universe. It is a steppingstone to lifelong learning.

One of the key components of the Montessori cosmic curriculum is the use of what Montessori calls the "Great Lessons". The Great Lessons are a classic element in the Montessori curriculum, especially during the elementary years, although we can introduce them even earlier and expand on them in the adolescent years.

Among other things, the Great Lessons are powerful and inspiring stories that are used to introduce children to the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. They are typically presented in a dramatic and engaging way, using storytelling, props, and hands-on science experiments and activities.

They are a set of five stories or lessons that are designed to ignite a child's imagination and deeper



NewGate School photo taken by Wes Roberts

interest in learning about the world around them. These lessons are an integral part of the Montessori curriculum and are typically introduced to children between the ages of six and twelve.

The five Great Lessons are:

1. **The Story of the Universe:** This lesson introduces children to the formation of the universe, the formation of the Earth and our solar system. This lesson and the follow up activities take a first look at the question of how the world began, different stories that people have told, and what scientists believe, in simple terms, about the Big Bang, formation of the stars, galaxies, and solar systems, and how the Earth changed over the geologic eras setting the stage for life to emerge.
2. **The Story of Life:** This lesson explores the origins and evolution of life on earth, including the characteristics of living organisms, the classification of living things, and the interdependence of all living things. Most children tend to be fascinated by dinosaurs. During

the the Second Great lesson, we helped them to understand how life evolved from simple organisms to the plants and animals that we see today. Learning about the fossil records, and the way animals changed over time and adapted to their environment is all part of this element of the overall curriculum. While the lesson is just the introduction, the ongoing study of biology continues throughout the curriculum in Montessori all the way through high school.

3. **The Story of Human Beings:** This lesson delves into the evolution of humans, including the development of language, culture, and civilization. Beginning with a broad overview of the evolution of modern people from our Neolithic ancestors, and how archaeologists have found evidence of the way people lived many years ago. Children are introduced to the fundamental needs that all human beings share, how we have met those needs in different parts of the world, early tools, and how civilization developed.

4. **The Story of Writing:** This lesson explores the history of writing, including the development of different writing systems and the role of writing in human communication.

5. **The Story of Numbers:** This lesson introduces children to the concept of numbers and their importance in human society, including the development of different number systems and the use of numbers in science, mathematics, and technology.

The Great Lessons are not simply stories that are told to children but are opportunities for children to engage in hands-on learning activities and explore their own interests and curiosity.

These lessons from the center of the elementary curriculum, with all areas of the classroom spiraling out from the Great Lessons. The Story of the Universe leads to science and geography. The Story of Life leads to the study of biology and zoology. The Story of Human Beings leads to cultures of the world. The Story of Writing leads to the language

area. The Story of Numbers leads to mathematics and geometry. These five lessons lead to all the other materials and lessons throughout the six years of elementary and beyond.

By presenting these lessons in a way that is engaging and accessible to children, Montessori educators aim to inspire children to become lifelong learners who are passionate about exploring the world around them. ■

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Tim Seldin is President of the Montessori Foundation and Chair of the International Montessori Council. His more than 40 years of experience in Montessori education includes 22 years as Headmaster of the Barrie School in Silver Spring, Maryland, his *alma mater* from toddler through high school graduation. Tim was Co-Founder and Director of the Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies and the Center for Guided Montessori Studies. He earned a B.A. in History and Philosophy from Georgetown University, an M.Ed. in Educational Administration and Supervision from The American University, and his Montessori certification from the American Montessori Society. Tim Seldin is the author of several books on Montessori Education, including *How to Raise An Amazing Child* and *The World in the Palm of Her Hand*. Look for his new book, *Montessori for Everyone*, co-authored with Lorna McGrath, soon to be released.



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