

Assistant's Talk

By Mercedes Castle

Presented as the keynote address to the 2008 OMA Assistant's Workshop

Hello and thank you for joining me today. As Cathy said, I am a Montessori guide and administrator. I work with the youngest of children, those under three. And yes, I am crazy.

I have been where you all are now. It was about eight years ago. I have been thinking about this talk for a while, and remembering what were the struggles that I had starting out where you are now. Because I imagine that they will also be your struggles. But, I am so excited for you, especially those of you coming from other childcare gigs, new to Montessori. For you will be the most changed this year.

As the aftercare director at Child's View Montessori School, I was the support for the lunch/outside time/nap melee and then ran the aftercare program. I had worked in conventional daycares before my experience at Child's View. I didn't know that children were even capable of doing some of the tasks that are commonplace in the Children's House. It is truly awe inspiring to see firsthand what children are capable of in a space prepared specifically for them.

And so today, we've carved out an hour in our lives to ruminate about Montessori's discoveries about children, and how these discoveries are incorporated into the Montessori philosophy and practice. We'll talk about the general role of the adult in a Montessori classroom, and the way in which the adult supports the work of the child in their process of self-discovery. Throughout our hour together, we'll revisit the themes of peace and preparation with respect to the work of the conscious adult in the context of the Montessori classroom.

In order to provide an experience for the child consistent with what we know that they need in order to realize their full human potential, we offer the prepared Montessori environment and the adult prepared to support the child on their journey.

Maria Montessori wrote and spoke about the importance of this preparation. Although you may or may not have completed a formal training course of the method of Montessori education, as an adult in the classroom, as an assistant, office resource or afternoon support, you are a part of the child/adult/environment triad. And as teachers and assistants alike we must work towards preparing ourselves to be with children, so that when we are with them, we are our best selves.

Working with children is an exercise in our own discovery and growth. In many ways working with children highlights the deficiencies in which we were raised, and reveals behavior patterns that are both negative and positive. How many of you swore that you would never sound like your mother, and then one day, there it is – "if I've told you

once, I've told you a thousand times..."An awareness and acknowledgement of your own experience is important in identifying possible hindrances that your own experience brings to your work with children. Because at times of great stress, we go back to the ways that we were treated as children, and if this way isn't the most positive or peaceful way, then we have some work to do.

If you work directly with children, in the classroom or in an aftercare room, you are part of the teaching team. I like to think of the guide as the captain – because every ship needs a captain. While the guide is the specialist, gives lessons, we know that every adult in the classroom absolutely affects the emotional, physical and spiritual climate of the classroom. In the slums of San Lorenzo over one hundred years ago, she speaks and writes that the academic achievement of the children with whom she worked was not the aim of her experience with them.

From Article No. 1 (Second lecture of the 19th International Montessori Training Course held in London in 1933). The following transcript of the lecture appeared in the January, 1999 issue of the "Voice of IMC"

This first institution housed about forty children of poor illiterate parents: itinerant sellers of flowers for example, or porters, etc. These parents were nearly always away from their homes in search of work, so that during the day the children were abandoned to themselves. When we first gathered them together, they had all the characteristics of children in similar conditions: they were timid, afraid of everyone, liable to hide themselves as soon as they saw a stranger. Their ages ran from three to six years. The aim of collecting them was not for purposes of instruction. They were gathered together to stop them from soiling and spoiling the wall of the house. They were entrusted to me not as a teacher, but as a doctor, for the children appeared in need of medical care for malnutrition and similar ailments. However, I was free to educate them also if I was so inclined. Moreover, I had been given means for doing this.

I will now tell you what assistants I chose. No self-respecting teacher would have accepted the task.

So by her definition, none of us are in our right minds.

But I think that what Montessori was saying, and continued to say and write is that her definition of 'teacher' was much different than the conventional definition of her day. The teacher was the boss, she was large and in charge, filling her student's empty little heads with thoughts and knowledge. The child's achievements were her achievement. I think that not only did the teacher tell the students what to think, but she told them how to think. A time-honored tradition as I imagine many of you can testify. Pink Floyd even wrote a song about it.

Maria Montessori described a new teacher who would be passive and gentle...guiding behavior and actions, not controlling them. Montessori's teacher doesn't just watch, she observes – actively aware of the child's actions. Montessori's teacher facilitates a connection between the child and the materials...she sees a need or sensitivity and she changes the environment to meet that need...and then waits until her offering is discovered organically.

Montessori's description of her chosen assistant (someone not in their right mind) is someone who can support this by putting their own ego aside for the benefit of the children in her charge. I'm not sure if this is part of your specific job description, but it is part of your spiritual preparation for your work as the classroom support. There are also some very material tasks involved in your role as the support.

Some of the tasks that fall to the support staff are not the most glamorous tasks – for me I recall some pretty unsavory moments involving a two year old, a messy bm and a slide. But you must know that they are just as important, as the tasks of the guide in keeping the classroom community flowing.

When you are in the classroom, you are small. You can be small by limiting your movement, staying low to the ground. You can be small by speaking quietly and only when necessary. You stay small by moving deliberately, and speaking to others face to face, and not across the room. You can be small by crouching down, and not just bending down to speak to a child. Crouching is also a more respectful and peaceful way to speak with children.

Montessori invites us to extend the same respect to a child that one would to another adult. To me, this means that we are authentic with children; we give to them our true selves by speaking with them in a true and honest tone of voice. We use real language appropriate to the age and ability of each child.

Like the children, you must be oriented in your environment. You must know where everything is kept – and not just work on the shelves but additional supplies. You should know how to change the toilet paper roll, and the paper towels. You should know how to refill the soap. And when you find them empty or running low, make sure they get replenished. Your guide and/or administrator has hopefully been very clear in their expectations of you with respect to keeping the classroom supplied. If this has been unclear, please go back today and tell them, Mercedes Castle told me that I need to know where these things are.

You should have clear written guidelines detailing your daily responsibilities. There should be something in writing that includes the protocol for caring for the environment, relationships with other staff, guidance and discipline policies, and interactions with parents. You should have a copy of the parent handbook, and you should probably read it, and know it. So that when a parent brings a child to school and

tells you that they vomited in the car, you can tell them that the parent handbook specifically prohibits caring for children who have vomited within the last twenty four hours.

Most schools insist that communication between support staff and parents be kept very general, and that only a child's guide or the administration discuss specific issues with parents. Your role is to communicate to your administrator or guide and then refer the parent back to the guide or administrator. When in doubt document, and always come clean if you fear that you've said too much. If a parent is pressing you for details about their child's day, you can say something like "Edison had a nice big snack. He sat with Dylan. I saw them laughing a lot". And then suggest that the parent email their child's guide, or stop in to speak with administration, etc. if they are looking for more details.

You are responsible for receiving fifteen clock hours of continuing education this year. Look for training opportunities that inspire you – either Montessori specific or otherwise. We are fortunate to have two training programs in this city, and the Montessori Institute Northwest as well as the Oregon Montessori Association and the PNMA all offer great training opportunities for the Montessori professional. Your administration should support you in getting these hours, but this is a great opportunity to pursue your own interests relative to working with children.

Working in a Montessori classroom requires cultivating the art of observation. Observing implies activity. It is not just watching passively. You can and will see things that the guide does not see. Find time to communicate your observations with your guide, especially playground observations.

You are going to have many opportunities to observe and engage with children outside. You all have different outside time arrangements, but I can say with certainty that it is not for any of you a break time. Being outside is a break from the classroom, but it is not a break from the children. In some ways being outside is more work, because the children will need help sometimes in finding productive games, and negotiating social interactions. This is where your bag of tricks will come in handy. And also where you can defer to the guide, and ask her for specific actions you can take in redirecting behavior, both outside and in.

In the classroom, the main role of the assistant is to protect the guide and the child while they are in the space of a lesson. And this is where your spiritual preparation becomes important.

Montessori writes a lot about the spiritual preparation of the teacher, and this is my favorite offering (from *The Absorbent Mind*):

"It is often we who obstruct the child and so become responsible for anomalies that last a lifetime. Always must our treatment be as gentle as possible, avoiding violence for we easily fail to realize how violent and hard we are being. We have to watch

ourselves most carefully. The real preparation for education is a study of one's self. The training of the teacher who is to help life is something far more than a learning of ideas – it is a training of the spirit. “

Whoa, right? She's not just talking about physical violence, but of emotional violence, or violence of our words or actions.

Montessori acknowledges the inherent power imbalance between adult and child. Acknowledging this power imbalance is crucial in having and facilitating peaceful communication and interactions with children. We operate in an environment where children are at the center. Their development and their opportunities for independence are paramount. And so with this in mind, we like to talk about empowering children by giving them choices, which I encourage you to do. Please think about this power dynamic when offering choices and make sure that what you are offering is truly a choice. Some choices for example, you can do it by yourself or I can help you (which I admit I have used in the past) sounds a little less like a choice, and more like ...I am bigger than you and I'm going to make you do what I want you to do.

You are the adult, and by virtue, the more powerful body. So when you are offering a choice to help a child feel empowered, make sure, it is a real choice.

Punishment and praise are not used in the Montessori classroom. Montessori wrote about intrinsic motivation, which means that it is important that a child do the 'right' thing because it's the 'right' thing, and not because they get an M-n-M or a sticker or some kind of reward, material or verbal.

That's not to say that we don't celebrate accomplishment, but not in the way that makes achievement of the child conditional to the adult's approval. And so 'Good job' reinforces the adult's power over the child and makes the child's achievement conditional to the adult's approval.

And so it is the same with punishment. Alfie Kohn writes;

“The popular view is that children who misbehave are just ‘testing limits’ a phrase often used as a justification for imposing more limits, or punishments. But perhaps such children are testing something else entirely: the unconditionality of our care for them. Perhaps they're acting in unacceptable ways to see if we'll stop accepting them.”

But we don't stop. We are peaceful. We are prepared. Spiritual preparation, practice, intention are all things that you will need for your 'bag o'tricks' which no assistant should ever be without. Working with children is a practice and a refinement of your own self and your own skills. You will find the way that feels most authentic to you, but I did bring some basic ideas in how to get there. Because I don't have a crystal ball, but I predict that you will have opportunity to work together with the other adults in the

school community to at times lovingly redirect child energy into more positive outcomes. So how do we do this? Through peaceful communication. Let's look at our handout...

Wow, sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? Seems like it would be a lot easier just to reinforce desirable behavior with stickers and pizza parties and stick those bad kids in a corner until they've racked up enough naughty time and we can just kick them out. And they become someone else's problem. Well, it is easier. And I am sad and sorry to report that there is a fair amount of what I described going on out there. Not here, because we know better, and Montessori knew better. She discovered a better way, a peaceful way. Peaceful communication is humanizing.

When I answer the question, "What is Montessori education?" for prospective parents, or those unfamiliar with Montessori education, I often highlight the peace and social justice component of this method and practice of being with children, as did Montessori herself. Academic achievement was not Montessori's primary goal – and as the children showed great achievement academically, what Montessori consistently wanted society to recognize was the true social achievement of the children – that forty children could work in harmony; peacefully and joyfully. The classrooms were quiet and happy, and children worked together to solve problems. This was and is an exciting revelation – if such a thing is possible in a room of forty children under six, than it is possible globally. I think that Montessori recognized the possibility of world peace – and for her (and for me) this was a monumental discovery!

And so you may ask, what *is* Montessori? Describing Montessori can be kind of like describing obscenity – "I know it when I see it". Montessori transcends any materials on the shelf, or brand of training an adult may have had. So let's start with *who is* Doctor Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori was Italy's first woman doctor. She grew up in a pretty well to do household, and I'm sure was expected to marry well and produce lots of children. I've heard a few stories regarding her acceptance to medical school, and the one I like best is the one I'll share with you. Maria Montessori had to apply to medical school twice, even though her test scores and grades were beyond reproach. The second time she applied as M. Montessori and was accepted. I believe that some wheels needed to be greased, but they let her in, and surely Maria became a doctor. She landed a gig working with children who had been deemed 'mentally unfit' and as the scientist she was, carefully observed the children in determining how she may 'treat' them. Using her scientific approach as well as some didactic materials borrowed from her predecessors, Jean Itard and Eduardo Seguin, Montessori taught these children to read and write. Their performance on standardized tests at least matched the scores of the children who were not disabled. Of course her work was heralded by the powers that were, and Montessori's answer to being called a 'miracle worker' was to ask 'if these kids are

capable of this than what are *normal* children capable of? And this event marks the beginning of Montessori's journey.

She describes the first experiment in 1907;

The (children's) behavior led us to become aware of a fundamental truth, namely that the child works for his inner development and not to reach an exterior aim and that when he has done this work he has not really developed a special ability, but he has developed something in himself. Joy, the lack of timidity, growing intelligence, these were the phenomena which manifested themselves ever more clearly as time went on. Another thing, which at the time seemed strange, was the need for order which developed in the children. They put everything back in its proper place. There were certain scientific instruments, which were difficult for the children to handle, but when the time came for the assistant to put them away, the children tried to do it before her. She evidently did not realize the reason for this, as I found out on one occasion when I happened to be present. She told the children not to touch these objects, which had nothing to do with them. I asked her to let the children do as they wanted and I saw that the objects themselves were of no interest to them; it was the order in which they were placed that interested them. Gradually we came to recognize the child's love for order and witnessed its surprising memory of the exact position of each object.

In time we came to witness what I mentioned in the beginning the "conversion" of the child. These children, who at the beginning of the experiment had been constantly weeping, no longer wept, and they had acquired a certain ease; they were no longer timid, they acted in a frank and open way. People marveled at the fact that the children of poor working people without culture behaved in such a manner. The parents themselves not only noticed that their children's characteristics had changed, but that they had become more intelligent - so much more intelligent than before, that they asked me if I would teach them to read and write. They were so insistent that I ended by trying. This also met with success. The children were so eager for knowledge that after six months even those of four-and-a-half years had learned to read and to write and the six-year-old had reached a level parallel to that of children of the second class of the elementary schools of the time.

For me, and indeed for the whole world (because the press had spread the news), this seemed a miracle. But there was another event which surprised me even more. Thinking that children might absorb culture little by little was surprising but conceivable. What was inconceivable was that the children improved also in health as if they had undergone a physical cure. They had been anemic, they continued to be ill-nourished and in spite of it their circulation improved and they became more healthy. Though, at the time, to me as a doctor in medicine the fact seemed incredible, I was made to realize that certain conditions which fulfilled psychic needs evidently had also influence upon the physical body.

And so that's how it all started. Maria Montessori discovered something about the development of the child and she spent the next 20 years of her life refining and pondering her discoveries. Montessori wrote about these discoveries, and developed her methods based upon them. Maria Montessori talked and wrote about the Human Tendencies. They should sound familiar...strangely familiar, but it's relevant to remind ourselves what they are;

- Development occurs naturally and spontaneously through a child's own discovery through movement
- Orientation –In order to explore we need to feel safe and oriented to our environment.
- Order – Not like, order in the court! through classifying
- Abstract thought and creativity
- Work, Repetition, exactness, perfection
- Development of the will
- Connection – humans need physical and emotional connection to other people. Communication makes this possible, and language takes this connection to a higher level.

As indicated above, in Montessori's own words, education is peripheral to the development of the whole child, and that no part of what makes us human can be ignored in the education of the child.

- Children enter into sensitive periods for acquiring new knowledge or skills
- Sensitive periods are limited periods of time when a child shows a heightened interest in a certain activity or activities
- These periods will pass whether the new skill is acquired or not. According to Montessori, during a sensitive period it is very easy for children to acquire certain abilities, such as language, discrimination of sensory stimuli, and mental modeling of the environment (Montessori, 1966, p. 38). Once the sensitive period for a particular ability is past, the development of the brain has progressed past the point at which information can be simply absorbed. The child must then be taught the ability, resulting in expenditure of conscious effort, and not producing results as great as could be produced if the sensitive period had been taken advantage of.
- The period between birth and six is unequalled in physical and mental development – or until the full development of the brain is complete

Between birth and six years, a child undertakes the awesome task of constructing themselves as a person. Children are capable of absorbing information passively from their environment because children have what Montessori referred to as an 'Absorbent mind'.

In the Montessori classroom, we offer freedom within limits. The freedoms and limits are specific to the age group that you work with, but generally the main limit is that we are free as long as we're not bothersome to anyone else.

Each of you will spend about an hour or so with either Dawn, Michelle, or Venus and you will most likely look deeply at the prepared environment, and I imagine that the topic of human tendencies and sensitive periods specific to the age group of children with whom you work will be examined more closely, and that the relationship between the tendencies and sensitive periods and the environment will be highlighted.

Earlier I mentioned having a 'bag of tricks'. Peaceful communication should be in this bag. Also in your bag should be a whole host of songs, stories, finger plays, anecdotes and ideas. When your bag is empty, look around... and be prepared to do the same thing you would if your clothes were on fire...Remain calm, and Stop. Drop. Roll.

Wow, so we've (and when I say we, I mean me) have been talking for a while now. We talked at length about Montessori, and I gave you the reader's digest version of her history and philosophy. If you're hungry for more, and you have a computer, please feel free to Google, Maria Montessori. She's out there in cyberspace and you can be her friend on MySpace even. We talked about some logistical considerations that usually accompany the role of the support staff in a Montessori school. And we talked at great length about the importance of your own preparation of self as someone whose actions will affect the children that you work with. And hopefully you have a few things in your bag of tricks.

So I leave you with the best advice that I can think of...four words...when you are in doubt...your clothes have burned to dust and all you can think about is how great six o'clock is going to feel. It's the 'in case of emergency, break glass' advice.

Talk less. Love more.