

The Role of the Teacher

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The Montessori teacher is referred to with a title that is somewhat deceptive. The Montessori teacher is really more of a guide, or director, that facilitates the children in their daily tasks and work and guides them through the materials available for their use. For this reason, instead of using the term teacher, the term guide will be inserted. The role of the guide in a Montessori classroom has 4 main components according to Dorer, as stated in an on-line lecture. These 4 primary tasks that the guide must be responsible for are 1) the preparation of the environment, 2) observation of the children, 3) presenting lessons, and 4) acting as a model. They have been listed here in chronological order, laying out a clear plan for the guide during the day.

Before we can explore these 4 tasks, however, a review of the Montessori philosophy must be undertaken. The guide must be operating within the Montessori philosophy in order for the children to reap the benefits that are put forth through the method. The guide must maintain a proper view of the child. The child is the future of humanity, and requires the utmost respect. It is important to remember that the child that comes to the Children's House is in the middle of a journey of self-construction and not a "finished product" so to speak. The outcome of our work is who the child will grow up to become. A Montessori guide must have a holistic view of the curriculum. A partial view is simply not enough. An understanding of the entire curriculum will allow the guide to properly plan and facilitate the child during this journey. As mentioned earlier, the teacher is more accurately described as a guide or director. His role is to direct the students through the curricular content within the Montessori philosophy, not to teach the materials. The classroom is intended to be a community of peace, within which a community should evolve. This community should be a microcosm of real life outside

the school. The guide must help the children evolve into a peaceful community, which will be influenced largely by the attitude the guide brings into the environment everyday. The idea of cosmic education is also highly important. The guide must bring the children to a deep understanding of their place in the universe, so that upon becoming adults, the person may choose a life task that suits them. The final point to be reviewed is that of the principle of the conservation of the materials. The Montessori materials are the curriculum, and function as an entire set. One material is the foundation for many others, so missing materials will compromise the integrity of the method. Neither adding inappropriate materials nor excluding any materials that are a part of the entire set are acceptable in the Montessori philosophy.

Back to the 4 main roles of the Montessori guide, the first of which is that of preparing (and maintaining) the environment. Dr. Montessori states that is “the adult’s task to build an environment superimposed on nature, an outward work calling for activity and intelligent effort; it is what we call productive work, and is by its nature social, collective, and organized” (2003, p. 198). One aspect of this task is to examine the space that you have been given, assess it, and arrange the materials in a logical and proper manner. Create ample work spaces on the floor and on tables, bearing in mind that all furniture must be to the proper dimensions, relative to the age group occupying the environment. Another aspect is that of maintaining the materials. The children should help with this task, but ultimately the guide is responsible. Any damaged materials must be repaired promptly. The environment must be prepared every day, so the children return to a place of proper order every day. The environment must be kept clean as well. Shelves, tables and materials should not be allowed to remain dusty or

dirty. This is a daily, active process that must take place. The final aspect of the environment is that it must be warm and inviting. The goal is to create a place that will welcome the child in, providing a safe, warm, and loving place to come and learn everyday. A daily greeting is helpful, as are flowers on tables, artwork, and other elements that beautify the environment. The guide's attitude can be included here, as the guide is the dynamic link between the child and the environment.

Once the environment is prepared, the second task of the Montessori guide is that of observing the children. Observation is the key to the Montessori method, and actually referred to as it's core and heartbeat. The foundations of the entire method are based on the observations of Dr. Montessori, and her work that stemmed from those observations.

Polk-Lillard quotes Dr. Montessori thusly:

The teacher must bring not only the capacity, but the desire to observe natural phenomena. In our system, she must become a passive, much more than an active, influence, and her passivity shall be composed of anxious scientific curiosity, and of absolute respect for the phenomenon which she wishes to observe. The teacher must understand and feel her position of observer: the activity must lie in the phenomenon (1972, pp. 79-80).

Clearly, observations in the classroom are very important. The guide should try to spend at least thirty minutes each day observing the group. Upon finishing with one child, the proper action is then to circulate through the room, not go to another child. Circulate through the room and observe from a few different vantage points. Note who is doing what, and what is needed where. While circulating, ask yourself "Does anyone **need** my help?" Do not ask "Who **wants** my help?" If a child is clearly in need, then that child will be addressed next. If all is well in the room, then retreat to the guide's observation chair and resume observations, denoting them into a notebook. This is referred to as sitting out. The idea is that you will not engage the children during this time of sitting

out. It is the guide's time to sit and take notes. It is not possible to be an observer and a participant at the same time, so make it clear to the children that this is your observation time. The guide should be recording his observations into his notebook for later review. While sitting out, write detailed notes on your observations. At the end of each day, review those notes, and in a different colored pen, annotate those notes, adding any relevant details. These notes should then be reviewed weekly, allowing for accurate lesson planning to take place. This is where a holistic knowledge of the curriculum is key.

After the environment is prepared, and observations have taken place, the next task of the guide is to present lessons, or "presentations" as they are referred to in the Children's House. When giving a presentation, the philosophy has an "open lesson policy" where any child, even if this work is thought to be too advanced for him, may sit and participate or listen in. Just because the guide feels the child may not be ready for that presentation quite yet, doesn't mean that the child should be denied access to the presentation. The guide should take advantage of the child's interest, and "plant the seed" so to speak, so that the child will be anxious to engage in the materials being presented at a future time. Lessons may take place in one of 4 formats. There are individual lessons, as in the Children's House. Another lesson format is a collective, where all the children are present. This doesn't take place often, and is usually reserved for messages and grace and courtesy lessons. The elementary ages usually engage in small group lessons. This stimulates deep thought through conversation with peers. Small groups may be designed by age or focus. Age groupings ensure that the children will all be exposed to the entire curriculum. Focus groups are formed with students that

have a high level of interest in a particular subject. Focus groups may also be designated for helping a group of children that may be struggling on one particular concept. The final lesson presentation format is that of coaching. If, during the guide's circulation time, he observes a child in need of help, the guide will engage and coach that student to ensure understanding and successful completion of a task. One point in need of mention regarding lesson presentation is that of the direct and indirect aims. The direct aim is the desired outcome of the activity the child is engaged in. The child will likely be aware of the purpose of the activity that may be referred to as "metacognitive" in nature. The indirect aim is not clearly apparent to the child. Indirect aims are preparations for future materials and activities. There are many indirect aims in the prepared environment, as many activities are designed as foundation pieces for more challenging activities to come later.

The fourth task of the Montessori guide is to act as a model to the children. Everything that the guide does is an indirect presentation to the children, so every step should be measured and taken with care. Even if you believe that no children are watching, you must still behave appropriately as they will notice your every move. The guide should dress nicely, and take steps to ensure proper hygiene. The guide should clearly inform the children of how he is to be addressed, and should be consistent within a school. When communicating with other adults, the guide must maintain proper behavior, using a soft voice, remaining calm, and speaking clearly. Modeling proper respect is another key to keep in mind. When speak to a child, they require the same respect and treatment as an adult. The guide must maintain a calm, soft voice, and never yell out. The guide should bend down and meet the child at his eye level, face to face for

clear communication to take place. When the guide moves through the room, he must move with a purpose, calmly and deliberately. Frantic movement will signal to the children that they may behave in a similar manner which will undermine the atmosphere of the environment. The guide should also model repetition, and leave in the middle of lessons or presentations. Invite the children to repeat the activities, and never offer them the option of putting away the materials. Encourage multiple usages of materials.

Walking away during the repetition stage of the work will help the child to build independence. The guide must also learn when to intervene and when not to. The guide should never interrupt a child's work to give praise or reprimand. This breaks the child's concentration and demonstrates a clear lack of respect. The guide should circulate quietly, without comment or interruption so that the children may continue their work. The guide must not allow his ego to lead him into the action of asserting himself where he is not needed. This tells the children that the guide doesn't truly believe that they can finish their work without the guides assistance or approval. The goal is to create independence, and intervening only when truly necessary is a key component to that development.

In conclusion, the Montessori guide must be prepared to work within the Montessori philosophy in order to perform the tasks necessary. The role of the guide then is composed of 4 primary tasks: 1) the preparation of the environment, 2) observation of the children, 3) presenting lessons, and 4) acting as a model. The guide must respect the children's independence, and allow them to work without interruption. He must seek out and assist those in need, and not allow those who want his help to

dominate his time. Dr. Montessori points out that “we teachers can only help the work going on, as servants wait upon a master” (1995, p. 9)

References

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