

The Montessori Teacher and Her Role: Learning More About The Method



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The teacher, when she begins to work in our schools, must have a kind of faith that the child will reveal himself through work. She must free herself from all preconceived ideas concerning the levels at which the children may be. The many different types of children...must not worry her...The teacher must believe that this child before her will show his true nature when he finds a piece of work that attracts him. So what must she look out for? That one child or another will begin to concentrate.

—Maria Montessori *The Absorbent Mind*, p. 276

One of the most notable differences between Montessori teachers and traditional teachers is the enormous trust Montessori teachers place in the developmental abilities of the children. It takes a tremendous amount of faith to “follow the child”. It is so much easier to say to the children, follow where I lead and no one will get lost. Nonetheless, with careful observation and planning, Montessori teachers remain constantly alert to the direction each child is heading and actively works to help them succeed.

Montessori teachers are not the center of attention in the classroom. Their role centers on the preparation and organization of learning materials to meet the needs and interests of the Montessori children. The focus is on children learning, not on teachers teaching.

Working as a guide and facilitator, the Montessori teacher creates a well-prepared Montessori environment and an atmosphere of learning and inquisitiveness designed to move students from one activity and level to the next. A Montessori teacher often steps back while the children are working, allowing them to learn from their own discoveries and draw their own conclusions. Rather than supplying children with answers, the Montessori teacher asks them how they would solve the problem, actively engaging children in the learning process and enhancing critical thinking skills. In most cases, children learn directly from the environment and other children, rather than the teacher.

Dr. Montessori believed that the teacher should focus on the child as a person rather than on the daily lesson plans. Although the Montessori teacher plans daily lessons for each child, she must be alert to changes in the child’s interest, progress, mood, and behavior.

Subjects are interwoven and the Montessori teacher must be facile at presenting and understanding history, art, music, math, astronomy, botany, zoology, chemistry, physical geography, language, physics, geometry, and practical life works. The Montessori teacher is trained to give one-on-one or small group lessons and spend little time giving large group lessons. Lessons are brief and precise, meant to intrigue the minds of children so that they come back to learn more on their own. Montessori lessons center around the most basic

information necessary for the children to do the work: the name of the materials, where it can be found in the classroom and on the shelf, how to use the materials, and what can be done with them.

Montessori teachers are scientific observers of children. They avoid using rewards and punishments for good or poor work. Montessori teachers never criticize or interfere in a child's work. It is only in a trusting atmosphere that a child's personality has room to grow. Children must have the freedom to choose their own activities and learn to behave without restriction. Dr. Montessori thought this was *real* work and that the child would reveal his/her true nature once he/she found work that commanded his/her full attention.

In *The Absorbent Mind* (pp. 277-81), Maria Montessori offered some general principles of behavior for teachers in the Montessori classroom.

The teacher becomes the keeper and custodian of the environment. She attends to this instead of being distracted by the children's restlessness... All the apparatus is to be kept meticulously in order, beautiful and shining, in perfect condition... This means that the teacher also must be...tidy and clean, calm and dignified...The teacher's first duty is therefore to watch over the environment, and this takes precedence over all the rest. Its influence is indirect, but unless it be well done there will be no effective and permanent results of any kind, physical, intellectual or spiritual.

The teacher must...entice the children... The teacher, in this first period, before concentration has shown itself, must be like the flame, which heartens all by its warmth, enlivens and invites. There is no need to fear that she will interrupt some important psychic process, since these have not yet begun. Before concentration occurs, the [Montessori teacher] may do more or less what she thinks best; she can interfere with the children's activities as she deems necessary... She can tell stories, have some games and singing, use nursery rhymes and poetry. The teacher who has a gift for charming the children can have them do various exercises, which, even if they have no great value educationally, are useful in calming them. Everyone knows that a lively teacher attracts more than a dull one, and we can all be lively if we try... If at this stage there is some child who persistently annoys the others, the most practical thing to do is interrupt him...to break the flow of disturbing activity. The interruption may take the form of any kind of exclamation, or in showing a special and affectionate interest in the troublesome child.

Finally the time comes in which the children begin to take an interest in something: usually, in the exercises of Practical Life, for experience shows that it is useless and harmful to give the children Sensorial and Cultural apparatus before they are ready to benefit from it. Before introducing this kind of material, one must wait until the children have acquired the power to concentrate on something, and usually...this occurs with the exercises of Practical Life. When the child begins to show interest in one of these, the teacher must not interrupt, because this interest corresponds with natural laws and opens up a whole cycle of new activities... The

teacher, now, must be most careful. Not to interfere means not to interfere in any way. This is the moment at which the teacher most often goes wrong. The child, who up to that moment has been very difficult, finally concentrates on a piece of work... Praise, help, or even a look, may be enough to interrupt him, or destroy the activity. It seems a strange thing to say, but this can happen even if the child merely becomes aware of being watched. . . . The great principle that brings success to the teacher is this: as soon as concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist... The duty of the teacher is only to present new things when she knows that a child has exhausted all the possibilities of those he was using before.

Anne Burke Neubert, in *A Way of Learning* (1973), listed the following elements in the special role of the Montessori teacher:

- Montessori teachers **are the dynamic link** between children and the Prepared Environment.
- They **systematically observe** their students and interpret their needs.
- They **are constantly experimenting**, modifying the environment to meet their perceptions of each child's needs and interests, and objectively noting the result.
- They **prepare an environment** meant to facilitate children's independence and ability to freely select work that they find appealing, selecting activities that will appeal to their interests and keeping the environment in perfect condition, adding to it and removing materials as needed.
- They **carefully evaluate** the effectiveness of their work and the design of the environment every day.
- They **observe and evaluate** each child's individual progress.
- They **respect and protect** their students' independence. They must know when to step in and set limits or lend a helping hand, and when it is in a child's best interests for them to step back and not interfere.
- They **are supportive**, offering warmth, security, stability, and non-judgmental acceptance to each child.
- They **facilitate communication** among the children and help the children to learn how to communicate their thoughts to adults.
- They **interpret** the children's progress and their work in the classroom to parents, the school staff, and the community.
- They **present clear, interesting and relevant lessons** to the children. They attempt to engage the child's interest and focus on the lessons and activities in the environment.
- They **model desirable behavior** for the children, following the ground-rules of the class, exhibiting a sense of calm, consistency, grace and courtesy, and demonstrating respect for every child.
- They **are peace educators**, consistently working to teach courteous behaviors and conflict.
- They **are diagnosticians** who can interpret patterns of growth, development, and behavior in order to better understand the children and make necessary referrals and suggestions to parents.

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