

Spiritual Preparation:

An observer in a Montessori environment can immediately discern that the learning environment is very different from a traditionally designed classroom.

By Crystal Dahlmeier

Montessori International Magazine, (Montessori St. Nicholas, London) Spring, 2000

The room is designed for children who are moving freely, purposefully and respectfully, who follow their unique rhythm and learning styles. The atmosphere is one of cooperation in which children assist one another or engage in conversations. The teacher assumes the role of a conductor of an orchestra rather than a teacher. She presents lessons, observes, supports, suggests, and redirects, influencing children in a subtle and non-obtrusive manner. She strives to create a delicate balance, leaving children free to pursue their interests, yet leading and guiding them to new challenges.

To many observers, the Children's House appears to be magical. When successful teachers are asked to explain how this 'miracle' came about, they often speak in general philosophical terms, using words such as freedom, prepared environment, respect, planes of development, sensitive periods and so on. As we read from Montessori's writings, though, it is clear that she viewed the role of the directress as complex, multifaceted, and central to establishing and maintaining the Montessori environment, she was vague about how, specifically, to achieve those goals.

Inexperienced teachers generally attribute immense importance to lessons, imagining that their own preparation ends when they have presented the materials in the right way. The truth is far otherwise; the mission of the mistress is much more important than this. She has to direct the development of the child's soul. The limited role of a simple observer of children is quite different. Such a one does not aim at knowing the children, but simply at helping them. (Child in the Family)

The question remains, however: How do we look into a child's soul? How do we get to know the children? What do we do about a child who is a wanderer...not self-directed...aggressive?

Montessori provided a general framework and set of expectations for the directress. She was very careful not to proscribe specific techniques to deal with individual differences, perhaps recognizing that those would differ depending on time and culture. If we, as guides, carefully read and study Montessori's words, we can find the keys to successfully applying her principles in our daily work with children. It won't happen in a day, a week, or even upon completing a teacher education program. It is a lifelong endeavor, one that requires continual study, observation and reflection.

Becoming a Montessori directress requires preparation and development in four areas. The directress's spiritual development forms the foundation upon which all other areas can grow. As the preparer of the environment, the directress carefully develops and maintains the physical environment as well as the "human" environment that supports social and emotional development. As an astute and objective observer, the directress practices and refines her knowledge of children and philosophy, and 'fine tunes' the environment to each child. As an

effective communicator, the directress is able to articulate clearly and respectfully with children, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

The first step towards this, Montessori knew, is one of spiritual reflection.

...the teacher must prepare himself interiorly by systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most deeply rooted defects, those in fact which impede his relations with children. (Secret of Childhood)

To do this, we must be open to change. Only by careful examination of our views on life, children and education, can we be open to new perspectives. By examining our own biases and prejudices, we can work diligently to adapt and change those that don't support life.

Frederick Hudson, President of The Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, CA, has identified ten qualities of Self-Renewing Faculty. While he primarily addresses university teaching, many of the qualities he identifies are even more essential for those of us who work with children. As I describe each, I will attempt to adapt them to both Montessori philosophy and methods.

Montessori directresses are value driven. We must know intimately the Montessori philosophy and why we take certain actions. This knowledge and understanding provides the anchor and consistency needed to work with children and communicate our goals and methods to parents, administrators and the community.

Montessori directresses are connected to the world around them. We participate in and help children develop community. We are truly interested in children, their ideas, thoughts and activities. We can communicate and empathize with parents and work in cooperation with other teachers. We embrace the concept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and work to create a classroom community as well as a school community.

Montessori directresses need solitude and quiet. In order to regenerate and to reflect upon our actions, we must take time to be introspective and thoughtful. Each person will fulfill this need individually and personally. While some will meditate, others will seek nature, art or exercise.

Montessori directresses pace themselves. When one is committed to one's work, it is easy to work at it 24 hours a day. In a chaotic world, periodic breaks are insufficient for the renewal process to be effective. Regularly scheduled holidays, or extracurricular activities, including hobbies, can provide additional energy as well as new insights.

Montessori directresses have contact with nature. We know how important this is for children. Is it any less important for us? We are still sensory creatures, even though we have passed that sensitive period. These experiences can be spontaneous and brief (a walk in the rain) or planned and extended (a trip to the beach). Either will help us bring renewed enthusiasm and ideas into the learning environment.

Montessori directresses are creative and playful. There is a liveliness and lightness to the environments they create. There is a sense of wonder - about the children, the materials, the interactions. They are as engaged in the process of learning and growth as are the children. A creative and playful environment encourages risk taking - a necessary component to learning

and growing. If children observe us as willing risk takers, they are more comfortable doing the same.

Montessori directresses are adaptive to change. As part of the reflective process, they are looking for better ways to do things. They are not victims to old habits (“but my instructor always did it this way”) but rather are proactive and purposeful in decision making. (Note that a good grounding in Montessori philosophy will be helpful in determining what changes are substantive and consistent with the theory and what changes are unnecessary and counter productive to our short and long term goals.)

Montessori directresses learn from down-time. If something isn’t working, they don’t keep doing it! They learn from mistakes, from disappointments, losses. They recognize that perfection is not a reasonable goal, but the quest for improvement is. They don’t deny the dilemmas and inconsistencies in their lives, but learn how to recognize them, acknowledge them and make accommodations.

Montessori directresses are always in training. They never stop learning. Every experienced Montessori teacher has experienced the phenomenon of re-reading a Montessori book and finding something that they didn’t see in a previous reading. Even experienced observers can learn more about children through systematic observations. Familiarity with other child development theories and current research is essential if we are to put our philosophy and practices in modern-day terms and be able to explain how it relates to other theories.

Montessori directresses are future-oriented. While living consciously in the present, we know that the children we teach are the adults of the future. By being aware of the situations that they may face, we can better meet their present needs to assure that they have a solid firm foundation, and are ready and eager to meet any and all challenges that they will face. An awareness of both previous and future development can help in more effectively preparing the environment for the children’s current needs.

To these qualities identified by Dr. Hudson, I would like to add one more:

Montessori directresses are fully present to the child and his/her current needs. Adults tend to get caught up in the future and how quickly we can get there. Children live (and need to live) in the present, at a pace that respects and encourages process and repetition. Outside pressures on teachers to move children more quickly through the curriculum not only impede children’s development, but also result in shallow learning based on memorization rather than understanding.

To take on the task that Montessori charged requires dedication and a commitment to children. It also demands that we are willing to take on the risk of looking within ourselves, to be open-minded in our introspection as well as in our vision for children. Can we truly “see the child who is not yet there?” (Absorbent Mind, p. 276) The spiritual preparation of the teacher goes hand in hand with the preparation of the environment, the observation of children and the development of the communicator. Each aspect of the directress’s responsibility enriches and supports the others.