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A Guide for Guides:

Leading an Elementary Classroom

by

Betsy A. Lockhart

Ninth Edition

A Guide for Guides: Leading an Elementary Classroom
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I: Introduction to Montessori at the Elementary Level

Education does not consist of information passing from teacher to student. Rather, it is students actively pursuing their interests, interacting with the environment with adult guidance.

Montessori: A Constructivist Philosophy

In Dr. Montessori's time, many child development theorists looked upon children as blank slates waiting to be written upon, or as empty vessels waiting to be filled. This philosophy fit snugly with people who had grown up during the late Industrial Revolution, a time when many economies shifted to a manufacturing base. This economic shift created a demand for very different and specific skills than the previous agrarian economy. In the 1900's this gave rise to The Factory Model of educating children, reflecting the idea that schools were originally built to train future factory workers. In this model, children are metaphorically the product that the factory (the school) produces; teachers are floor bosses, and testing is the quality control mechanism for ensuring that children have the right specifications upon completion.

Against this backdrop, the Constructivist Philosophy began to emerge with philosophers like Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and of course, Maria Montessori. Constructivism is radically different from The Factory Model, embracing the concept that knowledge is created by the learner, not given by the teacher. Learners combine new experiences / information from the environment with their prior learning to construct meaning. Dr. Montessori said that we each are born with what we need to turn our experiences into knowledge. "In every child is the seed that will mature into an adult." She strongly argued against viewing the child as being *blank* or *empty, saying*, "No empty thing, nothing without importance, can be the constructor of a Man." (*Montessori, Citizen of the World)*

Dr. Montessori took the ideas beyond a philosophy to develop the hands-on, experiential pedagogy now known as The Montessori Method. "The secret of good teaching is to regard the child's intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. Our aim therefore is not merely to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorise, but so to touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core." (*Montessori, To Educate the Human Potential)*

The Montessori Method, therefore, is founded on the principle of providing concrete experiences that guide children to build upon prior knowledge to construct meaning. This principle informs all our practices with children of all ages.

The Prepared Environment

In a Montessori classroom, the primary instrument from which children learn is not the teacher, as in Factory Model; it is The Prepared Environment. In it, children are free to respond to their natural tendency to explore and learn – free to do work. The environment is characterized by beauty, simplicity, order, reality, accessibility, and peacefulness. The prepared environment includes three components: the child, the adult and the classroom - the learning triad.

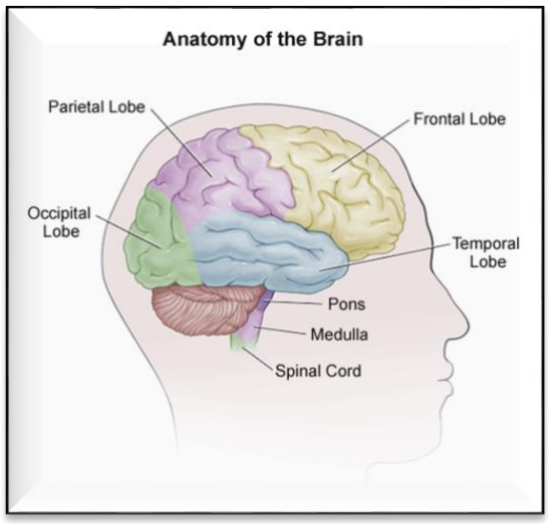
(From a section on redirecting children's unexpected choices)

The truth is that whatever response we make affects the child and the classroom environment for far longer than it takes to correct the immediate problem. If the response is authoritarian, designed to immediately extinguishing the unexpected behavior, the problem will likely resurface again and again, bringing with it greater and greater levels of frustration. If the response is focused on collaboratively replacing the undesirable choice with a more desirable option, we provide a solution for the current problem AND increase the likelihood that the child will make a better choice the next time the same situation arises.

<u>The Neuroscience of Corrections</u>

Looking at the effects of corrections from a neurological standpoint helps explain why this is true.

If we race in and reprimand a child, critically demanding compliance or even asking, "Why did you to that?", we present as a threat to the child. When the brain feels threatened, a collection of cells near the base of the temporal lobe called the *amygdala* activates the *fight, flight, flock, freeze, or appease* response. At that point, blood is diverted from the *frontal lobe*, the part of the brain where reasoning and planning happen, to the *reptilian brain* area (*brainstem* and *cerebellum*). All energy is focused on virtually or literally running away from the threat. (For more on this, see *amygdala hijack.)* The child's goal at this point is to make the threat go away, usually by providing whatever response they perceive will satisfy the scary adult. During this time, the frontal lobe is partially or completely disabled. The child's ability to think clearly, make rational decisions, or control responses is significantly suppressed. No learning is taking place. Consequently, when the circumstances that triggered the undesirable behavior arise again, the child has no new options - no replacement behavior has been patterned. The child is likely to make the same unfortunate choice again, much to the frustration of the adults involved.



Alternatively, we can engage the child in a dialog (both parties talk) that causes the child's frontal lobe to engage in reasoning out <u>why the choice was so unexpected to the adult</u> and <u>what concerns</u> arose for the adult. This is not hair-splitting. Asking children to be curious about others' concerns in a conversational tone evokes curiosity rather than fear. When the child is engaged in dialog, blood returns to the frontal lobe, enabling it to overrule the amygdala and restore the brain to more typical functioning. (This can take as little as 10 seconds!) The child and adult together can plan a different choice the next time the same circumstances arise. This does not guarantee that the child *will* make a better choice next time – there is still room for error. But at least this time, the child has options.

The long-term success of redirection depends on our ability to keep the child's frontal lobe in charge.

<u>Disciplining</u>

What about after the conversation? Don't we have to exert our authority by disciplining the child to be sure that the undesired behavior doesn't come back?

(From a section on establishing the Emotional / Spiritual Environment)

Meeting Children's Physiological Needs and Their Need for Safety

Maslow's model says that if a person is having difficulty getting their physiological needs met, they will not be able to focus on developing a moral compass or on whether they have the respect of others. Maslow called these most fundamental levels Deficiency Levels because if, after these needs have been met, a deficiency develops in one of these areas, the person will take positive action to fill that deficiency, neglecting higher-order needs until the deficit is filled. Skills used in learning (creativity, problem-solving, integration of facts, flexible thinking, etc.) are only accessible to those whose higher-priority needs are met. Unless the child's physiological needs and the need for a sense of safety and belonging are met, learning will be an uphill battle.

While we cannot control factors in children's lives outside of school, within our classrooms we can make one of our primary tasks to ensure that children's first-level needs are met. Many public schools offer free daily meals to those who need it – a great start. As Montessori teachers, we know that it is equally vital that children feel safe and have a sense of belonging. Many of the aspects of Montessori philosophy and practice go a long way towards meeting these needs.

We ensure a child's physical safety in the classroom through the development and practice of classroom ground rules, including prompt redirection when warranted. We foster academic safety by delivering individualized curriculum to students based on readiness rather than age. The use of concrete materials also fosters academic safety through exploration of a concept, de-emphasizing the rush to produce the "right" answer. We cultivate feelings of emotional safety and connectedness by building a supportive and inclusive classroom community. These things are nurtured in a classroom that actively promotes empathy and emotional/spiritual wellness. And we develop a sense of belonging through shared experiences that develop the classroom culture.

Promoting a Sense of Safety through Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is an important and evolving topic. Dr. Montessori talked about the child's place in time and space as providing the context through which all learning takes place, a concept supported by modern neuroscience. But our context is affected by more than just time and space. It is also shaped by our cultural norms, beliefs, and ways of being that have developed over generations to better ensure household and community functioning and well-being.

Culture is a complex topic. Many researchers and writers describe levels of culture, with only some parts evident to casual observers, somewhat like an iceberg. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain*, author Zaretta Hammond, describes three levels:

Surface culture: the outwardly observable manifestation of cultural patterns: holidays, cooking, art, songs, language, food, music, hair style, clothes, games, drama, dance, literature, stories...

Shallow Culture: social and familial norms of a culture - unspoken rules about courtesy, attitudes toward elders, concept of time, acceptable food sources, personal space, eye contact, ways of handling emotions, tempo of work, non-verbal communication, theories of wellness and disease, child-rearing…

Deep Culture: the tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern our view of good and bad which guides ethics, spirituality, theories of group harmony (individualism vs collectivism)

Shallow and deep culture include aspects that are "below sea level" to use an iceberg analogy. The surface culture of others is accessible to anyone through causal interactions and/or research. This presents both a risk and an opportunity.

A Few Words About Work Plans

Work plans are one of many tools that we use to empower students. They keep track of agreed-upon work options (required and suggested) as well as children's ideas for personal interest work. For required work, they also help children keep track of due dates. When we actively teach children how to use a planner, we are developing many executive function skills: planning, prioritizing, task initiation, time management, flexibility, goal-directed persistence, and metacognition.

It can be tempting to think that planners are a tool for controlling how children spend their time. Those who hold this mistaken belief are constantly in search of the perfect work plan – the planner that will cause each child to consistently "use their time wisely". These teachers believe that if only they had the right planner, they would never need to redirect a child back to work, freeing them to do their "real job" – giving lessons. When children wander, when they socialize, when they avoid a given work, these adults feel like a failure; their prime directive shifts to extinguishing the wandering, socializing, or work avoidance as quickly as possible. In so doing, they create a new role for themselves. No longer are they a coach or guide; they are now The Work Police.

These essential truths can help us stay in the role of coach or guide. They establish the proper context for the sample work plans in the next section:

- Planners are children's tracking tools.
  Adults have their own record-keeping to track lessons, follow-up activities, and personal interest work. Children should be keeping a planner that speaks to them and helps them make good choices. Children should not be keeping a planner just to satisfy the adult.
- Teaching executive function skills is as much a part of our "real job" as giving academic lessons. Planners are a material that helps make executive function skills more concrete.
  Children are not born with an inherent ability to use a planner. This is a skill that must be developed. Children are best served when we teach them how to use their work record to prioritize, choose, initiate, and complete work. We can use more sophisticated planners to teach older children to set goals and to manage their time proactively. When we approach the wandering child with a question like, "What should you be doing right now?" followed by, "Let me see your planner," we are effectively weaponizing the planner. Again, children feel that they have failed us.
- We do not control children with planners (or anything else, for that matter).
  We control ourselves: our actions and our reactions. Period. Beyond that, we can best influence children by developing a classroom culture that says, "We value learning!" The structures that we create (including work plans) are tools intended to support children. If we think of work plans like a legally binding contract, it encourages us to feel disappointed and angry with children who "violate their contract" by not completing work on time. Anger makes it nearly impossible to approach these children with a sense of curiosity, which impairs our ability to see children's barriers to success. Children feel our disappointment keenly and begin to see themselves as failures. We become less and less effective with the children
  (For more on control vs. influence, please refer to the discussion on Steven Covey's Model of Circles of Influence and Concern in Designing the Classroom Environments.)

With these thoughts in mind, in the next section we dive into designing work plans. We will step through a progression of work records and planners based on the developmental level of the children and their academic and executive functioning skills. These samples have been gathered from many Montessori classrooms over the years. There are pros and cons to each of these, and each is appropriate for a particular age/skill range of child.

(From a section on Montessori and the Neuroscience of Learning)

Making Memories

Every minute of every day we are bombarded by sensory signals. The many and varied parts of the brain mobilize, sometimes simultaneously or nearly so to protect us and inform us. Some are transitory experiences, and some make deep memories. Understanding how memories are made can dramatically impact our Montessori practice!

STEP ONE: GET THE SIGNALS IN.

The reticular activating system (RAS) monitors the scene for sensory signals 24/7. It is particularly attentive to anything that is novel (changing). It applies the first filter to incoming signals, figuratively posing these questions:

1st: Does this information indicate a risk to safety or happiness?

If so, the RAS activates the amygdala – a limbic structure in the cerebrum. Cortisol and adrenaline are released, and blood is diverted from the frontal lobe to the reptilian brain stem, triggering the fight, flight, flock, freeze, or appease response. This effectively shuts down all learning – the person is in reactive mode.

2nd: If the information presents low risk, is it important or relevant?

If so, these signals are passed from the RAS into the cerebrum in two ways.

- It awakens the cerebral cortex, "New information coming soon!"
- It forwards the information to the thalamus (in the limbic system) to be disseminated to the appropriate lobes of the cerebral cortex

If the information is not identified as indicating a threat or as being relevant, it is filtered out.

Implications for Montessori teachers (with chapter references to read more):

- **Avoid activating the amygdala! This has behavioral and academic applications.**

  Behavioral Applications
  - Presume positive intent, especially when children struggle behaviorally/academically. (Ch 2)
  - Approach children making unexpected behavioral choices with curiosity, not anger. (Ch 2)
  - Redirect with intention to empower better choices (future) rather than to punish. (past) (Ch 2)
  - Know your triggers, especially those that might arise from misinterpretations of cultural differences, and work to dampen your response when triggered. (Ch 2 & 6)

  Academic Applications
  - Begin lessons by assessing readiness through short warm-up activities. (Ch 3)
  - Teach skill-based lessons (MA, LA, computational GE) by skill level, not by grade. (Ch 4)
  - Use planners as a resource for children rather than a tool for accountability. (Ch 4)
  - Rely on feedback and positive reinforcement more than grades. (Ch 5)

- **Be sure that what we give children passes the important-or-relevant test.**
  - When making announcements, be sure that children are still and attentive, not just quiet. Waiting until their eyes and ears are on you makes what you say "important".
  - Begin every lesson by putting the new learning in context: how does this relate to previous lesson(s) or to something that the children are interested in. (Ch 4)
  - Adopt culturally responsive teaching practices (Ch 2)
  - Promote collaboration and peer-peer learning (throughout)