

As if I Did Not Exist

How Maria Montessori Opened My Eyes to the Kind of Supervisor I Want to Be

by Jeny Searcy

It was 3:30 pm and I was attending supervisor/leadership training. I was sneaking looks at my watch and trying to stay awake. The trainer was quickly covering major education theorists: Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey. . . . Then a quote attributed to Maria Montessori leapt out at me: “The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say “the children are now working as if I did not exist.” At that moment, it all clicked for me. If Montessori, one of the true pioneers of early childhood education, believed that it was a sign of success that children could work independently, shouldn't I be granting the staff I supervise the same privilege?

Maria Montessori, born in Italy in 1879, was initially trained to be a doctor. One of her first professional jobs was to visit insane asylums and select patients for treatment. An extremely intelligent woman and an acute observer, Montessori quickly recognized that the problems of many of the children observed were not in the children themselves, but in the environment and approaches of those around them. She took these thoughts and ideas and by 1907 began working with typically-developing children at Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in the slums of Rome.

While radical when she began her work, Montessori's theories are such a basic part of early education today that we do not even think of them as 'theories'; they are accepted practice. It is appropriate and logical that we extend these principles to support our staff. We all work — or should work — to make sure children are happy and excited to attend our centers and schools. But children cannot be excited and happy unless their teachers and those around them are excited and happy, too.

Environment

Attention to the environment is the foundation of Montessori's philosophy. Environment included not only the materials that children use and the furniture provided, but also the dynamics between the children and teachers who share that environment. Today, we make sure that tables and chairs in the classroom are child-sized and that milk pitchers can be manipulated by small hands. Do we put as much effort into making the environment inviting for staff?

- Is the teachers' lounge comfortable for breaks and lunch?
- Is it dirty and furnished with broken or uncomfortable chairs?

- Are the adult restrooms adequate and inviting?

In one program where I worked, we had one tiny bathroom for the 14 women on staff. It was old, cramped, and drab. Nothing could have made that space inviting. The teachers, however, made a request. They wanted a bathroom scale. A quick trip to the discount store and \$20 made the bathroom more livable for these women.

At another program, an enterprising operations manager added dry erase boards to the bathrooms. General information and cheerful messages mingled on these boards and provided a quick way to communicate information.



With a degree in secondary speech education, Jeny Searcy rather unexpectedly entered the field of early childhood education many years ago when she became director/teacher of the Head Start center in Tipton, Oklahoma. Since then she has worked as a Disability Specialist, Mental Health Specialist, and Literacy Specialist in Head Start programs. After a lifetime in southwest Oklahoma, Jeny moved to Oklahoma City in 2004. There she has worked as a director and supervisor in various early care and education programs. She completed her masters degree and has served as an adjunct instructor in local colleges. She currently serves as Early Care Education Director at the Goddard School in Edmond, Oklahoma. Jeny is married with two grown, married children and is the very proud grandmother of five grandchildren under the age of six.

If you are a supervisor or director, is your office a welcoming place for staff to visit? Instead of having a standard visitor's chair, I want to have a rocker with a pillow and a cozy blanket or shawl. In my current office, personal items and pictures of my grandchildren mingle with part of my collection of teddy bears that share space with the manuals and educational materials on the bookshelves. Whatever her personal choices, a director should make the office environment one staff like to visit.

Montessori believed in the power of a beautiful, cheerful environment to enhance learning: "To assist a child, we must provide him with an environment that will enable him to develop freely." Jim Greenman suggested that as we design children's environments, we should "create a nest for children as they navigate the demands of growing up and to make them believe that they can fly . . ." (Greenman, 2007). This is precisely what we should do for teachers! We need to encourage them to develop their classroom atmospheres to be places in which children can learn and thrive; but it should also be an atmosphere where teachers can navigate comfortably. When they turn on the lights in their classroom each day, teachers should feel, "This is my space and I'm happy to be here." As directors, we need to find out what works for the staff in their environment and to help provide it!

Of course, the teachers' work environment is more than just four walls; the environment includes relationships. In this regard, we need to make the environment 'fit' our staff. Work to learn about your teachers; find out about their needs and respond appropriately. Shortly after I started my current position, one teacher told me that she appreciated the fact that I wasn't constantly checking on her — that I just made it clear to her that I was available if she needed me. At the same time, another staff member said she felt that I wasn't interested because I didn't check

on her. And I was treating both of these teachers in the same manner! Obviously, treating everyone the same wasn't the right answer; I needed to take the time to learn the needs of each staff member and provide for each as a unique individual. We individualize classroom activities for each child; I needed to learn how to do this for my staff. In his book *Leading with a Limp*, Dan B. Allender (2006) writes, ". . . we must seek the input of people who will help us find a different path from the one we would come up with on our own." By being open to this input, we are creating an environment where everyone can be successful.

Independence

Montessori believed children should take responsibility for the work that needs to be done: caring for themselves and their surroundings. Teachers need to allow children to pour their own milk, pick up toys, and put on their own jackets, even when it would be easier and faster for the teacher to perform these duties.

How often as a supervisor have you been tempted to do something for a staff member when he should do it for himself? I recently had a well-respected director tell me she wrote all the lesson plans for her teachers. Her intentions were good: she had the time and the training, and she was genuinely concerned about her staff and all the work they were required to do. Instead of writing lesson plans for them, she could have provided guidance and time for them to write these themselves and responded to their questions as they arose. Just as the teacher provides a steadying hand of support when a child is learning to pour milk from a pitcher or suggests "Let's try another way" when a toddler puts his jacket on upside down, our role is to provide a guiding hand and helpful suggestions — not do work for our staff.

Freedom

Montessori taught that children should be surrounded by interesting things to do and should have the time and freedom to do them. Again, let's grant this privilege to our teachers. Allow staff the freedom to explore ideas and techniques for themselves and the children in their care.

Years ago, I worked as a literacy coordinator for a Head Start program. I loved reading to children and sharing books and other literacy ideas with them. I was given many training opportunities and had a great deal of information to share with the classroom teachers. It was so tempting to tell the teachers exactly what to do and how to do it. After all, this was my passion! I thought I knew all the best ways to introduce early literacy skills in the classroom. With self-control, however, I didn't do this. I shared some suggestions — and, I hope, some excitement and support. Then I let go. The results were amazing. The literacy-related projects and activities designed by the teachers far exceeded what I could have told them to do — and the children's pre-literacy skills flourished.

In much the same way, in another program the teachers I supervised were introduced to a new system for keeping portfolios. I wasn't the instructor this time; I was learning along with them. I supervised 11 lead teachers as we explored eight different methods for implementing the portfolio system. Was this wrong? Absolutely not. It's exciting! All of the teachers were collecting data, keeping great records, and accomplishing the same goal. But they had the freedom to make the system their own — and that is why it worked.

Observation

Montessori teachers are trained to 'teach little and observe much.' Although

plans must be made and materials must be available, observation of the children is of utmost importance. If the children are absorbed in a project, the teacher should be mindful of that and not pull them away from it just because her lesson plan tells her it is time for something else. Maria Montessori watched children, observing their strengths and, thereby, providing for their needs.

How much more exciting our programs would be if supervisors took the time to carefully observe our teachers. Careful observation on our part will enable us to understand and guide them in specific ways. This is hard work: hard to find the time, hard not to want to impose our own methods in a classroom, hard to see another person's point of view, and hard not to jump to conclusions.

Recently, one of my staff complained about a coworker's not greeting children when they entered the classroom in the morning. So I went into the classroom to observe, arriving early before any of the children. I watched as the teacher greeted children and made them feel welcome. She had a quiet, understated way of beginning the day, but it worked for that teacher and those children. Through careful observation and a willingness to see the teacher's point of view, I recognized that this teacher did greet — just in a different way than her coworker did. And that was fine.

I left the eight-hour leadership training at 5:00 pm feeling invigorated! My goal is to become a 'Montessori' supervisor — to give the teachers I supervise the proper tools, the proper environment, and the freedom and independence to do their jobs. I want to observe them and guide them in their development. Sure, there might be some spilled milk along the way as they try to pour the milk on their own, but I'll be there with the paper towels if they need me to help

mop up — and I'll always be there to assure them, "You'll get it next time." It will be my greatest success when I'm able to say, "The teachers are working as if I did not exist." I want to make Maria Montessori proud.

References

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For More Information

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