

# Dear Phyllis:

## Questions from the EAA Community, Answered by Phyllis Pottish-Lewis

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### Volume I: Community Building

My goal in all that I offer publicly has always been to share with my colleagues the benefit of my years of experience in the Montessori world working with children or listening to the advice of my esteemed mentors. My hope is that these volumes will supply answers to your questions or fortify your efforts as you endeavor to effect Dr. Montessori's principles for the second plane children.

As I begin to answer some of the questions sparked at this year's EAA Refresher Course on the Whys, Hows and Don'ts of the implementation of Dr. Montessori's vision for the elementary child, a common thread among these three questions seems to be related to Community Building, which is a good starting point for this project.

**QUESTION:** In the orientation meeting on the first day of school, how do you recommend engaging and getting buy-in from the children who are not participating in the discussion? In my experience, the ones who sit quietly during that conversation are the ones most likely to disregard the rules throughout the year.

**ANSWER:** When you and the children are collaboratively generating rules that the community needs to ensure a safe and secure community and the consequences for breaching them, I would stress that as a member of the community, **everyone** needs to think about what they believe would secure this goal. Once the momentum of the discussion begins—offering rules and the reasons for the rules—I would observe specifically those individuals who seem hesitant to offer suggestions or those who need to hear a particular rule.

When the time is favorable, I would select one of those children and ask her directly what she thinks about the rule and the reason behind the rule. If the child just “grunts” a non-answer, I would reiterate the importance of each person's contributing to this process. Then I would ask her again and wait (with the group) until she offers a reasonable response. After that I would continue with the discussion with the whole community, trying to weave a bit of humor into the conversation to lighten the mood. Then I would circle around to the next child who also was reluctant to make a response.

Having observed your response to the first child, the next child may be more willing to engage appropriately. In the unhappy event that this strategy doesn't work with those select children, I would take each aside privately at different times and directly tell the child that even

though she did not offer a response when asked, she was still accountable to the laws, the very laws that govern the community and were collaboratively agreed upon. Additionally, she will be subject to the consequences for any breaches that had been pre-established by the group. **You must be firm when delivering this message**, not ambivalent.

Once these meetings and any required individual meetings have been completed, I would be especially observant that all children were following the rules. For those who breached a rule, I **would act immediately!** The teacher must be consistent in this regard otherwise all her efforts will have been for naught. Remember that having the children submit signed contracts or posting the rules on the board **do not deter** those children who are bent on naughty behavior. If these strategies did work, we would use them.

The next two questions can be addressed together as they are closely related to each other.

**QUESTION:** How do we ease out or transition out of a weekly class meeting/gathering if it is an established practice?

**QUESTION:** Regarding group meetings, what would you recommend for children who want to present their work?

**ANSWER:** I would gather up the entire group of children and discuss with them that you want **to try an experiment** that would require changing one of the established practices of the classroom in the spirit of meeting their needs better and giving them more time to work on their self-inspired projects. Instead of having a weekly class meeting, we will meet at the moment when there is something pressing to discuss. In some cases, the whole class may need to participate, in other cases perhaps just those who are affected by the issue will gather. Elicit from the children the kinds of things that they discussed in the weekly meetings and address how each one can be handled in a more timely and spontaneous way rather than having to wait for the scheduled meeting some days later. Some examples might be:

- Resolving social issues in the class and on the playground
- Attending to class chores
- Presenting finished work projects

**Resolving social issues** should be addressed straight away when they emerge whether in the classroom or outside. Often the children involved can work together to find a mutually agreeable solution without having to include anyone else. If they are not successful by themselves, then the teacher can convene the embroiled group to meet about the issues. In some cases, children who observed the altercation may be invited to present their views of the conflict. It is also critical that the teacher ensure that each participant has an opportunity to present his view of the issue **without interruption**. By doing this she can put the point of contention into perspective for all parties.

Once all the positions are presented, ask each child involved in the altercation what he or she thinks is the solution. Remind them of the importance of compromise when working and playing together. If they are not yet able to agree on a solution, give the children directly involved

in the dispute time alone to reflect on the issue and urge them to come up with a solution that everyone can live with. If they are unable to do so, then tell them that as the final arbiter in the matter, you will be forced to impose the solution.

Do not employ the tactic of using a booklet on how to solve problems. This is a contrivance, and children who want to avoid work, fabricate a problem so they can take the book to a private place to “solve” their problem only to fool around with each other. This I have seen with my own eyes. There is much to be said for the act of surveillance!

Attending to class chores should be a matter of course if at the beginning of the year you have established a system by which you can track who is responsible for which task and if it’s being done. An essential part of this system is that tasks are done **when they need doing**, not on a certain day of the week or time of day. If children are not adequately attending to the chores, this matter must be dealt with by the teacher and the responsible children, not the whole class in a meeting.

Before introducing the new way of presenting finished work projects to the class inform the whole group of why and how this change is important.

- The WHY is this: this change will provide an opportunity for the children to independently take charge of their own event thereby developing their organizational capacities and responsibility. Because they have complete autonomy in the orchestration of the presentation, they will have to think through many details to make a successful presentation. This will enhance their intellectual development as they plan ahead each detail that must be attended to.
- The HOW is this: When a group has finished a collaborative project and they want to share it with the class, request that they pick a time and day to book the event. They will need to consult with you and the class calendar to make certain that the presentation does not conflict with any other class activities. Once they have reserved the time and date the children can inform the whole class and invite them to the up-coming presentation. At that time, they can mention the topic and where and when it will take place. This invitation might even extend to other classrooms if conditions permit. This data-filled announcement will inform the others so they can adjust their work and schedules accordingly. Should they choose not to attend the presentation, they must work quietly and respectfully during it, so they don’t interrupt the speakers or those who have gathered to hear the talk and see the work.

The presenters will be encouraged to allow a few days between the scheduling and the event itself to give them time to practice and polish their presentation. This will enable them to decide who is going to say what and when. To put a theatrical spin on this time it could be called a dress rehearsal.

Inform the children that this is their work, not yours, thus they are responsible for all the details pertaining to the presentation, such as where in the environment it will take place, what materials (if any) will be necessary, perhaps advertisements of the event, etc. Without being too directive, the afternoon before the day of the presentation, ask the group if they are ready to share their work. This should just be a gentle reminder as the children are responsible for making

the exhibition happen. If they miss the designated time, so be it. They can always reschedule it. This is a learning experience itself.

Once you have laid out the design of the new change, invite children to offer suggestions and ask questions. Include in your discussion that after this “experiment” has been in place for an adequate amount of time, as with all scientific experiments, an evaluation of the change will follow.

## Volume II: The Age of Rudeness

These next two questions—similar in nature yet different—strike at the heart of our work when guiding children to develop the social skills that all people need when functioning civilly in society—skills such as respect, consideration, politeness, compassion, etc. The answers to these questions need to be detailed for them to be of any value.

**QUESTION:** You stated, “Never let a child be disrespectful to you.” What do you do when they are disrespectful to you? Ex: raising voice, shouting “no,” turning back and walking away plotting to have teachers fired (!) (Upper EI environment).

**ANSWER:** To answer this question in the blind is difficult since I do not know the surrounding circumstances of the structure of the class or the school and these factors may be contributing to the described rude behavior. Thus, knowing what the factors are may shed light on why these children think that it is acceptable to behave like this and help you to find a solution. Additionally, this analysis will provide fodder for discussion with the administrator at the school whose task is to support the teachers in the classroom. If it is a systemic problem, such as too many children lacking a Montessori background, then it is crucial that the administrator be part and parcel of the solution.

- How old is the child?
- Was he a late comer to Montessori, the class and the school?
- Has his behavior been consistently rude during his time at the school?
- How long have you been teaching and at which levels?
- How long have you been teaching this class?
- How many children are in the class?
- Is the class normalized?
- Are most of the children behaving like this?
- Do you have the support of administration should you have to take forceful steps to rectify the situation?
- Is the administrator Montessori trained at the elementary level?[\[1\]](#)

To this end, I would apprise the administrator of the behaviors of the children and invite her to observe the classroom for herself several different times and for extended periods. It is important that she sees the same behaviors that you have described so she can back your strategies for remedying what has become a toxic environment for everyone. Without this support, it will be very difficult to change the way the children operate in the classroom. Wield Dr. Montessori's words to emphasize the importance of protecting all the children in the classroom.

*Do not apply the rule of non-interference when the children are still prey to all their different naughtinesses. Don't let them climb on the windows, the furniture, etc. You must interfere at*

*this stage. At this stage the teacher must be a policeman. The policeman has to defend the honest citizens against the disturbers. The Child, Society and the World, 16.*

Next, I would call a face-to-face meeting with the parents of the offending child and with the administrator—in a support role—to discuss their child's unacceptable behaviors and underscore how his behavior is exposing other children to damaging behavior and upsetting the harmony in the class—a harmony that every child is entitled to and deserves. This is the time to enlist the parents' support in this process. After describing the child's behavior and your plan for addressing it, outline the possible consequences that may be imposed when and if the objectionable behaviors continue—consequences that may result in the child's being sent home until he agrees to change his behavior. By involving both the administrator and the parents you are creating a structure of support. If the parents do not endorse your plan then this is a matter of a different kind—equally serious if not more so. For the sake of the other children but also for the child who has a need to “act out” the school must act on behalf of a healthy, happy, secure environment for all the children.

Backed by the administrator and the parents I would gather all the children and tell them that we are going to have a frank discussion regarding the behaviors that have been exhibited in the classroom that threaten a peaceful and safe environment. I would warn them that should anyone attempt to disrupt this discussion, he or she will be removed from the discussion and perhaps even the classroom. Depending on the force of children who have precipitated this meeting, I may even have the administrator sit in the discussion to lend reinforcement and imply this matter is taken seriously by the school. If a child, either by dint of his voice or body language is disrespectful, **dismiss him immediately** to return to his table to work.

When broaching this discussion, you must be **firm** or the children will not take you seriously. The discussion can begin by asking the children which behaviors they have witnessed that were uncomfortable and unacceptable. You can expect few responses because at this age children will back each other rather than the adult. This is natural. If this is the case, you should list the unacceptable behaviors you have seen that must be eliminated if we are to have a healthy, civil classroom. While the other children in the class may not acknowledge rude behavior verbally, they will know exactly what you are referring to.

Once the objectionable actions and attitudes have been identified, reestablish the consequences for engaging in them in the future. As the protector of the environment, you will state those consequences—they can range from removal from a lesson or work session; removal from the classroom proper; even removal from the school premises. Inform the children that no discourteous or insolent behaviors will be tolerated and there will be **no second chances** since you must protect all the children from this lamentable conduct. If the latter option is required, the administrator must inform the parents of the process that must ensue before the child will be invited back to the classroom. This will send the message to the parents that the matter is serious. Based on my experience when resorting to this consequence more than once in my career I offer the following steps:

- Inform the parents exactly what the child had done to warrant the consequence.
- Ask them to discuss with their child the ramifications of his actions.

- Bring him back to school only when he has acknowledged what he has done and agrees his behavior must change to be invited back.
- Have the parents and the child come in before class begins so you all can discuss the matter openly and transparently.
- In this combined meeting obtain from the child his verbal willingness to abide by the established laws of the class.
- Advise him that his reentry into the class is contingent upon his altered behavior.
- Reiterate the consequences for any breaches so he is completely informed and should his behavior regress he will, once again, suffer the same consequences.

While this process may seem a bit “draconian” it must be just that to impress upon all the children that they may not disrespect you or anyone else in the class for that matter. Shouting “no” and walking away will never be tolerated. The administrator can address the point that no child can get a teacher “fired” by explicitly stating this fact to the child who made the threat.

Apparently, in her time Dr. Montessori observed a class that exhibited behaviors akin to those described in the question submitted. This aroused her to say the following:

*When the teachers were weary of my observations, they began to allow the children to do whatever they pleased. I saw children with their feet on the tables, or with their fingers in their noses, and no intervention was made to correct them. I saw others push their companions, and I saw dawn in the faces of these an expression of violence; and not the slightest attention on the part of the teacher. Then I had to intervene to show with what absolute rigor it is necessary to hinder, and little by little suppress, all those things which we must not do, so that the child may come to discern clearly between good and evil. The Montessori Method, 92-93.*

My sincere hope is that the solution I have posed will help you to regain control of the classroom. It is not easy to implement but there is much at stake—the atrocious impressions that other vulnerable children are subjected to and influenced by; leaving the perpetrator's appalling behavior unchecked implying he can get away with anything; a complete disruption of a peaceful, safe, educational environment. If this strategy is to work, you must draw upon your inner strength, knowing that you are saving these children by courageously holding firm and developing a commanding presence that will brook no disrespectful behavior ever. Although this is the “age of rudeness,” we must act to eradicate it by acting resolutely and with conviction that we are doing what we must do.

**QUESTION:** Currently our “age of rudeness” in the UE classroom is manifesting as both “mean girl” behavior and toxic masculine identity behavior. Grace & courtesy and classroom agreements based in the principle of freedom and responsibility do not seem to be going far enough and more social/emotional lesson are needed (both intrapersonal and interpersonal). Do you have recommendations Books, resources, social emotional curriculums that align with Montessori principles?

**ANSWER:** Although I recognize, as you do, that at the 9 to 12 level the children exemplify to a greater extent the “age of rudeness” that Dr. Montessori observed, I **do not agree with your assessment** that “Grace & courtesy and classroom agreements based in the principle of freedom and responsibility do not seem to be going far enough and more social/emotional lesson are needed (both intrapersonal and interpersonal).”

All of us who have worked with these older children have seen the behaviors you have described— “mean girl” behavior, toxic masculine identity behavior, along with other objectionable sorts of conduct. But the answers to the correction of these do not reside in information on social emotional curricula. The answers lie between the pages of Dr. Montessori's books and our abilities to put her principles into practice without alteration or compromise. This is not an easy feat. When modifications are made, her approach fails. It may help to reflect on the words of J. Ewart Smart,

*The principles she [Dr. Montessori] has evolved have long since passed the state of experiment and achieved recognition and acceptance as a standard of modern educational practice. These principles have been subjected to the most critical scrutiny and examination but practicing teachers who have applied them for many years have shown no desire to abandon them or to alter their methods.* J. Ewart Smart, The 1946 London Lectures, xv.

My advice is to assess exactly how you are employing her strategies in the classroom. Do the children know the limits to the freedoms granted them? Do they understand that as members of a community they must care for each other? If not, take the offenders aside and lay down the law of what it means to be a part of this small society. Make sure they understand their personal responsibility to every member of that society. Let them know the consequences for breaching the law and act swiftly when you see them resort to the same hurtful objectionable behavior. Always unfailingly address these problems when they arise. And, **be consistent**.

But more importantly and more effectively, to take their minds off unhealthy social issues, do what elementary Montessori is all about: engage these children in appealing work—work of their own choice stemming from their imaginations and reasons. When children are involved collaboratively in their own work, they have little interest in descending into unwelcome behavior.

*The child has a natural and irresistible tendency towards work. This principle (it is not the one commonly held), should be well fixed, and very clear in our minds. When I observed this phenomenon I was surprised, and it led me to think, to ponder and to doubt for a long time until I was convinced. The tendency to work is tied up with the nature of the child, and therefore with human nature. When the child is left free to work in an environment prepared for him when he is free to act, he has the tendency to organize a set of movements around an idea, which constitutes a definite aim – work.* Creative Development in the Child: Volume I, 60.

Have faith in the child and faith in Montessori and always be consistent in the implementation of her ideas and your management of the class.

## Volume III: Non-Workers: The Bane of our Mission

All of us who have worked with elementary children have encountered the child that for one reason or another refuses to engage in the work that is going to build his brain, skills, expertise, and talents. To address this child (or children) we must activate our brains, skills, expertise, and talents. But also, we must draw on our commitment to the child and our courage to do what is necessary to 'jump-start' this child's work ethic.

**QUESTION:** What to do when you provide the inspiring story and the freedom to explore and the children consistently use this freedom but not responsibly?

**ANSWER:** We can begin by identifying the non-workers and analyze why they are not wanting to work, which is against the child's nature and the natural human tendency to work. Questions we might consider:

- Did the child have the benefit of a primary experience at the school, or did he come later to the school?
- Does he have a learning challenge that keeps him from engaging?
- Are there social issues that make it difficult for him to work with others?
- Is he used to others doing for him?
- Are our lessons effective and exciting?

Our strategy might not change depending on the answers, but it may give us insight to the child's resistance to work and gauge our approach accordingly. Also, we must analyze how we function in the class, because the source of the absence of work might reside in us, all things being equal. Remember, what Dr. Montessori said,

*If children at school do not show a disposition to work spontaneously, then the fault lies not with the children but with the teacher and her manner of presenting the subjects. If children are bored, uninterested and uncomprehending, it is because, in the method of teaching, there are obstacles which prevent the child's intellect from functioning as it ought. The Montessori Revolution in Education, 22.*

With her words in mind let's begin with how we give our lessons to reassure ourselves that we are giving them in such a way that they generate collaborative exploration on a topic that appeals to the children. This strategy will not only pin the children down by making them accountable for their work and the commitment to their work partners, but it will set them on the course from which they will derive the greatest benefits possible.

Steps involved in a successful lesson

- Begin by giving the lesson to an assorted group of children—different ages, genders, abilities, etc. These groupings can be established in your lesson planning schedules and will

draw on your capacity to artfully select compatible personalities and include those who are typically uninvited by others for social reasons.

- Depending on the material or lesson being presented always make sure that the group has at least two children but no more than the number whose attention you can handle (perhaps 5?). They must understand the concept if you are to grab their attention.
- Introduce the lesson with a question to engage the reasoning mind and then tell a lively, interesting and inspirational story to trigger the imagination. Once the story has been told introduce the material. If the concept is presented on didactic material, make sure that each child knows how to manipulate the pieces before leaving the children to work without your guidance. If the lesson requires impressionistic aids, present them after the imagination and the reasoning mind have begun to churn.
- After the lesson and before the children leave the lesson, have them determine their work groups. If all the children don't get settled into a group, guide them to include everyone in the lesson.
- Remind them that Dr. Montessori observed that children at this age were naturally attracted to each other and worked best when part of a group. That is why in a Montessori school the elementary children are expected to work together. Mention that through working together the children learn and develop valuable social skills that they will rely upon when they grow up. By stating this, the children will glean that working together is a requirement that works on their behalf.

Once the groups have been established, ask each group how their work together might manifest itself. Reinforce the idea that the fruits of their collaboration will result in one product. This means that each child contributes his skills and talents to the project. Creating one product also means that the children will not work side-by-side producing individual work on the same subject, or that one child goes off to work alone on the topic.

If you deem it appropriate, you may apprise the children that since there will only be one product, when the work is finished, they will have to decide who takes the work home. When the project is finished, this aspect may kindle argument, but the children will need to collectively find a solution. The process is more important than the product and so we leave them to design a resolution themselves without offering them a recommendation. Children are quite enterprising when it comes to this step as I have discovered. It draws on their abilities to think creatively as they devise possibilities to settle this matter.

Should the children have difficulty thinking up a novel expression of the lesson, pose different options that they might be interested in. Let them know that you have a plethora of materials—beyond that of paper and pencil—that is at their disposal when effecting their innovative plans. Once unique follow-up work takes root in the classroom, it will travel through the environment like the tentacles on an octopus. Everyone will begin to “think outside of the box” so they can express their work with the intriguing materials in a clever way.

- Once these two aspects have been decided—the groups and their follow-up work—remind the children that each one is making a moral commitment to the project and to the other members of the group. Thus, they cannot abandon the project or their partners for any

reason. By making this clear to the children, we ‘head them off at the pass’ when the work breaks down because of differences of opinion or some other reason.

- Also, remind them that they have been offered the freedom to think, act and work without interference from an adult. But that freedom—as with all the freedoms granted them—has an associated responsibility—they must work productively and harmoniously. If they fail to work or to work efficiently then the freedoms allotted will be rescinded and you will be forced to choose all their work for them.
- After the groups are sent off to work, it now becomes the teacher’s responsibility to consistently observe and follow-up on the decisions and work of the children.
- If the work breaks down, the teacher must find out why and help the children to rectify the situation. Feel free to reiterate the axiom that freedom is only offered when aligned with responsibility.

Steps for children who do not use their freedom constructively:

With the above reminder of how we frame the guidelines for our expectations of how children do responsible work, I want to address the circumstances of the child who does not work, even though you have gone through the steps listed above. First let’s fortify ourselves with Dr. Montessori’s words:

*To let the child do as he likes,” when he has not yet developed any powers of control, is to betray the idea of freedom. The Absorbent Mind, 205.*

Since the child knows that his freedoms are aligned with freedom, we must not let the child “do as he likes”—when he refuses to work, because this is abuse of the freedom extended him. Dr. Montessori had no compunction in asking that the teacher direct the child’s movements when the child is unable to regulate or to contribute to his own self construction.

*The remedy is not to tell the adult – “Now leave the child alone, leave the child to be disorderly and destroy all he can!” This is not the remedy. This is not freedom. The problem is not so easy to solve, its roots go much deeper. If the child has not been able to develop his own personality, then it is better that the adult directs his movements.*

Creative Development in the Child: Volume I, 158.

By having said this Montessori gave us permission to act vigorously to help this non-worker to remedy his behavior by “directing his movements” and repealing all freedoms that have been accorded him. It is necessary that he fundamentally understand that he must answer for his actions or lack thereof. Depending on the child and his attitude, this process may be short, or it may take more time. Here are the steps in this process:

- First, we make certain that we have given this non-worker many lessons from the entire curricula so that he has had something that might have appealed to his interests.

- Then we have a candid and direct conversation with him regarding his lack of work and productivity. Also, if it is relevant, point out how his unconstructive and distractive behaviors impact others who are engaged in worthwhile work.
- Remind him that all freedoms offered are contingent on responsible behavior. Pointedly tell him that when those freedoms are misused, they will be forfeited. Since he has disregarded this responsibility all his freedoms will now be rescinded—the freedoms to choose work, where to work, with whom to work, how long to work, freedom to move around the class. Tell the child that, as his teacher, you have a responsibility to see that he works and learns from that work. Since he has been unable to do this on his own, you are obligated to “direct all of his work.”
- Offer the child two choices of work, either from his unfinished work or from a lesson that has been neglected. If he offers another viable option, you can permit him to do that. If it is not viable, he must select one of your choices. If he does not, then you select one for him.
- Since he is no longer free to choose where to work, find a table or space where he sits alone to do his work. Caution him that he does not have permission to move around the class and must stay seated at his table or space. Nor does he have permission to engage with the other children. Caution him that he must work in this manner until he has satisfactorily finished the chosen piece of work.
- At this point you must keep constant vigil on this child. Should he breach one of the admonitions, return him to the table and tell him that every time he chooses to defy your injunction his time working alone will be extended (**and you must mean it**). You can also ask your assistant to keep an eye on this child who can alert you when necessary.
- Once the child finishes to your satisfaction this first piece of work you have different options to offer the child.
- If the child has done his work well according to your prescriptions—depending on the child—you can offer him the opportunity to resume his work with others. If he chooses this option, caution him that you expect his work and behavior to be stellar. If not, he will be back at what Margaret Stephenson called “the grindstone table.”
- If the child has done subpar work and periodically flouted the guidelines set for him, offer him another choice of work to be completed in isolation. If his performance improves considerably, you can offer him the freedom to work responsibly, while alerting him that should his productivity decline, he will find himself once again sequestered and for longer duration.
- For this process to work, the child needs to understand that you are a person of your word, and that he could easily lose his freedoms again. You must not waver in this commitment to help this child, because you feel you are being too hard on the child. No, you are not! What you are doing is helping the child to become accountable and responsible for his own choices. Would that every person that needed this kind of loving guidance received it in his formative period. Let me share with you, once again, Miss Stephenson’s pithy words: “You Americans are too concerned with being in touch with your feelings. What you need to do is to be in touch with your backbone!” If that isn’t a golden nugget for helping a child who needs a firm hand, I don’t know what is.

**QUESTION:** What to do when you provide the inspiring story and the freedom to explore and the children consistently use this freedom but not responsibly?

**ANSWER:** I hope the lengthy commentary offered above will provide the answer you seek. When children are not using their freedoms responsibly, they have transformed freedom into license and this they cannot do. Be strong for their sakes!

**QUESTION:** How do we support children in making responsible work choices or when they cannot make an independent choice?

**ANSWER:** Again, I think the answer can be found above. With that being said, you may have to tell the child/children that if they cannot choose work independently or choose work that stretches their abilities, you will have to choose their work for them. Make sure they know you are deadly serious.

**QUESTION:** What if the majority of your class is “non-workers” and you and your assistant do not have the capacity to “pin them all down’ all day every day?

**ANSWER:** I have encountered a class such as you describe, in which chaos prevailed and very few children were working effectively. The reason for this havoc was that the teacher was a novice and very timid. She had not established herself as the authority in the classroom, which we all must do. The children soon recognized this weakness and treated her blatantly disrespectfully as well as their peers and the materials in the classroom. To help this teacher I solicited the Head of School’s (HOS) support for a drastic process that I proposed given the flagrant pandemonium and abuses we both had observed. This process unfolded like this:

- I had the teacher call all the children to a discussion along with the HOS to lend a sense of gravity and seriousness to this matter. She served as the authority figure in this discussion and did not brook any interruptions nor rudeness from the children. The teacher outlined all the unproductive activities exhibited, the aggressive actions and bullying some children engaged in, and the continual chaos that prevailed throughout the whole class. She recognized those children who were trying to work through the mêlée and was sorry that her plan would have an impact on them even though they had not earned the consequences.
- The teacher explained the importance of using the freedoms accorded the children responsibly. Since there was little responsible work being done, all freedoms would be revoked. She assigned each child a table and gave each child a work sheet of some topic the individual needed to work on. No talking or moving through the classroom was permitted without the teacher’s permission. Once a child finished one worksheet, he was given another.
- This process was to continue indefinitely. The children were told they needed to earn their freedom back and that would be decided by the quality of the work they accomplished and how they complied with the new strict guidelines.
- The HOS reaffirmed that this process would continue until it was no longer needed. The duration of the process was in the hands of the children. It depended on them. The children

who had been working well before were soon released from these bonds and continued to work on their activities. Little by little other children got the message that they could not continue as before and worked to earn their privileges back. When the most recalcitrant of the group realized that if they wanted to work according to Dr. Montessori's design, they had to alter their behavior earnestly and markedly. If not, they would find themselves working without any freedoms once again. In this classroom, because the HOS and the teacher worked together to implement this stringent plan, they had the whole class back to work in three days. The HOS observed daily to lend support for the teacher and the teacher realized that she needed to adopt a demeanor of authority to manage these children. Yes, this was a 9 to 12 class.

I am happy to report that in my 42 years of consulting classrooms, I have only once had to offer such a drastic suggestion. Luckily the method worked for these children and the teacher. When I returned to the school the next year the children were working well, which was 180 degrees different than the preceding year.

## Volume IV: Avoiding Potholes and Ruts on Our Montessori Path

Administering—and I use the word intentionally—a Montessori Elementary classroom requires putting underlying techniques and practices in place so that everything runs smoothly on the path to our goal—namely spontaneous discipline driven by predetermined principles of human nature. This path can be fraught with potholes and ruts that can derail us if we are not vigilant and circumspect as we navigate our journey. The next array of questions/answers will cover seemingly small but significant such issues that can impact our course—assisting in the child’s self-construction.

**QUESTION:** What if a child wants to work alone although he/she was in a group lesson and was asked for his follow up ideas but refuses to work with anyone else?

**ANSWER:** As you know Dr. Montessori realized that children from ages six to 12 years of age are naturally attracted to each other in both work and play. The task of this second plane child is that of an individual becoming socialized—or in other words learning the skills one needs to be a successful member of society. Thus, not only is it critical that children learn these skills, but these six years of the elementary children are the optimum and natural time for doing so. How do they do it? By working together. We tell the children this unequivocally, so they know the reasons why it is essential that they work with each other. By verbalizing this trait and its benefits, you create an expectation of how to function in a Montessori elementary classroom. This establishes a framework for those not inclined to work with others. I have found that children who prefer to work alone are those who always want to have things their own way or they are perfectionists. They also want to be the “owners” of the work produced without having to share the credit with others. These are the very children who need to learn how to compromise, which they must do when working with others.

For the child who adamantly refuses to work with others, a forthright and firm strategy is in order.

- Tell the child Dr. Montessori discovered that this age child naturally worked with others, that is why it is an expectation in an elementary Montessori class.
- List and solicit from the child the benefits of working together and why it is essential to his personal development.
- Then guide—even insist if need be—the child towards a group enterprise through your lesson-giving process.
- Encourage that child to share his skills, expertise and ideas with other members of the group—a little pep talk to show how others will benefit from his contributions as will he from his association with them.
- After the lesson monitor this child’s work. Should he veer from the group to do his own thing, take him aside and remind him that since he is not working in a group and that it is an expectation in the classroom, you are going to ask him to sit and observe the groups that are functioning well together, pinpointing the social skills being developed.
- Caution him not to get up until you return to speak with him.

- Periodically check in with him to see what his assessment of the group work is.
- Ask him if he is ready to join his group and work communally. If he says yes, you can dismiss him to go to the group with the proviso that if he breaks away from the group, he will once again be asked to sit and observe others working together.

Trust me, the child thus managed will soon become so bored he will relent and begin working with others. If you are persistent, you will see the fruits of what you might consider a “heavy-handed” strategy—but one that is necessary to set the child on the social path of developing social skills as well as possibly learning something about himself. Remember, you are the driver on this path and through the route you take, you guide the child’s social construction. It is not uncommon, even if it is a forced experience, for a child to have a positive experience when asked to work with other people. Some of the hesitancy at the root of the child’s resistance may be ameliorated by working with others. It is a time that he can discover things about themselves.

**QUESTION:** How/when/do you interrupt work to give a lesson? Or do you wait for stragglers, wanderers and disrupters to snag for spontaneous lessons if everyone else is working?

**ANSWER:** Knowing when to interrupt a child’s work for a lesson falls under the title The Art of Montessori Teaching. Observation of your children and the work they are doing is the mainstay of this art. Part of that art is having lessons for the children “at the ready” as they go about the day. Yes, you can catch your stragglers, wanderers and disrupters in your web of planned lessons, but the interruption of children who are gainfully employed requires more skill on your part. When they are earnestly involved in their cooperative projects—often those that lead to great work—you must at some point mention to the group members that other lessons are necessary to ‘round-out’ their knowledge base. What this means is that periodically, you will have to interrupt the team to give these required lessons. If, after the new lesson, they are driven to return to their self-generated project, that would be fine, but at some point—not so far in the distant future that they forget the presentation—they will be obliged to produce some follow-up of the newly presented concept. By doing this, you have squarely positioned the burden of accountability on to their shoulders.

You have given them an opportunity for further development by letting them take charge of their own schedules and work. However, you must remain attentive that they meet this new responsibility. You can ascertain that information in the child/teacher meetings. By the time you have the meeting with the child, if he still has not produced any work on the lesson, you and the child can collaboratively schedule a time that is reasonable and mutually acceptable to both parties to complete the work. Sometimes when the children take a break from the work they love, it allows their brains to rest so when the children do resume their work on their project, they view it with a new sense of awareness, passion and eagerness.

**QUESTION:** What are your thoughts on an inbox/outbox system where children receive feedback on work daily?

**ANSWER:** With all due respect, having an inbox/outbox system has no place in a Montessori classroom. If all the strategies recommended by Mario Montessori and AMI Elementary trainers are in place, these practices are redundant and counter to our approach. In fact, they are the kind of regimented practices that are used in a conventional educational method rather than in one that promotes independent thought and action. Just like children do not need daily approbation from us, they do not need to feel that we are going to check their work regularly by placing it in an inbox. This practice is by no means helpful. In fact, it is harmful in many ways—it can become an expectation that the children feel they must meet, thus their submissions are perfunctory, unfinished, and uninspired, as well as taking time away from the children’s own imaginative plans.

Also, this practice can set up an expectation of praise, which according to Dr. Montessori is an interference to the child’s independent self-assessment and his work. He doesn’t need an outside source to give him feedback. He knows perfectly well if he has worked to capacity or if he hasn’t. If we have truly mastered the Art of teaching, we have no need for such practices. They are a crutch that makes it seem like we are tracking exactly what the children are doing daily. It is through our ability to observe carefully as we move around the classroom that we determine which children need our guidance and which do not. If we offer unwanted or gratuitous feedback, we are at risk of interrupting the creative flow that is often initiated when children are working on their own ingenious tasks. We also create an expectation in the children of being supervised rather than left to their own initiative.

**QUESTION:** How do you ensure children are practicing with problems or sentences that they can navigate independently if they make them up themselves? As a Lower EI teacher, I find the younger children need “controlled” follow up exercises to be able to practice without the aid of an adult. What are your thoughts on this for Lower EI? How do children know which follow up work is needed if there is not a list for them to refer to?

**ANSWER:** You have a two-part question that requires two distinct answers. Let me address the part of your question when you used the word “controlled” as it relates to the follow up exercises in practicing with prepared problems and sentences. You make a mistake if you believe our method is one of “controlling” what children do, no matter their age. We do not control, we inspire. In this process we prepare them for work they must do when we introduce the Public-School Curricula—a document that lists the body of knowledge children must acquire by a certain age. Since we have our children for three years at each sub-level those ages are nine and twelve. In the lower elementary (6-9), however, the children do need to know how to solve compound math problems and single-digit combinations in all four functions. If they come from the Casa dei Bambini lacking these skills, then we must artfully address the situation immediately. Thus, they must work on them regularly until they have mastered this challenge. Since they are armed with imagination and reason, they understand why they must work on these subjects, but that they can be fully in charge of this work by making up the problems themselves. Let’s heed the wisdom Dr. Montessori offered us in this regard:

*It is marvelous how nature urges the child to seek independence. Without independence there is no functioning individuality. Let the child alone, leave him to act for himself without your help.* Creative Development in the Child: Vol. I, 61.

Strategy on how to work on math problems independently and enjoy the process:

- Gather a group who need math practice and mention that these are skills that must be learned in the class. Just like with any aptitude like skiing or playing the violin, the achievement of the skill requires much repetition.
- Let the children know that to make this activity fun-filled and a group activity they get to make their own problems up for themselves and each other. For their problems they can randomly select numerals, use birthdates, addresses, number of baskets that Stephen Curry makes per game (appeal to their personal interests), or even throw dice to find numerals for their problem.
- Each of them will solve different problems but they can work together while computing. They can write these problems on graph paper along with the date and their names. Ask the children to do about three problems every morning—not spend the whole day on this activity. This direction becomes a daily expectation. Remind the children that repetition leads to self-perfection and to eventually the conquest of a challenge.
- To vary the experience, the children can produce their self-made problems in Roman numerals or Egyptian hieroglyphs.
- Let them know they can check each other's work, but you will see it at the teacher/child meetings too. For these children in need of this structure, have more frequent meetings with them so you can give any guidance on errors you discover in the process—better brush up on your ability to read these exotic numeral systems ;-).
- Once they begin to demonstrate a reasonable degree of competency in their computation, you can ask them if they are ready to “test out” of this daily work. If they think they are ready for the GRAND CHALLENGE, you write three problems on a white board or paper, ask the child to work alone to solve the problems, and if they get two out of three correct, send them on the way to their next challenge on another day. If too few are correct ask them to practice a bit more.
- This construct helps the children to independently make up their own problems by working with each other on a daily challenge until they have mastered the process designed for their improvement.
- If the children need work on single-digit combinations, see Appendix B in *Whose Montessori Do You Practice?* for a strategy that works. Also, in Appendix E you can find the directions for checking the accuracy of answers to the compound math problems by Casting Out Nines. This process gives additional repetitional use of single-digit combinations.
- When you approach the development of math skills in a way that appeals to the children's natural proclivities, they will work independently without any crutches—like prepared problems—provided by adults.

*Nota Bene:*

- For children who come with no Montessori background, begin with the Golden Bead material because it is concrete. You only have to do a few problems until they understand the inherent process, but they still can choose their own numbers. After this they can move to pencil and paper and work to abstraction.
- In the 9 to 12 class if children arrive without the capacity to multiply or divide compound problems, you must start the process early to rectify this deficit. It can be done the same way as it was done for the younger elementary child.

How to work on language and sentences without the use of prepared sentences:

- First, you must understand that one of our goals as Montessori teachers is to help the child to develop his intellect. We do this by allowing him to think for himself, rather than doing the thinking for him. Providing prepared sentences has done the thinking work thereby depriving the child of an essential opportunity to “think” up his own sentences. By thinking up his own sentences, he is in the embryotic stages of developing his own style of writing. The secret is HOW to get children to think of sentences that are not simplified sentences with just a minimum of the parts of a sentence with only the predicate, subject and direct object. This is where our Art comes into play. To develop our style of writing we must be able to make clever, complete sentences that express an idea in a personal way. This development cannot happen when the children are given prepared sentences to parse!

Here's what we do to help the child develop his style of both writing and speech.

- Make sure that the children have manipulated the grammar boxes for exposure to the different parts of speech and their symbols. Never permit or expect your children to copy the sentences on the cards. This is MINDLESS work and does not develop the child's intellectual capacity. The purpose of the material is simply to learn the different parts of speech and how they function in a sentence through physical manipulation of the cards. Soon the children experience sentences that become more and more descriptive with the addition of new parts of speech. They should be encouraged to transpose the parts of speech to see how the order of the words can render the sentence meaningless or alter its meaning. This is a discovery the children can make and use when developing their style of writing.
- After working with the verb grammar box introduce the children to the sentence analysis materials. Begin by asking the individuals in the group simply to make up a sentence that has just one verb in it. If you can cogently speak in sentences, you can definitely make up a sentence. To prime them, you can begin by making the first sentence up. After each has verbalized his sentence, choose one to analyze with the material. Do a few more and then leave the children to make up their own sentences up but ask them to invite you back to see their analyzed sentences.

- Once they have done the preliminary exercises take them through the different steps that will eventually include predicate, direct objects, indirect objects, nouns in apposition, adverbial extensions, and attributives. These exercises on the didactic material introduce the basic concepts of grammar and give the children an understanding of the syntax of our language. Have the children work with both the circles and arrows as well as the sentence analysis board.

As useful as the material is, the time comes to wean the children off it but to continue to work with their own sentences. The question is how to entice them to do this? In answer I submit:

Gather the children together and offer them challenges:

- Try to make a sentence that has one verb, two nouns in apposition, one predicate, a direct object, and three adverbial extensions. Write that sentence down. The children can throw out different challenges to each other to be parsed.
- Give them the challenge of using all the adverbial extensions in a sentence. Have them try to make up a sentence that has an indirect object but no direct object. They will discover it is impossible try as they might. The children can symbolize the sentences and place them on a communal chart or a lengthy time line.

Include art in their sentence making by suggesting they make up an intricate sentence to illustrate.



“Ms. Oldknow, the grandmother, mends a colorful quilt.”



“High in the forest canopy a black bird chirps.”



“The snow falls quietly around the frozen lake.”



“Miorn, the yak, gives good milk to his master.”

- The children can collect these illustrated sentences into a booklet and offer it to the class for reading and inspiration.
- When you resort to prepared sentences, the children are never inspired to illustrate the sentences, because they are not their own.

The second part of your question, in my opinion is easy to answer. “How do children know which follow up work is needed if there is not a list for them to refer to?” First, you must acknowledge the great intellects residing in those young brains. You cannot underestimate the children’s ability to remember what work they are accountable for. They can. Some just don’t want to remember it for different reasons. If you have given them a presentation that is alluring and interesting, they won’t forget to do the work. So, the first thing to do is to analyze how you give these lessons. Remember Dr. Montessori’s words from The Montessori Revolution in Education, 22.

If children at school do not show a disposition to work spontaneously, then the fault lies not with the children but with the teacher and her manner of presenting the subjects. If children are bored, uninterested and uncomprehending, it is because, in the method of teaching, there are obstacles which prevent the child’s intellect from functioning as it ought.

Other Montessori strategies should be in play as well that would obviate a list of goals. They are the children tracking their work in their record books and the child/teacher meetings. For those children who do not follow through as they should, you can address the issue in these meetings. From your lesson plans you can point out when and what the child has been presented. Then ask them where the follow-up work is for the lessons they have ignored. Since they haven’t done the work, they cannot produce the work. At that point you give the child the reason why he must do the work associated with the lesson. Namely, it is through repetition of a concept that he will learn the skill. By referring to your lesson plan and the child’s record book, identify all lessons that need to be worked on. From your personal records you can make a list of them—not to give the child but to guide him one task at a time until he has completed them all. Send him off with one task to accomplish by a mutually agreed upon schedule. Ask him to show you each piece of finished work.

With this external structure that you provide the child, he will soon get the idea that he must not procrastinate on beginning or finishing the work he needs to do to acquire essential skills. However, you must keep your eye on the child when he is working on these select tasks, lest he stops working as you and he agreed upon. Also, more regular child/teacher meetings will be in order for children who need this kind of support and direction.

I know these processes take energy, time and commitment, but this is what we signed up for. Giving a list of goals is an easy way out. Unfortunately, that doesn’t work. More importantly, it infringes on the functioning of the second plane psychological characteristics. By giving lists of goals the children’s imaginations are curbed, their reasoning factor is stunted, the group work is stymied, the great work is non-existent, and there is not opportunity for moral development. To help the child learn to follow through with his work without jeopardizing our guiding principles is a testament to our ability to implement Cosmic Education artfully.

Volume V:  
Great Work: The Pinnacle of Our Success—but it isn't easy to actuate!

Tucked in the moniker 'classroom management' is the ability to facilitate adroitly our goal—a goal that is manifested in the children's Great Work engendered by their Group Work. Many steps must be initiated for the children's work to bear the kind of fruit that we call Great Work. Like so many things in implementing Cosmic Education, we are confronted with situations that have the potential to impede our goal. The following set of questions have a congruent theme related to Great Work and the answers—I hope—may assuage your concerns and give a path to follow for a solution.

**QUESTION:** How long are children working with didactic materials before they start these big works?

**ANSWER:** First off, as you all well know, you must begin your lesson with a group of children—more than one and no more than the number of children who can attend to the subject at hand. The group also must understand, once the inspirational lesson has been given, that working repeatedly on the lesson—especially in the case of didactic materials—is required to learn the skill. Through repetition, the children move closer to abstraction. If the materials are put away too soon, the children must take them out and work longer on the material until they begin to understand the concept.

This brings us to the heart of the question: how do we determine if they need more work before engaging in a communal great work? We can decide this through our powers of observation and an informal assessment to see if the children have grasped the skill. If they have, they can move to the next step—actualizing their ideas in some great fashion. For those who have not yet abstracted the notion, more manipulative work on the material is in order.

In some cases, in which children have worked productively on some material and are still not as adept as others in the group, they can be included in these larger projects since working with others who are more proficient may help the child practice his weaker skill. In this case the teacher must keep an eye on the group to see that the child is sharing in the work. For example, if the children were working with the box of sticks to find the different parts of plane figures and their definitions, the child can lend his talent to the project while strengthening his weaker ones.

Different abilities have contributed to this piece of group work: naming and drawing the parts of the figures, writing the definition, deciding on the artistic elements, such as colors and cover design, and engineering the mechanism that reveals the work. Perhaps, the child who is struggling with remembering the definitions of the figures is the genius behind the string-pulled device that raises the multi-colored cover to reveal the information inside. This success might stoke his self-image and confidence thus motivating him to work on his limited skill.



**QUESTION:** What kind of writing/research do you expect before they get started on their “great work”?

**ANSWER:** When children are pursuing a story-like lesson before they engage in any related group project, they must know something about it. Perhaps they discover something that appeals to them through reading books found in the classroom or at the library. Once they have acquired a body of knowledge from their explorations on their chosen subject, gather them together to discern what they know. Try to draw information from each child in the group to determine if they are all interested in the subject. If they do not seem well prepared, guide them to sources (**not the computer**) where they can find out more about their subject. Elicit from them the kinds of things that they might want to pursue in relation to their topic. Let them know to come and tell you when they have more information.

If you are convinced that they have adequate details on the subject, gather them all around a writing source and have them list the topics they want to convey in their written work. By your engaging in this process, the children will infer that they must produce some written work before going any further with their ‘grand ideas.’ If the expectation that all work results in written expression—to one degree or another—has been solidly engrained in the elementary children from the first day they entered the class, this should just be a matter of course. Once they produce a well written and organized piece on their subject, give them free reign to unleash their creative imaginations that embodies all they have learned on the subject.

**QUESTION:** What do you recommend when follow up work (conceptualized by the children) drags on and on due a lack of enthusiasm? In other words, how do you strike a balance between expecting follow up from a lesson and wanting to move past the painful thing to more interesting work?

**ANSWER:** To a certain extent you will find the answer to this question in Volume IV, Question 2. I can add a bit more for clarification. For the child who ‘drags his feet’ because he is uninterested in the skill-based activity he needs and would rather work on his personally conceptualized work with his friends, you can address the matter directly in the child/teacher meeting. I would appeal to his reasoning capacity about why learning the topic, which does not hold his interest, is vital for his over-all knowledge base. I would emphasize that it is my (the teacher’s) responsibility to see that he achieves this skill and that to learn anything we must practice it again and again. This paves the way for his understanding that while the topic may not excite him, it must be tackled.

At question, is how it will be tackled. If you and he can come to a mutually agreeable logical solution...great! If not, then you will be required to set his schedule for him so that you can discharge your responsibility to see that he learns the basic skills. Do remind him that once this “painful” work is accomplished, he is free to go back to his “children-conceptualized work.” And, as always, you must be vigilant that he attends to the solution that has been agreed upon or imposed. Just remember, by doing this firmly you are providing the child a valuable helping hand, whether he sees it that way or not.

**QUESTION:** What to do when children have chronic conflict while doing group work?

**ANSWER:** In Volume I, Question 3 I have covered Resolving Social Issues. In that question I have given steps to take to help the children resolve their differences. At the end of that paragraph, I said, “If they are unable to do so (resolve their issues), then tell them that as the final arbiter in the matter, you will be forced to impose the solution.” What I did not do was elucidate the ‘imposed solution.’ Now I shall.

For children who struggle with “chronic conflict” I would tell the parties that since they seem to always have trouble working together that it is best that they select other people to work with for the time being. Emphasize that they will not be able to work together until you see evidence of their being able to work amicably with other people. Typically, these “cantankerous” children are good friends and like being together even though they argue excessively with each other while working. When they appeal to you to allow them to work together once again, discuss with them your expectations of how that process might unfold. If they commit to working civilly, you can allow them to show you that they have been ‘rehabilitated’ and will not engage in their previous disruptive behaviors.

However, they must be reminded of what is at stake if their work again deteriorates and they resort to previous argumentative conduct. So, what is at stake? Losing the privilege of working together for a much longer duration. In the meantime, you can orchestrate your lessons so that the ‘recidivists’ work with others who may be more compatible than the personalities involved in the chronic squabbling and bickering. Again, you are faced with an issue that requires a firm tactic to remedy it. Without a firm and logical strategy, the situation won’t correct itself. Dr. Montessori encouraged us,

*We must remember that these children are our responsibility; it is our duty to give the children the conditions to grow strong and healthy both in the physical and in the psychical field, so that he may achieve his (sic) purpose. Creative Development in the Child: Volume II, 88*

Volume VI:  
Inhabitants of the Montessori Classroom:  
Their Contribution to the Child's Self-Construction.

As we consider the inhabitants of the classroom—besides the teacher—that contribute to the children's development of independence, responsibility and other indispensable potentials, we must look for other sources and opportunities in the immediate environment that provide such a service. Interestingly, sources are not always present in human form. Rather they can assume many different forms, especially those from the wonderful world of biology. This conjures the world of flora and fauna. Although the following question does not ask about plants, the rationale pertaining to animals can be applied to plants as well.

**QUESTION:** Please comment on the number and types of animals (or classroom pets) we should have in the Elementary environment. Please also answer why this is true.

**ANSWER:** Before addressing the number and types of animals (not pets) needed in the elementary classroom, let me attend to the WHY of the question, because the reason lies at the heart of our endeavor to assist in the child's self-construction. Indeed, by populating the room with animals we are following Dr. Montessori's insight when she said,

*As far as possible, it is good to bring children into contact with the reality of life in animal form. In order to introduce the older children to the field of biology, we decided to have an aquarium in the environment. Starting an aquarium involves more than taking a tub of water and putting a couple of live fish in it. In order to keep an aquarium, it is necessary, to understand the conditions in which the fish lived, and to prepare an environment for them. Creative Development in the Child, Volume One, 223.*

When you have living organisms in the classroom, the children begin to understand the conditions required to keep them alive through their first-hand experiences in doing so. They understand it is their responsibility to feed and water the animals along with maintaining the environments and the health of animals, be they vertebrates or invertebrates. With clear lessons and guidance, the children will be prepared to do their jobs and by so doing, develop their responsibility for another life. This development is crucial to keep our natural environment intact.

Also, as the children care for the animals, they develop the abilities to observe carefully. They can begin by noting their different physical characteristics and that different animals' parts take different forms; they all can move, but they use different body parts to do so; they have different behaviors; they all need food, but different kinds; and each animal needs a particular kind of environment to meet its needs. They can discover through their observational skills when an animal is not thriving and take steps to correct the problem. There is so much to discover when children live in proximity with animals—and they do this by handling their tasks responsibly and observing acutely the nuances of the living world.

Now let's tackle the TYPES of animals suitable for the classroom. It was Mario Montessori, a dedicated animal lover, who recommended having one of the five classes of vertebrates and an example or two of some invertebrates for the children's benefit. Indeed, it was he who spearheaded the materials for the animal nomenclature and classification materials that should be in our classrooms to support the children's observations. To have his suggested array of animals for your children, provides them with a rich field of animal life to explore and to know intimately while developing valuable personal skills.

However, not all schools are able to do this because of some limitation or another, such as space or budget. But any limitation must be a legitimate one—not because of a teacher's personal bias to caging animals or because she is afraid of or dislikes certain animals such as reptiles or spiders. I use these two animal examples because as a child I was extremely afraid of snakes and spiders. As a primary directress I had to 'get over myself' so I could give my children the full Montessori experience, which was to put the children in "*contact with the reality of life in animal form.*" I did so by acquiring a baby corn snake that slithered lithely over my knuckles grasping each with a squeeze-like proprietary grip. At that moment, I fell in love. Well, perhaps I should say, "I fell out of fear." Today I can handle any non-poisonous snake that is smaller than my arm and I have no need to shriek EEK! Over the years I have observed that snakes are among the children's favorite animals.

To get over my fear of spiders I was faced with an exotic animal expert who came to my elementary class for a demonstration of different kinds of curious exotic animals: a Madagascar hissing cockroach, a bird-eating frog, a goliath beetle, an African giant millipede, and a tarantula, among others. I took care to sit far away from the presenter. After all the children had held the 6-inch leg-spanned Mexican red-knee tarantula, the expert turned to me and said, "Your turn Teach." I had a conundrum—to hold a seemingly ominous creature whom I had feared for over three decades of my life or lose face with my elementary children.

I made the right decision when I girded my loins and held out my hand to receive her. I petted one hairy leg and then another. After each stroke the spider gracefully moved its appendage slowly away. It made no attempt to inject me with its poison as I once imagined it would. The fear of spiders that once held me in its clutches began to melt into thin air. It helped knowing that the tarantula bite is no more poisonous than a bee sting; only if you are allergic to the animal is it worse. In the 30 odd years I taught elementary children I always had a tarantula in the classroom so the children could care for and become accustomed to these much-maligned animals. No one was ever bitten.

However, it did frighten the beejebers out of a big, burly fire inspector when he pulled a shelf aside to check an electric switch plate in my classroom. In response to his manly scream I said, "Oh, you found Turbo," who had once again gone missing. I bent down, picked her up and asked the inspector if he would like to hold her. He declined. But enough about me. Here is some advice on how obstacles to having animals in the classroom can be overcome. First know it will take setting aside prejudices, determination and creative thinking.

If you are afraid of an animal and cannot overcome that fear, have another adult present it to the children. You do not want to project your fear onto the children by telegraphing your trepidation. If the children assume the responsibility of caring for the animals, you will have little need to interact with them (the animals, not the children ;-).

- If the budget is tight, rotate animals through the elementary classes to share the expenses among the classrooms.
- Have child organized fundraisers to buy a favored animal and the materials needed for its upkeep.
- If space is an issue, think about hanging a bird cage (I recommend cockatiels) or choose animals that need smaller environments (e.g., ant farms). You can also put a combination of animals in one environment: snails in the fish tank or the frog terrarium; shrimp in the fish tank.

Care of animals during holidays can be managed by having the children and their families share the care. Also, members of the school’s administration could be solicited for a little care during the summer. **I know this works!** But it requires planning ahead and informing the children of the steps to be taken.

Having animals in the classroom is a gift to all children, especially to the children who for whatever reason do not have animals in their homes. I will leave this question with these words, “Where there is a willingness there is a way.”

**QUESTION:** Can you kindly address the assistant in the environment?

**ANSWER:** The assistant is of great importance to the teacher and the overall workings of the classroom. In fact, an assistant’s help is indispensable. In many ways the partnership between a teacher and her assistant is like two tango dancers. To make the performance smooth and successful each person needs to clearly understand her steps, her position and the underlying aspects that define her role. When this is done right, the relationship between the teacher—like that of the dancers—is an alliance that manifests in a graceful ‘performance’ while working on behalf of children. In my tenure I have had three long-standing assistants with whom I experienced this connection, which now allows me to wax poetic about the bond that can be forged. I also have had several assistants who thought they could follow my lead, but alas, could not. From these disappointments I have learned how to manage the process of hiring someone who understands her role perfectly.

The delineation of the assistant’s role falls to the teacher, not to the administration. It is the teacher’s obligation to take on this educational responsibility so the assistant knows exactly what steps she can take and knows her tasks are not random but guided by pedagogy. If this task is discharged clearly, there should be no misunderstandings or confusion of exactly what the assistant can and cannot do and--importantly the reasons why. Many people who apply for an assistant’s position are eager to work with children and engage with them to help if they can. After all, it is only natural that adults want to help children. But too often they are unaware that their efforts in fact, don’t help the child in his great construction, but instead impede it. For these people, Dr. Montessori’s words can clarify that misconception of the role:

*Generally, people are ready to render assistance when we do not need it. Creative Development in the Child, Volume One, 15.*

Thus, the teacher must fully educate the applicant about her potential role as a partner in the classroom. This education begins in the interview process during which the applicant is informed of what that job exactly entails—what she can and cannot do, and the reasons why. Essentially, she is an **assistant to the teacher and not to the children**. The job as described will not suit everyone who applies and it's best that the applicant knows that at the outset so she can make an informed decision. Here are relevant points to be covered:

The teacher can begin by assuring the assistant that her role as support to the teacher is vital, but it is very different than the role of the teacher. Her interactions with the children will be in a limited capacity—overseeing lunch and playtime and taking the children on their going-out ventures. From time to time, especially in the lower elementary class, she may be called upon to listen to children read, tell the time for the children who need to record that data in their record books, or to sit by a child who needs an adult presence.

The assistant is not at liberty to offer gratuitous assistance to the children, but she can observe and take notes on the children and their work—serving as a second pair of eyes for the teacher. When children are not working but distracting others, she can alert the teacher to their behaviors but not attempt to involve herself in the correction and guidance of them. She must not move through the classroom interrupting the children by asking them needless questions about their work. This is intrusive and an invasion of the children's privacy.

She should never be asked to 'correct or edit' the children's work, make problems and sentences for them, or solve their social differences. Most importantly, the **assistant should never give lessons of any kind**. That task belongs solely to the teacher.

The assistant can also render the teacher vital service by maintaining the infrastructure of the classroom. This means she keeps the cupboards clean and orderly, completes administrative paperwork, restocks the consumables, labels the bins of supplies, makes and refurbishes materials, run class-related errands such as trips to the grocery store to get the apple, tomato, peach, and pumpkin for a lesson on the four kinds of fruits. She can do some of the deep cleaning of the classroom, but never usurping the cleaning tasks that belong to the children.

After hearing what is being asked of her and your response to her willingness to follow your lead, it should be **you who does the choosing of the person to partner with you, not the administration**. Not all the people who apply will be able to meet your needs even though they think they can. Therefore, through your comprehensive interview you—and only you—will have a sense of which applicant is most compatible with your personality, style and committed intentions toward the children. Thus, you are the person who is uniquely prepared to assess each candidate and make your best choice. Good luck! I consider the hiring the right person to assist me as one of the more difficult tasks we Montessori teachers have.

## Volume VII: A Basket of Sundry Questions

Different issues emerge in our day-to-day Montessori practices—ones that require our thoughtful responses and reflective actions. Some of these themes are pedagogical matters while others are more political. You never know which of the children's questions will take you aback—especially those from the political realm. I am reminded of the question a primary child threw at me when first entering the class one fine day. He marched decidedly up to me and asked, “Mrs. Pottish, is Nixon a crook or not?” Perhaps he saw me as an impartial judge in this sensitive matter—I wasn't—since his mother was on one side of the issue while his father was on the other. While I had an opinion on the matter, it was not my place to side with either parent. I merely said, “You know David, some people think he is, and some people think he isn't. Each person must decide for himself.”

I believe the best rule of thumb in these political matters is to stay neutral, so we don't inadvertently influence the children's opinions or intrude on family dynamics. This small anecdote may not be pertinent to the following questions, but I love telling it. David's asking made me realize that the social and political environments have an impact on even the youngest children. With that bit of nostalgia, let's deal with the first question:

**QUESTION:** How much do we share with our children about **horrific news** items, current wars, school shootings etc.?

**ANSWER:** Unless the matter is initiated by the children or one so horrific (like 9/11) that our lives are impacted country wide, I would downplay the issue as much as I could. For the children who might introduce an appalling topic I would acknowledge their concern, discuss the issue with them as briefly as possible to recognize their concerns, and then take pains to involve them in the beautiful opportunities and lessons the classroom offers. I would seek to channel their energy into positive experiences to take their minds off troubling issues—issues they can do nothing about at their young ages.

Depending on the child I might find an art project in which he could express his feelings and liberate his anxiety. If we dwell on egregious societal events, we could be a source for further embedding any fears the children might have or even worse, introducing children to atrocities who might thus far be ignorant of them. In following this advice, we are not abandoning the child to confront his fears and worries alone; rather, we are constructively redirecting the child to raise these issues with those best positioned to address them with him: his family. These are tricky times! So many issues that keep us up at night. Let's consider our classrooms a sanctuary and a respite from the disturbing aspects that today pervade our peace of mind. After all, our charges are still children, learning the skills to solve problems in their own good time, and not having to take on the weight of the world just yet.

**QUESTION:** What are the dynamics or challenges of having an AMS Lower EI guide and an AMI Upper EI guide?

**ANSWER:** The **dynamics** of working with teachers who have two different trainings boil down to how the distinctions are handled. This situation has the possibility of devolving into competition, resentment, insecurity, as well as condescending and patronizing behaviors, all of which can create divisiveness among the team's relationships. This creates a toxic work environment for everyone.

On the other hand, to mitigate this possibility, all the teachers should take every opportunity to learn from each other to forge a strong bond with each other carved out of mutual respect. The climate should be one where constructively helping those who may have a void in their knowledge base is both a constant and a keystone in building camaraderie. It is not uncommon for teachers without an AMI elementary diploma to ask about some materials unknown to them because they didn't get it on their training course. This is an ideal time to help each other to strengthen those bonds.

It also helps to ask the AMS teacher questions about her practice that may help yours. At least, it will establish an equity between the two teachers and avoid one teacher looking down on another. With years of consulting different schools, some with teachers from different courses, I discovered that the best teachers are not defined by the diplomas they hold. Rather they are those who have a natural affinity for working with children according to the foundational pedagogy of Dr. Montessori, no matter which diploma they hold.

The **challenges** that might confront the AMI 9 to 12 teacher when children matriculate into her classroom—no matter which elementary course the 6 to 9 teacher has—is some children may not have all the required skills. So, the question is, what do we do when children come with deficits? The answer is we roll up our sleeves and get to work. First, we assess the children's skills in the early days of the school year and then plan further lessons to rectify their lacks. I believe it was Dr. Montessori who said that the roots of all subjects are planted in the 6 to 9 class and revisited again in the 9 to 12 class. This review of the curricula further nurtures and prepares to the children to approach a topic in greater depth. Repetition is the byword and an underlying staple of Montessori education!

As a matter of practice in my 9 to 12 class I would take the new children through the beginning lessons of all subjects by telling the initial stories in geography, history and biology, and presenting the first lessons in geometry, language and mathematics. Since the children should have gone through all the grammar boxes, abstracted multi-digit multiplication and division, I would quickly move them to abstraction on those subjects in a way that appealed to them and would provoke them to work willingly and constructively while also immersing them in the exciting lessons of Cosmic Education.

I also kept a close eye on their progress as I observed their work in the class and when I met with each of them individually. If they were working effectively, it only took a few months before these children were up to par. Should a child not be progressing as I had hoped, even with the many repetitive opportunities and strategies for doing so, I would observe him with an eye on the reason why. If it seemed like it was some cognitive blockade, I would begin the process of how to help this child with his struggles—struggles that persisted no matter my attempts to help him. This assistance often came from a specialist who was trained specifically to deal with obstacles impeding the child's progress.

**QUESTION:** Our school has the oldest students in each environment (Primary, Lower El, Upper El) begin visits in the environment into which they'll be moving into as a “preview” and **to receive lessons for that last month** of the school year. Would you please share your thoughts on this practice?

**ANSWER:** I think it is a sensible plan to have children who will be moving from one level to another to visit their new environment in the spring—about four to six weeks in advance of the move. This should be considered a visit in which the child can observe the advanced work of the older children, get to know the new teacher and how she operates, to see the new schedules and systems that they will be asked to follow, and to identify other children who will be in their new community. Aspects to consider in this process are outlined below:

- Collaboratively the teachers at both levels should set up a schedule for the visits to occur. The teachers of the children who will be moving will have a final say about how much time their children will spend in the new class. It is not a time for the children to begin work at the new level—either in the 6 to 9 class or the adolescent class. This is your call! No one else's.
- The children should be sent in small groups.
- Initially, the children can take their own work project with them to the new classroom, or the potential teacher can give the group a simple lesson depending on their ages. This provides the new teacher an opportunity to get to know the children better and make a preliminary assessment of their abilities.

Some practices that you want to avoid in this process:

- Be careful the children don't assume that the teacher of the class they visit will be their teacher in the fall. So, mix up the visits among all the classes. In schools with many elementary classrooms this can happen; children get their hearts set on one teacher and are disappointed when assigned to a different class and teacher.
- Do not let the adolescent teachers **commandeer** the older elementary children by expecting them to regularly come the last month of the year to receive adolescent lessons. The argument that I have been given for this arrangement is that adolescent lessons prepare the children for their entry into the program. No! What prepares the children for the adolescent work is a full six years in the elementary program. The elementary children have plenty of work to finish in the last months as members of the class. Also, they need these final days to express their leadership and enjoy their relationships with the younger upper elementary children. This is a time when they can bring their childhood to a comfortable closure and be reminded of all that has passed and who they have come to be because of having been in the elementary program for the full duration. Nothing should deprive them of this precious opportunity of recognition and to say goodbye.
- Any adolescent work presented to the visitors should be inspirational, titillating with no follow-up work required. The purpose of these visits, as I mentioned above, is to is to familiarize the children with the salient points of the new classroom and to ease

their entry into a considerably different environment, not to become premature members of it. Remember the 12-year-olds, while on the cusp of adolescence, are still in the elementary phase of childhood with its corresponding psychological characteristics. Upper elementary children who visit the adolescent class too often seem to be at a loss dealing with the emotional upheavals of the young adults there. Let's protect them from an unsuitable, unnecessary exposure to another plane of development that differs greatly from what they have known.

**QUESTION:** In my 12-18 training, the Story for the Great River is very prominent, but my 6-12 albums do not have that lesson but some other 6-12 trainings do. Is this an approved 6-12 lesson?

**ANSWER:** The Story of the Great River is absolutely an approved 6-12 lesson. It is considered one of the Great Stories we tell our children. It differs from the first Five Great Stories in that they are **introductory stories** that open the doors to the universe: the creation of the universe (The Story of God with no Hands), the coming of life, the coming of human beings, and the two gifts given to us by the head, hand and love of humans, those human gifts that led to the story of mathematics and the story of language. The lessons following these great stories are the details of each aspect and are considered 'Key Lessons.' They allow the children to pursue avenues related to each story that will eventually create an interlocking nexus of information that will prepare the children for understanding The Story of the Great River—a **culmination story** given after the children have been sufficiently immersed in the key lessons that bolster the children's understanding of how all matters flow through a whole to create a healthy existence.

Because the metaphor of the human body is used in this piece of material it can be included in the biology album. Since the chart also implies the metaphor of the world's social economy seen as a whole, it can be given as a part of the geography domain. Either rationale is meaningful and acceptable. Thus, in conclusion we can say there are six great lessons, five of which introduce the universe and its furnishings and one that is a cohesive amalgam to crystalize a concept.

**QUESTION:** We have so many children needy of attention and praise. Some of them constantly. What is the best way to handle that?

**ANSWER:** I touched a bit on the notion of offering praise to a child in Volume IV, question 5. It is well to remember that Dr. Montessori considered praise an interference to the child's independent self-assessment and his work when she said,

*The teacher must recognize the first moment of concentration and not disturb it. The whole future comes from this moment and so the teacher must be ready to not interfere when it occurs. This is very difficult, because the teacher has to intervene continually before the children are normalized. Generally, a teacher*

*will interfere when a child is working. The teacher will go to see what the child is doing and praise him. This praise is an interference.*

The 1946 London Lectures, p. 229.

While this quote doesn't necessarily address needy children who continually seek praise, it does give us advice on why praise should not be reinforced in the classroom for any reason. Thus, with the needy children we first must determine why they are always seeking praise and attention. Perhaps, for whatever reason the child is insecure regarding his skills. Perhaps he is used to getting praise from some source in his home life. Perhaps, in his way, he wants to be rewarded for what he does in the classroom. No matter the cause, to help the child to become independent and capable of assessing his abilities, we must wean him away from seeking out positive reinforcement from any adult in the classroom.

The question is how to do this without further diminishing his ego. The process I would begin with for a class weighty with needy children would be to have a class-wide conversation about how a Montessori education helps us to see ourselves clearly without needing the concurrence of another. Our self-worth comes from doing the best we can as we work in the classroom. We know our value and therefore we do not require any homage paid us by others, teachers or children alike. Ask the children, "With that in mind, how might you react when you have done something you consider praiseworthy?" Depending on the answer given, guide the child to acknowledging that he doesn't need to depend on praise from someone else. His opinion of his work is what is most important.

This preliminary discussion paves the way for the next steps. When a child approaches you wanting attention or praise, ask him what he thinks of his work or what he has done. Do not praise him! Send him back to work and ask him to produce the same kind of quality of work he has just shown you. Do this repeatedly. Children who are so entrenched in seeking the approval of others will have a harder time breaking this habit than others who are afflicted less. You must be consistent in this response. Soon the child will recognize that he does not need the acclaim of others to evaluate his work and he will soon learn that he will get no gratuitous compliments from you, but simple neutral expressions of support for his efforts. "I see you worked hard on this piece." The color choice of your design is appealing."

But keep this in mind too, when children are working collaboratively, they seldom seek approbation from the teachers. So, ensure that these "needy children" are working with a group—which should be the norm in a Montessori Elementary class.

## Conclusion

Perhaps it was fortuitous that there was no time to answer questions at the AMI/EAA 2024 Refresher Course, since it provided me time to delve into the answers more deeply than I would have been able to do during the course. I have enjoyed this process since tackling the questions triggered memories of my time working with children—memories that feed my spirit still. Additionally, it gave me an avenue for sharing practical knowledge I have gleaned from this work with those of you who are now facing some of the same issues I had to grapple with during my teaching tenure. I hope the words and reasons behind the answers in each of these volumes give you the advice you seek.

I would like to thank the Board of AMI/EAA for their efforts in making these volumes a reality. This project has required time, effort and love on their part to make it happen and I appreciate all that they have done on behalf of EAA's members.