



## CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

By Paula Lillard Preschlack

When I took the AMI elementary training in 1994, there were one or two lectures and some discussions on “Classroom Management.” In the AMI primary training, which I took immediately afterwards, the subject was scattered as anecdotes throughout our lectures. From both courses, I had the impression that managing the classroom was not going to be difficult; giving presentations should be my focus.

However, in those exciting first days in my own primary classroom, I discovered that “management” was indeed a necessary precursor to the functioning Montessori environment I had heard and read so much about. Since then, I have learned that many Montessori-trained teachers become so frustrated and discouraged by Christmas of their first year that they resort to non-Montessori approaches, or resolve to give up teaching altogether.

After a collective thirteen years as fellow teacher and head of school, I have found that not all classroom management skills can be taught. No wonder the trainers cannot prescribe exactly what to do: Like advising a parent with a crying infant, the answer begins, “It depends...” And ultimately, one must begin with their own emotional intelligence: their compassion, respect and internal discipline. The individual teacher shares these with students through modeling, well-chosen words, and a strong sense of responsibility.

The term that better defines classroom management is “classroom leadership.” The Montessori teacher must become an effective leader. The seemingly magical way that students work and interact peacefully—without adult interference—is a point of arrival that does not occur without a long period of active adult leadership.

How, exactly, do we do this? The most precise answers can be found with dedicated AMI trainers when they observe and consult with us every three years. In an effort to augment these observations, here are three skills I learned during my teaching experiences. I believe each is central to successful classroom leadership.

### 1: Take the Lead

When I first began teaching three-to six-year-olds in 1995, I watched in horror as a group of eight four-year-old boys moved around my painstakingly-prepared classroom like a windstorm. They disturbed the few trying to concentrate, destroyed materials, giggled nonchalantly and walked away from me as I attempted to stop them. Every night, pushing back tears of frustration, I recounted the events of the day to my mother, Paula Polk Lillard, and asked for her advice.

Through her suggestions, I gradually developed an attitude of authority with the children, performing a role I was wholly unprepared for. I was not used to telling others (even four-year-olds) what to do, and I did not enjoy it. But with her 30 years of Montessori teaching experience, my mother insisted that this was exactly what I must do. She helped me see that it was unfair to abandon the children to their own whims or to allow the peace and concentration of the others to be violated. I began to see that as the adult present, I was to be the guardian of precious attempts at concentrated work. Strong leadership, she convinced me, was what the children needed.

Paula suggested ways that I could assert my authority without threatening the children or challenging them to power struggles. She encouraged me to draw each child’s attention to the details.

For instance, one strong-willed three-year-old typically responded, “NO!” whenever I gave her a choice or tried to get her to take out some work. Paula advised that when shaking the child’s hand to greet her, I look directly into her

eyes and say, “Good morning Sally. Let’s find an apron,” in a pleasant but definitive manner. Then, I was to follow or lead her to the apron and begin to draw her attention to each point of interest in putting on the apron: “Let’s see where the button is...Ah, you found it! Now, where is the hole, is there a hole on the strap?” And so on, meeting each resistance by drawing the child deeper into the activity, to the language of the parts or steps, and to the way we move, walk, lift the tray and so on.

Most such details are in our albums, but when faced with the challenging reality of a fast-moving, quick-thinking child, we can feel at sea. We can forget to emphasize these details in an enticing way during our presentations. By linking the child to the details, we free them from the power struggle and engage them. Before three-year-old Sally knew what had happened, she was washing a table. What’s more, she was doing it with an attitude of attention to her movements, the objects, and the sequence. This attitude was modeled for her long before the tray was even placed next to the table and the formal presentation had begun.

### 2: Wear Different Hats

One of my first students, a three-year-old boy, disrupted one working classmate after another until I led him by the hand to sit next to me. He then removed his shoes, laid across the materials I was working with, and squirmed against my side. When I made my first attempts to be firm with this child (following my mother’s prompting), I literally shook afterwards with emotion. I felt unsettled and grim. I knew the other children sensed this. I struggled with how to remedy the paradox of being as firm as necessary, while maintaining a cheerful composure with the class. In my second year of teaching I made progress, realizing it is important to treat every child as an individual, so that responses gave valuable information.

For instance, immediately after speaking very firmly to a child who had done something

unacceptable, I turned with a happy smile to another who came to ask a question. Thus, the children found that my responses did not reflect a mood or feeling. It was important not to transfer the reaction one child elicited to my interaction with another. This is how the children learn that their teacher is dependable.

I discovered that while the children elicited different responses from me, every interaction could be simultaneously affirming. To be effective, I had to be genuine and have sincere hope and well-wishes for every child. Underneath every interaction, especially when it was a firm one, my heartfelt goal was to help the child. This way, children sensed my care and love, even when I was being firm. I also thought back to an important message I had heard from two of my AMI trainers, Hildegard Solzbacher and Maria Teresa Vidales: Treat each moment in a Montessori setting as a new beginning, a fresh start for the child. I tried to keep my mind in the present so that no child adopted a persona.

Children differ not only in moment-to-moment behavior, but in temperament. While one child craved strong guidance, another was highly sensitive to the slightest frown or dry tone of voice. Therefore, I would not make a “public display” when speaking firmly to a child. I would keep my voice low and treat interactions as private by speaking within arm’s length and with eye contact. Very sensitive children who witness that the teacher is respectful to all the children, even while firm, are less likely to become emotionally unsettled.

Cultivating this ability to respond specifically to individual behavior and temperament may take time. With consistent work, most teachers will find that a cheerful, compassionate tone of voice and expression becomes the norm. As they become efficient at inspiring change in a student’s behavior, it becomes easier. They may eventually find that the class carries on independently and peacefully without their presence for a few moments.

### **3: Stay Connected**

#### **Despite Distance**

One of my frustrations as a first-time teacher was that when I looked up from giving a presentation, I often saw undesirable behaviors but knew that leaving my place to address them was not ideal. I also knew that yelling, “Hey! Don’t bop your classmate on the head with that mop!” was not a great idea. Eventually I tried what became an invaluable technique: whispering a child’s name to get his attention. This was respectful and unobtrusive to other students

working with concentration, and could be detected more easily than a “normal” voice from a distance. We did need to “practice” this now and then so that children learned to recognize my whisper over the hum of the class.

For instance, I occasionally approached a child to say, “I whispered your name from over there but perhaps you didn’t hear me. Let’s practice—I’ll go back across the room and when you hear me whisper your name, please look over at me.” I often mouthed a “thank you,” once the child looked over. Children sometimes gave a heartwarming smile back at me. Usually, I found that when a child responded to my whispering his name, I could motion with my hands or make a facial expression to get a point across. Whispering a child’s name, then frowning and slowly shaking my head, accomplished more than a whole conversation may have.

What I like about whispering a name to gain eye contact is that it’s quick and the child can respond immediately by attending to her work or changing her tone. This communication was possible without me or the child having to leave our places of work. More importantly, whispering over a distance created an invisible connection between us. It fostered the sense that I was helping the children engage in their work. I was the active “link” between each child and the environment when needed. Over time, the children’s own self-mastery began to take over these invisible “cords,” as my interference became unnecessary much of the time.

When I reflect on my years in the classroom, I realize that it was these three discovered skills that ultimately connected me to the children in a meaningful and effective way. I eventually found the point of arrival that Montessori saw was possible in the classroom: the beautiful sight of children creating a peaceful atmosphere with respectful, industrious, joyful work, as if there were no adult there at all. With Montessori, we can become classroom leaders who truly follow the children. My hope is that first year teachers will try these and other suggestions given by AMI consultants and fellow teachers, and keep on trying. Persistent modeling with deep faith in Montessori philosophy will lead you to your goal.



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