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Preparing the Adult's Environment

Montessorians are intensely aware of the drive for self-perfection. We can be so aware of this human tendency that we may develop a somewhat critical attitude towards ourselves and/or the adults around us. We may have a good eye for seeing what we are doing wrong and pay a bit less attention to what we are doing well. What we can see with gentleness and compassion in children, we often see with less understanding in adults, especially in ourselves.

But if we are truly to master our calling to aid the development of the whole child, we must attend to how we consider and how we treat ourselves.

A baby step towards developing more kindness in this direction is to look at the environment we have (or haven't) prepared for the adults in the school.

Two important areas that are often overlooked in the design of a classroom environment are the need for storage (for the guide's personal items, for the didactic materials that are not currently in use and for consumable supplies that will be refilled during the day) and privacy.

Personal Items

As part of our work as Montessori guides, we regularly visit other Montessori classrooms. Often times we find no place to put our coats, bags, or coffee cups. And it isn't just the visiting adult who faces this dilemma. The head guide and assistant guide often have to cram their belongings in some unlikely space... the bathroom, under a table, or behind a shelf. We go through pains to make sure each child has a space for their belongings going so far as to measure the size of lunchboxes and sew special bags to hold their change of clothes. But for the adults? "If you wouldn't mind, please just stuff it under there."

Of course we realize that our clutter can easily become the child's clutter. Our extra storage space often overlaps into the classroom space and, by so doing, distracts the children from their work. But in addition to this, we deserve a space no more or less than the child does. This doesn't mean we have to add a hook for ourselves in the cubby line. Our belongings are sized differently from the child's. Our bodies are different so our space must be different. But we can set aside for ourselves the real estate we need in the classroom or in the hall, wherever it fits. And we can make it lovely as well as functional and secure.

Didactic Materials

Most of us know the importance of rotating certain materials to maintain the child's interest. Yet, nowhere in my study of the prepared environment was there a section on "storage." This wasn't included in any of the floor plans! We have all been creative in how and where we store our extra pitchers, bowls, trays and language cards. We put them on high shelves or cabinets in the classroom/hallways/children's bathroom, on the window sill, on a pile on a desk or table or, if you're really lucky, in a closet. Some of these storage situations work. Some don't. Some are communal areas and some are secretive. Whatever your current storage set-up, you may want to take a look at it with the following points in mind.

- (1) Stored objects should not be visible to the children.
- (2) Storage must be accessible for the adult (which means items are stacked in a way that makes it unlikely that they will fall on your head when you reach for something).

When you define your spaces, be sure to include room for items in need of repair. If you are using shelves that are visible to the children, place stored items in attractive, opaque containers. If the storage is hidden, you can gain shelf space by turning a wine case or shoe box on its side or place a brick at either end of a current shelf and lay a long board across its top. Designing your storage spaces is a worthy project for staff to share on your next curriculum day.

Consumables

When space is tight, we often find unlikely places to put the things we use all the time. We may make multiple trips every morning as we restock cotton balls, cotton swabs, and paper. There is an alternative that can save time and enhance the children's ability to care for themselves. Create a large tray that holds the practical life items you refill everyday (e.g., polish, cotton balls). In the morning or at the end of the day, take the tray with you as you restock practical life activities. Create a similar tray for paper. Store these trays in a low cabinet accessible to the children. Give lessons to your students on how to go to the cabinet, retrieve the needed supply and restock the item.

Private Meeting Place

Physical space is often at a premium in our schools. I have conducted parent teacher conferences in classrooms, in the kitchen, in the office and even in the hallway. All of these places were public to some extent. There was always the possibility of someone entering the space for a valid, necessary reason in the middle of the conference. The same is often true of our staff space. I have found myself and my colleagues discussing private information about students or other staff members in places that were not so private.

Creating a space that affords a degree of privacy for adults is a worthwhile investment of our resources. It should accommodate four adults (the guide, the parents or guardians, and the head of school) and be created to meet the needs of the adult. Just as you so carefully invest in child-sized materials for your students, invest in comfortable, adult-sized furniture for this space: armchairs, a small table, a plant, a serene piece of art, a glass of water, a box of tissues. If you have no alternative, plan on temporarily moving adult-sized furniture into your classroom for a scheduled meeting. Be sure to place a sign on the door indicating when it is in use: "Conference in Session," or "Meeting in Progress." If you are able to set aside a permanent space, hang a simple clipboard with a sign-up sheet on the door so that the meeting space can be scheduled.

These adult spaces show compassion and kindness to adults. They create an atmosphere where everyone is valued. They remind us to treat each other with the respect we insist on showing our students. They create a livable, lovable space for us to be in every school day. The most effective way of sharing with our students our sense of compassion and gentleness is to model it not only in how we treat them, but also in how we treat their families and ourselves.

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