

About Those Materials on the Shelves—All Good Intentions

By Julia Volkman

I am fortunate to work with talented and dedicated teachers who have studied in many different Montessori Teacher Training programs, both well known and obscure. Like me, each of these teachers has an album describing exactly what educational materials they should have in their learning environments and how to use each material. So, when I notice a material on the shelves or in use that I don't recognize I ask: "Is that in your album?" I had expected to discover diversity among what different training programs taught. But that doesn't seem to be the case. The vast majority of these unfamiliar materials aren't in the teacher's albums. They have crept in.

So when I ask, "Is that in your album?" the response is usually, no, but there was a good reason to introduce it. It would meet the needs of a specific child. It was so useful in someone else's classroom. It was recommended by a specialist/intervention teacher. This is particularly common, I believe, in this era of testing where we have a real or perceived sense of accountability to some "standards" and, thus find ourselves playing defense through "remediation."

We all come across children who don't seem to engage with the curriculum. Maybe they start late or have a complicated home life or poor attendance or learning exceptionalities. Maybe we have not done our jobs as well as we could have because our lives were complicated or our administration unsupportive or our student assignments unbalanced. There is no shortage of complications and challenges. So what are we to do?

The answer is *always* in practical life. But here I mean the practical life of the teacher. There is the tangible matter of your classroom and teaching environment. Is your classroom/school set up to help you do what you were trained to do? Do you know what you were trained to do? And then there is the intangible, this rather enormous matter of our spirit. Sometimes if we attend to the one, we also attend to the other.

So, start with your physical environment. Open up your albums and compare them to your room. Look at the table of contents and ask yourself if your shelves contain the specified materials. Are they ordered and in the proper sequence? Are they mixed with remedial/non-traditional materials? How did those materials arrive in your room? Are they truly necessary or are they distracting you and your children from more valuable work?

Sometimes we have no choice about what is on our shelves. Our unique student population or our administration may require certain exceptions. This is not a problem. We can accommodate this without compromising. If we need to include a non-traditional material on our shelves, we can do it in a way that authentically meets the needs of the children. One part of this means placing it in sequence on the shelves. For example, if it

is a remedial material designed to help one or a few five-year-old children, place it in line on the shelves with the materials we would normally expect five-year-olds to be using. The key here is not to let this remedial work distract the other children, particularly the younger children, from the work they need to be doing. But more than this, we need to deeply consider any non-traditional materials in our environments. If we are certain they must be in use, we have to create step-by-step lessons on how we will present them, just as we do with every other work. We can also reach out to mentors to consider possible alternatives to the remedial work. Many times the solution a child needs is innately included in a standard activity and we simply need to see the work with new eyes.

As you attend to the physical environment, there will be plenty of room to reflect on your spirit and the spirit of the children. Of course, they are not really two different things at all. They lift up or pull down in unison, one with the other. If we are frustrated and exhausted and discouraged, our students will be frustrated and exhausted and discouraged. Even if we mask our words, the children will absorb our underlying emotional state. We must tend to our spirit just as we tend every day to the water in the pitchers and the dust on the shelves. This doesn't mean we need a vacation (although that may be a good idea). It means that as we go about giving lessons, straightening shelves, rolling rugs, tracing insets, that we notice the calm and peace within the work we are doing. It means we allow ourselves to relax into what we are doing at that moment. We open our hearts and rest our busy minds so we can be fully present with the children. It is then that the gorgeous true nature of the children and of we adults is freed.

So how can we handle the overwhelming challenges handed to us? How can we honor our deep desire and intention to help children, to meet them well and be of use in this life? We relax into what we know. We immerse ourselves in the deep wisdom we were offered in our training. We simplify our lives by trusting that what we were taught will actually work. Just believe it. Allow yourself to believe it, to long for it in *your* classroom. And then each day notice the tiniest examples of where it reveals itself. Focus on those. Give less attention to what isn't working and more attention to what is. Free yourself to stumble towards peace by allowing *your* true potential to entirely unfold...and notice where it already has.

Julia Volkman is the Children's House Teacher Mentor at the Zanetti Public Montessori School in Springfield, MA. She holds a 3-6 Montessori teaching credential, is the mother of a teenager and a 3-year-old, is the founder and president of Maitri Learning, and was the lead investigator of a clinical study on lamination methods in the Casa.