

## **The Promise of Fall**

by Julia Volkman

As I write this, it is springtime. There is promise and potential blooming in every gentle breeze that enters the newly opened windows. It is interesting to look back and see how the classroom environments looked in September as compared to April. What was on your shelves? What worked? What didn't? What will we repeat next year? What do we want to change? When will we have time to actually get in the classroom and prepare it after the floors are done?

Here are some thoughts to help begin the year well.

### **The Goal**

Of course we begin with the intention of helping the children normalize with all due haste! We don't begin with wanting them to achieve a passing score on the state Kindergarten tests or with wanting them to do addition finger charts and read fluently. We just want them to learn how to be in the classroom...and enjoy it. So how do we do that? With tremendous patience, a great deal of repetition, vigilance in the precision of our words and actions, and fantastic style.

### **Setting the Ground Rules**

What are the behaviors that frustrated you most this year? Write them down. Try to get to the root of why those issues keep popping up. What is it about the physical or invisible (behavioral rules) environment that is getting in the children's way?

**Individual Work.** We see that our four-year-olds and children with exceptionalities are drawn to social interactions so we encourage the children to work together. But most of the work in the casa is designed for only one child. There are exceptions, of course, like grace & courtesy role plays and the bank game but the rest of the work that is designed for more than one child (like the sensorial games) is generally reserved for age 5 and older. This is not by accident! Respect it. Give the children the gift of time: time to internalize their sense of order and, as a result, develop flexibility.

**Cycle of Activity.** Allow each child to own his own work. Clearly set this expectation from the start. Using transitional materials during the first weeks of school can be very useful in creating this norm. We show the child that she can choose a puzzle or play dough, work with it at a table/rug, and put it back where she found it. This clarifies that they need a presentation on a material before choosing it and that there is a cycle for doing work.

The key is that when the child is working, we vigilantly protect her ownership of the work. We give grace and courtesy lessons about every three minutes demonstrating how to observe someone else's work without touching it and how to gently remind an errant child that we follow that rule. We silently use our eyes to stare at the offending child in utter disbelief at the gall of someone ignoring the rules. Often, this look is enough to help

the child become self-aware of his/her actions and to do so without further interrupting the child who is working. When words are necessary, we clearly set the boundary and then invite enthusiasm for an alternative course of action. We might say, “You can’t touch this work. It’s not yours. You can choose your own work or maybe you would like to practice watching...without making a sound!”

When we find a work that is left out, we DO NOT assign an older child to clean it up. Instead, we ask, “I wonder who was doing this work?” If we know, we find that child, greet her with a smile and say, “I found something! Let me show you,” and we walk together and show them our discovery. Yes! That’s right! The child will often smile in recognition that it was indeed her work. How wonderful. Now she can put it away...and the children want to do what is right. Really. Somewhere in our hearts we know this is true and yet, when surrounded by hordes of children, floods, and wet pants it is easy to forget!

### **Designing the Space**

Some of us have large rooms; many of us have small ones with inadequate storage space and less than perfect furniture and fixtures. It’s okay. Whatever your space, you can make it beautiful and make it accommodate the needs of the children...that includes the needs of the adults!

*Anticipating the needs of the Adult.* The whole environment benefits directly when we can maintain holistic organization by designating a location to put notes from parents, materials in need of repair, and whatever else it is we need to set down somewhere and get to later.

*Less is More.* This reality of having to make the most of often limited space is not a problem. It is a gift. Less is more. New children can easily be overwhelmed by the array of materials suddenly presented to them at their eye level. What a wondrous new experience! Fewer options can be calming for everyone.

Include just one basket/option for the basics like vocabulary cards, 3-part cards, and phonetic reading materials and then change the materials regularly. This brings magic to the classroom as the children are curious and excited to discover what is new. (Note: If you don’t have time to make your own, you can purchase beautiful vocabulary, matching, and 3-part cards with full-color photos that isolate their subject from my company’s website: [www.maitrilearning.com](http://www.maitrilearning.com).)

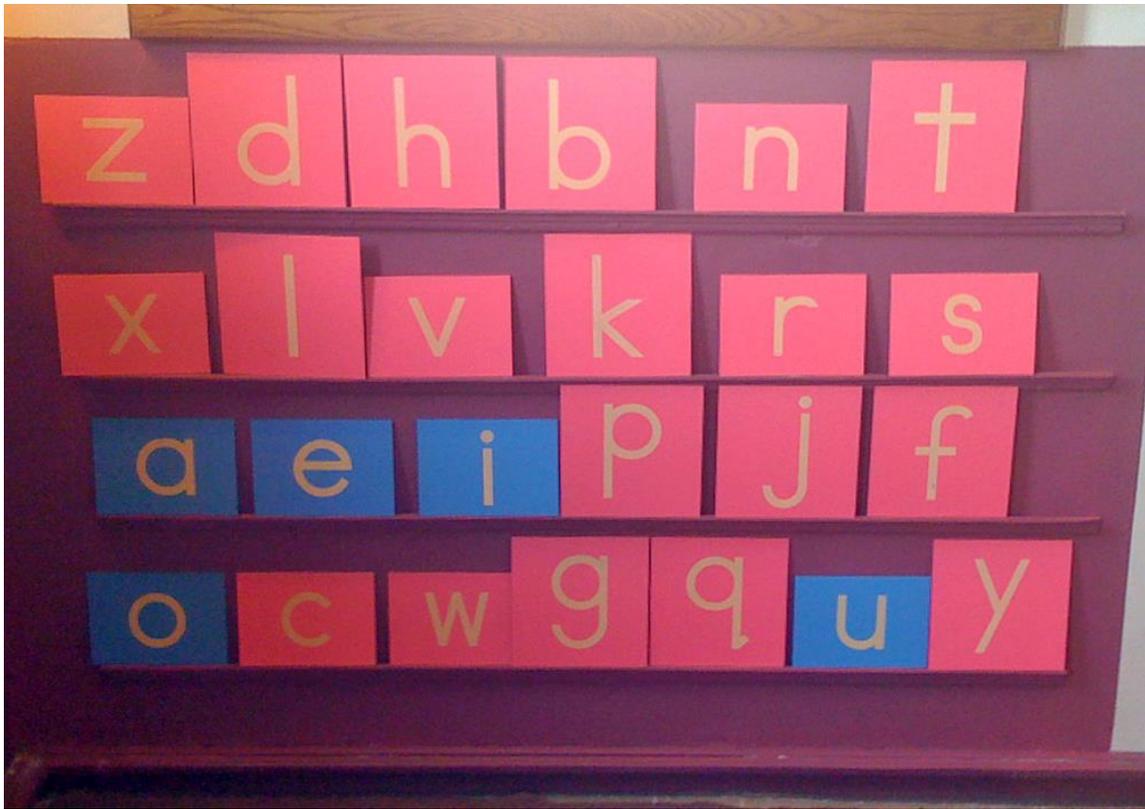
Even if you have returning students who are ready for division with racks and tubes and the Asia puzzle map, you should not have these materials on your shelves until it is clear that the new children understand that if they have not had a lesson on a material, they are not free to choose it. Don’t worry that the older children will suffer. They will not. This is their chance to remember the ground rules, to revisit the materials they used to love, and to take the younger children under their wings.

***Invisible Materials.*** It can also be useful to include empty trays or other reminders for the work that is not physically on the shelves. One teacher I know has a lovely basket full of slips listing different grace and courtesy lessons. It is the first thing on the top left of her practical life shelves. So whenever she walks with a child to practical life, she is reminded of the most important beginning work in that area.

The same can be done in the language area by placing a photo of the classroom on the top left of the language shelves. This is our reminder to present 3-period vocabulary lessons naming every object in our environments, beginning with the basics of shelves, tissues, and faucet and moving on to tile floor, trinomial cube, and botany cabinet.

***Sequence.*** The key is to set up the space so that you are reminded of what to do next. When you see a child who is ready for a lesson, you can simply walk together to the area they need and look at the shelves to see what is next. This is a significant reason why Dr. Montessori specified that the materials should be displayed in sequence on the shelves. It is not just for the children's sense of order; it is a visual reminder for we adults who are overwhelmed with paperwork, parent conferences, first aid certification, and visits from lice. Make your life easy and invest the time it takes to open up your album and arrange each work listed therein in order on the shelves. Hold back the elaborate/advanced/fragile works until the class is ready for them.

***Displays for Easy Assessment.*** Another wonderful trick is to get your sandpaper letters out of the box and on display. Dr. Montessori never expected us to present every letter to every child. The children absorb this knowledge not only from working directly with materials but also by watching other children at work. But in these days of testing, teachers are often required to know precisely which sounds/symbols a child knows at any given point in time. It is an overwhelming task! Yes, it is. By arranging your letters in one area, on the back of a shelf or on a wall, you will have an easy way to quickly assess which sounds the child knows. You also give the children the potential to easily find what they need when they need it...and to place the letters in meaningful arrangements. (I worked with the LORD equipment company to help design specialized molding for exactly this purpose. You can get more information from their website: [www.lordequip.com](http://www.lordequip.com).) It creates the possibility for children and teachers to succeed.



### **Possibilities**

And this is the entire point. As we set up our classrooms, plan our grace & courtesy lessons, remind ourselves of the songs, poems, and finger plays that draw the children in, we are creating the possibility that the class will be a rousing success: that it will become gorgeous without delay. There will be unexpected events. There will be students who behave in concerning ways. There will be clogged toilets and sinks. Yes. There will be all of this at the same time that there are children joyfully helping each other, dreamily pondering a bird outside the window, and bouncing with excitement at intellectual discovery.

Having a normalized class is not an abstract concept reserved for “those” schools where everything is as it should be. It is possible when the only materials available are salvaged from yard sale discards. It is possible in schools like mine where the children write movable alphabet sentences about “visiting” their mother. It is possible for teachers who are in the midst of great personal loss and turmoil. The casa is our refuge and the child our salvation. Let yourself believe it. It is possible for you.

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