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Public School Montessorian

WINTER 2009
ISSUE 82

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Managing interruptions: guidelines

Even though it is late in the year, many of us may still be experiencing difficulty with work being interrupted. Don't worry if this is the situation in your classroom. You don't have to wait for next fall. You can start now.

Here are some general guidelines for cultivating a culture of patience in your classroom.

Your teaching partner

Work with your co-teacher/assistant to create an aura of patience in the classroom. Model with each other the behavior you hope to see in the children. Be careful not to interrupt each other! When your partner is working with children, patiently wait in the manner you ask the children to wait. For example, you can gently place a hand on his/her shoulder to let him/her know you are there. You can use these precious moments of waiting to observe the children.) You also have a 'sign language' gesture you develop (something you also wish the children to use) that can signal your need silently from across the room. Discuss about what will work for you and then discuss it and implement it together. Whatever method you decide upon, you must be sure to give your attention to every child who follows the protocol in the order they queue up! If you redirect the noisiest or closest child first, you will be giving the message that behavior or cutting ahead works. Be vigilant in attending to the queue in order.

Of course, when you are giving a presentation, you'll want your assistant to step in and redirect children who need it. But s/he is not superhuman. There are many times when your partner will not be able to step in for perfectly valid reasons. Think about how you will manage these situations independent of each other. Speak with your partner about them so you can be consistent.

Lessons with the children

Be entirely available for and focused upon the child with whom you are working. Begin by giving one lesson at a time. This may sound ludicrous; how will you possibly be able to give all the presentations we need to give if we work with one child at a time? But this is the way to begin. Until you can give your

attention to one child during one entire lesson, you will not be able to truly see the deep potential we have within us for concentration. This is what the children need and so rarely witness. And while they are waiting, they are watching the lesson you are giving!

Remember to physically complete the entire cycle of activity:

1. inviting the child to work with you
2. going together to the shelf and naming the work
3. walking together to bring it to your workspace
4. giving the presentation
5. observing the child as s/he repeats what you have demonstrated
6. working together to clean up the activity, and then
7. walking together to put it back in its proper location.

Stay with the child physically and mentally through the entire process and you will find a diminishing need to re-present lessons as well as a growing ability of the children to present to each other.

Other adults

It is easy to be pulled away from our work when an adult enters the classroom. The adult him/herself may demand our attention by interrupting us, or we may feel compelled to meet and greet them promptly upon entry. Your first priority action is to enlist the aid of the children! Have fun role playing the way you would like guests to be greeted. Before you do this, carefully consider the exact procedure and work it out with your teaching partner. You both must model this behavior following it each time you are free to greet a guest.

If you consistently encounter adults who interrupt the classroom, you might post a very kind and gently worded note on your door explaining your gracious method for interrupting the work. If it is one adult in particular, you might have the opportunity to ask for their assistance as you role play your interruption procedure. Then, ask them to help you help the children by modeling this behavior when s/he enters the classroom.

Your example

The children will do as they see us do. They will adapt to the culture and examples we present. Try to notice your interactions with adults and children. You can, place a video camera in the corner of your classroom and record yourself with the children. There is no more potent lesson than witnessing ourselves unfiltered, as we truly are.) Allow yourself to focus entirely on one child at a time. Hang up your multitasking superhuman abilities the moment the child arrives! Then, don't allow yourself to be interrupted by anything other than a dangerous situation. This, more than anything else, will let the children witness your gracious, focused attention and concentration, something many of them will see.

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