

END OF THE YEAR REFLECTIONS ON CLASSROOM STRUCTURE (REPs)

By Chip DeLorenzo, M.Ed.

"Now the adult himself is part of the child's environment; the adult must adjust himself to the child's needs if he is not to be a hindrance to him and if he is not to substitute himself for the child in the activities essential to growth and development." (Dr. Maria Montessori, 'The Secret of Childhood', Orient Longman Limited, 106)

It was the beginning of April, and Mandy felt as though summer couldn't come fast enough. The students in her Upper Elementary class "out of control". They were being disrespectful to one another, and to the teachers. Very little work seemed to be getting done, and parents were starting to complain. It had been a difficult year, right from the start. Mandy was not a novice teacher. She had been teaching for over 10 years, and this was the most difficult class she had ever had. None of the students, themselves, had particularly serious behavior difficulties, but the group as a whole was having a very hard time, and so was Mandy!

In June, Mandy felt as though she had never been more ready for a summer break. It wasn't a good feeling. You may have had a similar experience. She left for break feeling unsuccessful, and confused about what had happened to the class that year. By the third day of summer break, Mandy decided that she couldn't just put this year behind her and pretend it never happened. There was no way she was going to let a difficult year happen without learning from it. She needed to figure out what happened.

Mandy called a good friend, Alicia, who she had trained with, and asked her if she would work with her to deconstruct the year, so she could identify what went wrong. Her friend readily agreed, and the met for coffee.

Alicia was a great listener. Mandy talked openly about her struggles that year. She described how difficult it had been to set limits with the children, because her assistant wasn't consistent, and the children saw him as the good cop, and Mandy as the bad cop. Mandy felt that she could never enjoy the children, because she felt a sense of obligation to maintain the ground rules and discipline, while her assistant got to enjoy a lot of one-on-one time with the kids. She also explained that by mid-year the children didn't seem to be following basic ground rules, and that transitions were the worst part of the day. The older students weren't leading, and Mandy felt like she could never leave the classroom, even to go to the bathroom.

Alicia began to ask some very insightful questions. "What was your plan for communicating with your assistant?" "Tell me about how you set routines in the classroom?" "What was your plan for following through with children with classroom ground rules?" "How often did you

observe your classroom, and for how long?” “What did you do with your observation notes? Did you share them with your assistant?”

Alicia had had a similar experience a couple of years ago. A really difficult dynamic in her classroom had really caused her to examine her practices, and how she set up the environment, particularly the structure of the classroom. Not just the physical environment, but the social-emotional environment (routines, classroom discipline, grace and courtesy, social skills, etc.). The questions she asked were based on her hard won experience. Mandy was grateful for the conversation, and thanked Alicia. Alicia simply responded, “My most difficult years have been the greatest gift in hindsight. They forced me to become vulnerable and open to change, at a time in my career when I was starting to get comfortable.” Alicia and Mandy promised to correspond throughout the year. The discussion gave Mandy a lot to think about.

Preparing The Environment – Routines, Expectations and Procedures

Nothing is more fun and satisfying, as a Montessori teacher than setting up your classroom during set up week, prior to the first students arriving at the beginning of the school year. Setting up the shelves, putting together work, arranging the materials, laminating name tags, decorating the classroom, and getting work ready for the eager students who will descend upon your classroom in just a few days. It’s something that I look forward to every year, even though I am no longer in the classroom full time. I love the sense of hope and anticipation that comes with the start of every new school year.

I am sure that Mandy’s year started off with the same optimism that most of ours do. And, if you’ve been teaching for a while, you know that you can’t always predict your most difficult school years. Sometimes they just seem to come out of nowhere. However, the most difficult years have been the ones that showed me where my blind spots were, where I still needed to grow, or in some cases, later in my career, where I had fallen asleep (or gotten lazy).

In the Montessori classroom, one of our primary tenants, is to promote independence. The classroom is set up to do that. Children take materials off the shelf, independently, and work on them where they choose, and for how long they choose. They work at their own pace, and make choices based on their interest and ability. So much of that time spent during set-up week is devoted to making sure that the environment promotes and nurtures independence. Once the school year starts, the Montessori teacher works diligently to connect children to the materials in the classroom and supports them in becoming independent learners.

To make all this work, though, is not just the set-up of the classroom, and the materials that are displayed on the shelves. Children, when they arrive, will spend time learning how to operate in the classroom. They will be introduced to the classroom routines, expectations (ground rules), procedures (REP). The REPs are the skeletal system of the classroom. They support all the vital functions (teaching, learning, working, and interacting with one another).

Routines - A routine is defined as a regular way of doing things, in a particular order. While there are many approaches to parenting that have been written about in the last 30 years, there is one topic that seems to weave itself consistently through every one that I have read. Routines are important!

Routines provide consistency and predictability for children. Strong, consistent routines create an environment where children to know what's coming next, and are able navigate their environment independently, both logistically and emotionally. When routines are consistent, well thought out, communicated, and practiced, children can prepare themselves, internally, for transitions, which can be the most difficult time of the day. And why wouldn't they be? If adults have difficult time with transitions, why wouldn't children?

Who's the boss? One of the greatest lessons I learned as a young teacher was that I could eliminate a lot of power struggles by allowing routines to be the boss (rather than me). Recently, I was subbing for our middle school teacher, who has incredibly consistent routines. When it was time to transition inside from recess, I asked the students to take 10 minutes to weed a portion of the garden that had been neglected. They responded quickly, "That's not on the agenda for today!" Although it may not come across in my retelling, what struck me was their internalized sense of order, and ownership in their routine. Of course, they are old enough to break their routine for a logical end, but it really caused me to stop and consider how important the established routine was for the students to self-regulate, and the security that it provided them. (Confession: I did have them weed, anyway. I paid the price, though 😊)

Expectations – Many of us are quick to avoid the use of the word "rules." Maybe we had a bad experience with those in charge mandating rules, expecting obedience. Rules are defined as a prescribed guideline for conduct. Montessori classrooms have been criticized for being either too permissive, loose, or free; or, on the other hand, they have been criticized for being too rigid, or controlled. Behind these criticisms is a fundamental misunderstanding of our philosophy and its implementation. A well run Montessori classroom should not be permissive, nor overly controlled. The children should have clear and appropriate boundaries, and the freedom to operate within those boundaries. Freedom within limits. It is the adult's role to insure that the children have clear and firm limits, along with the freedom to make choices and learn from their mistakes.

"A child's liberty should have as its limit the interests of the group to which he belongs. We should therefore prevent a child from doing anything which may offend or hurt others..." (Maria Montessori, Discovery of the Child).

Primary children are in the sensitive period for obedience, which means their moral center lies outside of themselves, and within the adult. They are not yet able to determine,

independently, what is respectful or disrespectful. They need guidance and direct teaching of ground rules. Elementary children are in the sensitive period for developing their own moral compass. Their moral center begins to shift from without to within. When teachers involve elementary aged children in the process of creating ground rules, they tap into this developing internal moral compass, and the children become co-owners in maintaining a community based on mutual respect and social responsibility.

Procedures – A procedure is an established way of doing something. Establishing procedures, simply means taking time for teaching, and for practice. This is something that, as a group, we do very well in the Montessori community. We take time to teach practical life and social skills that many traditional classrooms leave to the families to teach at home.

Rudolph Driekurs famously stated, “A misbehaving child is a discouraged child.” He observed that all human beings had a common social goal – to belong and feel significant within their community. One of the reasons children become discouraged in their attempt to connect with their classmates or teachers is that they don’t yet have the needed social skills to effectively navigate the any twists and turns of human interactions. In their discouragement they appear to misbehave, but that misbehavior can simply be an awkward attempt at achieving acceptance.

We have all had a child in our class that transitions midway through the year, with no Montessori background. The child is unfamiliar with everything, but especially the social expectations and customs that have been taught and practiced by the rest of the children. The student sticks out like a sore thumb, sometimes. He doesn’t know how to interrupt respectfully, how to wait for a material that someone else is using, how to ask if he can work with another child, or how to resolve a conflict with another student. Undoubtedly, this child will face some social difficulties as learns the social “language” and social skills of the classroom. However, after the teacher has taken time to teach the procedures that drive the classroom routines, ground rules and social interactions, the child starts to become a true member of the community. Maybe, the teacher even reflects that it is hard to remember him as a new student because he is now just “one of us.”

To teach social skills and grace and courtesy lessons takes devoted time and attention. Unfortunately, even in our wonderful Montessori schools, these “soft skills” are often the first to go untaught, as the adults begin to focus on giving lessons, meeting with parents, completing conference reports, writing newsletters, and navigating their way through the day to day routine. As well, social skills and grace and courtesy skills are often only taught at the beginning of the year, and then abandoned because the “real work” has to take place. However, without practice, attention, and the teaching more intricate lessons that the children need as they change and develop within a school year, misbehavior will begin to crop up, as children revert

to what they know, or don't know. As we know, repetition is critical to the learning process, and that includes the process of learning social skills too. An ounce of prevention...!

Here are some social skills and grace and courtesy lessons to consider teaching throughout the year. You can make your own. But one of the things to consider, as you are making it, is how much there is to learn, and how much we take for granted that children should know how to navigate their social world without any formal lessons, even in a Montessori classroom!

Direct Teaching of Grace and Courtesy Lessons and Social Skills for Children, Ages 2 ½ through Adolescence

- Conflict resolution model
- Practicing the conflict resolution model with specific problem types that the children are experiencing (e.g. teasing, exclusion, distraction, "you're not coming to my birthday party," triads, physical aggression, etc.)
- How to say, "No."
- Assertiveness skills (e.g. saying, "Stop" with assertiveness, confronting someone who is hurting someone else, sticking up for a friend, sticking up for yourself, etc.)
- How to ask if you can play with someone else
- Interrupting a conversation
- Writing a thank you note
- Apologizing
- Encouraging a friend
- Comforting a friend
- How to invite someone for a playdate
- Taking responsibility for a mistake
- Asking for something – please, thank you, etc.
- Saying, "excuse me"
- How to burp politely
- How to blow your nose in public
- How to set a table
- Waiting for someone else to be served or unpacked before eating
- Chewing with your mouth closed
- Waiting until you're done eating before you talk
- Talking to people at your table
- How to start a conversation
- How to get to make a friend
- How to show someone you care
- How to be a guest at someone else's home

- How to “let it go” when you’re mad
- How to shake hands
- How to be a good listener
- Looking someone in the eyes when you are having a conversation
- We could increase this list ad infinitum...

Teaching Routines

As important as teaching and practicing social skills, is teaching and practicing the procedures that guide routines.

- How to line up
- How to sit in circle
- Moving from place to place on campus as a group
- Fire drills
- Cleaning up from lunch
- Putting personal things away neatly in your cubby
- Etc.

End of the Year Reflections

One of the things I love about the rhythm of the school year is the clear beginning and end of the school year. Most of us have a gap between the end of a school year, and the beginning of the next. It’s this time of year that I have always come to the conclusion that I have done what I can do for the current school year, and begin planning what I will do differently the next year. It’s one of my favorite times of year (especially if I’ve had a difficult year)!

Whether you’ve had a year like Mandy, or are simply in the process of reviewing this past school year, here are some questions to consider when looking at the current year and your plans for the year ahead:

Routines

1. Are the children in my classroom able to navigate transitions successfully?
2. What time of day do I notice the most misbehavior or disruptions?
3. Do the routines promote independence?
4. Where in the day do the adults feel like they need to be most “in charge”, or that the children need the most “help”?
5. What routines seem not to be working for the adults?
6. Can the children teach a sub or new staff member the routines?

7. For elementary and middle school classrooms, have the students been involved in creating and evaluating the routines of the classroom?
8. Are all the adults in the classroom involved in creating and evaluating the classroom routines?
9. Is there a formal time that is set up for adults to evaluate how things are going in the classroom? Is there an agenda to keep the conversation constructive and focused? Are routines part of that conversation?
10. What skill or procedure would you say that the children most need to learn as they make transitions (putting things away, remembering their personal belongings, lining up, etc.)?

Expectations

1. Do the adults in the classroom have the same expectations of the children? If not, what are the specific differences?
2. For elementary and middle school students, have the students been involved and the creation and evaluation of ground rules and classroom behavioral expectations?
3. Are the adults consistent in how they follow through when children do not follow ground rules? If not, where are the specific inconsistencies? How can that gap be narrowed?
4. Is there a formal time where the classroom adults talk about classroom behavior, expectations and follow-through?
5. Do the children set boundaries and help hold their peers accountable for upholding the ground rules and expectations?
6. Are the adults following all the ground rules, or are they exceptions to some of those expectations? If the adults are not following the ground rules, do the adults need to change, or do the ground rules need to change?
7. How much time is set aside for teaching ground rules?
8. How much time is set aside for practicing ground rules?
9. Did the children seem to “forget” or stop following ground rules part of the way through the year? If so, this is most likely a problem of follow-through by the adults. What caused the lack of follow-through (getting too busy with lessons)?
10. Did the physical environment stay clean and ordered throughout the year, or was there a time where it started becoming more cluttered and disordered? Did this coincide with misbehavior? If so, this also may not be due to children “forgetting”, but adults loosening up on follow-through, thus creating unintended inconsistency, which almost always begins to invite misbehavior.

Procedures – Teaching Social Skills and Grace and Courtesy Lessons

1. What are the five behaviors that have caused you the most irritation or discouragement this year?
2. What social situations were you most likely to see these behaviors crop up?

3. If you knew your students would listen to you, and follow your advice, what advice would you give them in those situations? Write down your advice for each situation or disturbing behavior.
4. What social skills would correlate to your advice? For instance: Advice – I'd like to tell them just to make other friends. Social skill – making new friends, or excusing yourself when someone is disrespectful.
5. If you could give your students five grace and courtesy skills that would insure the world was a more respectful place, what would they be? How are you going to teach them next year?
6. If you knew that someone would be coming into your classroom once per week to observe the grace and courtesy of the students of your classroom, what lessons do you need to start giving?
7. Do all the adults in the classroom model the grace and courtesy?
8. Is there space in the schedule for practicing and role playing important social skills, like assertiveness skills, saying no, making friends, etc.?
9. Is there a formal time and agenda item for adults to plan and evaluate what grace and courtesy lessons or social skills need to be taught and practiced?
10. Consideration: Make a list of social skills that you believe children at your level need to be socially successful in the classroom (and out). For elementary and middle school students, be sure to brainstorm lists of social skills and grace and courtesy lessons they feel are important to navigate their social world effectively (you might be surprised what they come up with)!

Happy reflecting, and best of luck with the end of your school year!