

How Do Montessori Teachers Do That?

by Paul Clement Czaja, Ph.D.

Not only new parents but also experienced visiting educators wonder how our Montessori teachers work their magic. They do not see our Montessorians doing anything special. They just seem to be there. Sometimes it is even hard to find them in the room. There are the children all spread out doing different things in different parts of the room, some at little tables, some on little mats on the floor, some standing together in quiet conversation, some simply lost in a reading book, twenty children all busy at doing something within an orderly, calm, very attractive bright and open room, all seemingly "on their own!" Oh! There's the teacher, over there in the corner on her knees presenting a lesson to this little girl. Her back is to the rest of the class. And that young woman must be the assistant teacher. She is by the work table busy by herself cutting strips of paper. And yet the class goes on concentrated, attending to many different learning tasks.

How do they do it? How can they control a whole class full of children without standing up in front controlling them? What's the trick? Hypnosis? What is the secret? The secret ingredient that creates the wonder of a true Montessori learning environment is respect. I am not referring to ordinary, run of the mill respect, but to real, existential respect. So existential it reveals the etymology of the word: RE- repeatedly, SPECT- observing. That's the skill of all skills a Montessorian must master. Observing each child over and over again with a scientific rigor: constantly taking notes, reflecting about the observations, acting upon what they reveal, making each presentation and each of the learning packages fit the individual child's interest and need and learning aptitude, fit as well as his or her shoes do! It is from this proper fitting that the magic naturally evolves.

Just as it happens within a well prepared garden, when the learning prescriptions fit each child's profile they naturally begin to act and grow "on their own." Ask a Montessori child "Who taught you how to read?" And she will answer with joy and pride: "I did! I learned it by myself!" The marvel that is a Montessori education is not one that we pull out of a hat or create through the clever use of smoke and mirrors. It is not even something we accomplish by the daily conditioning of behavior through the employment of carrots and sticks. No, Montessorians are not magicians. We are merely gardeners left over from the Garden of Eden. There is a philosophy, however, at the very core of what we are about in this profession of nurturing children to become all that they by the grace of genetics and Love are meant to become. What, you ask, has philosophy have to do with gardening? with the raising up of our children?

Well, philosophy tells us how to begin worthwhile endeavors. Philosophy has to do with the wisdom of personal life, that is, it has to do with how to live life best. Its advice is pithy. So here is the Montessori pith: "Independence precedes freedom." Think about that for a while. You cannot give a child freedom first and then expect him to become independent. It has to be the other way around. The child needs to become independent in order to make good use of freedom. Freedom is too wild a state without the habit of self-reliance. The personal condition of freedom needs the self-discipline that is fostered by independence. The governance of Montessori is precisely found in the philosophic ways the faculty use to develop a learning community of truly independent learners. It is only after a child has his or her own repertoire of meaningful choices which have been presented by the gardeners that freedom to grow with true vigor begins to prevail.

A condition of true independence must be established first before a child can make good use of freedom. Within the "Land of the Free" of a Montessori learning environment, liberty not license is enjoyed. You do know, there is a big difference between liberty and license. Both have to do with being free. However, the freedom of liberty is bound by the golden bonds called the Bill of Rights, whereas, the freedom of license knows no bounds. It is the wild and woolly West. Beginnings are all important. Beginnings contain their endings. In Montessori we begin with creating the true independence of a vibrant, well prepared garden. Within this Land of Liberty under the caring rule of master gardeners, each child grows freely into the man or woman they are meant to be at their fullest personal potential. That's the Marvel of Montessori. And ain't that something grand to witness! Peace and loving kindness to you all, my brothers and sisters in the world's Montessori fields of glory!