



MONTESSORI SOCIETY OF CANADA

The AMI Alumni in Canada

Volume 10 Issue I

Affiliated to the AMI

Spring 2009

The Role of the Assistant in a Montessori Classroom

by Sandra Giralto

Sandra Giralto is the Director of Training at the Foundation for Montessori Education in Toronto, Ontario. This paper was originally delivered as a talk at an AMI/USA conference in Chicago, Illinois in 1998.

Why have I been chosen to speak on the role of the assistant in the Montessori classroom? My past experience has provided me with the perspective necessary to discuss this topic; I have at different moments in my life been in the capacity of assisting another. At times I have been privileged to have an assistant as part of my experience, and I conduct an AMI assistants course in the summer at the Foundation for Montessori Education in Toronto. Furthermore, in our collective work, we are all assistants to the creative energy of the child, in whatever capacity our titles may dictate.



Dr. Angeline Lillard at the National Conference in Vancouver, BC March 2009.

As you know, this conference is dedicated to Mario Montessori and it is entitled *Grace and Courtesy - A Human Responsibility*. It is from this perspective that I wish to approach this talk. I would like to begin with an extract from Maria Montessori's Last Will and Testament which can be found in *Communications* 1998/1: "With regard to my property, I declare that this belongs, both materially and spiritually, to my son: that is, to him belong by right not only the material goods of every kind or sort that I may eventually possess at any time of my life until the end; but to him belongs by right also, everything that may accrue from my social and intellectual works, either because they were inspired by him or because, from the time he was able to act in the world, they were undertaken with his actual and constant **collaboration**, since he totally dedicated his life to helping me and my work."

I read you this because it will help us to put into perspective the role of the assistant. Dr. Maria Montessori, when she spoke of collaboration, spoke of the immense support which her son Mario provided her with, not only in her life but also in her work. She

Continued on pages 9-14

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2 Message from the President
- 3 Books
- 4-5 Reports from Vancouver 2009
- 6-7 Photos from Vancouver 2009
- 8-9 Update Affiliated Societies, AMI AGM
- 9 Library Project
- 10 Child Haven Project, Consultation
- 11-16 Role of the Assistant, continued
- 16-17 Announcements
- 17-19 Advertisements
- 20 How to Reach us, AMI Training Centres



acknowledges in a number of her books the contribution that Mario made to the furtherance of her ideas and principles. In *The Discovery of the Child*, Dr. Montessori writes “Signor Mario M. Montessori has helped this development (referring to the math materials), interpreting and materializing many calculations up to the extraction of the square root of two, three and even four figures; and the combination of the number-rods has made it possible to introduce the first operation in algebra...” In *What you Should Know About Your Child*, Dr. Montessori refers to the period of sensitivity to language when she writes about Mario, “It was Mario Montessori who was responsible for the suggestion that at this period of sensitivity when children have a voracious appetite for words, it would be more useful to allow them to master words relating to reality than words relating to things of fantasy. Thus the children were given facilities for acquiring scientific terms in direct association with the objects they denoted.”

Although, Mario was a great educator in his own right, he also acted as Dr. Montessori’s guide, soulmate, teacher and student. Her work was made possible in part because he aided her, because he protected her time and her efforts, and because they had a common vision. It is from his life and his work that we take our example, that we take our model of what an assistant is or should be.

An assistant in the Montessori classroom is someone who acts as a helper to the directress or the director. It is someone who supports the work of the pedagogical guide in the prepared environment. An assistant is someone who helps to maintain the equilibrium in the classroom. The relationship between assistant and pedagogical guide is paramount to the success of the classroom. It is crucial to the wholesome and healthy development of the child.

Let us for a moment take some time to reflect on Mario’s contributions to Montessori; too many to mention them all, I shall highlight those qualities that characterize best his role as an assistant or collaborator to his mother’s work. Dr. Montessori referred to his merits as “great and sublime.” Mario Montessori possessed:

- A love of life- a passion for living.
- A respect and profound interest for the natural world, the earth.
- A love of children, not a sappy love but almost a reverence for the potential of each and every child.

He called tiny babies *miracle makers*.

- An intuitive intelligence and an openness of spirit.
- A profound understanding and an enthusiasm and belief in the work of Dr. Montessori.
- A cosmic vision.
- He was a fighter for the child, an ally with the child, a defender of the rights of the child.

Are these qualities that every assistant should have? Yes, in fact they are.

The role of the assistant is often misunderstood and misperceived. Sometimes an assistant is seen as subservient, secondary to the directress or director. This misconception has the potential to bring down not only the relationship between the two adults in the class but also to bring down the class and all of the children in it. The misconception can have ramifications on the quality of not only the moment, but can be far reaching, effecting the quality of life the child will later experience. Can it be so profound? Without question. Let us look at why.

The classroom is comprised of a tangible environment as well as an intangible environment. What is a *tangible environment*? That part of the environment which is capable of being touched, that which has corporeal existence. That which is concrete in nature. We know the tangible environment to be the classroom itself, the tables and chairs, the shelves and, of course, the Montessori materials: in fact, all that we can see and touch. The directress or director, together with the assistant, needs to set up and maintain this tangible environment. I will discuss the responsibilities of the assistant within the tangible environment in a moment.

What is an *intangible environment*? It would stand to reason that the intangible environment is that which we cannot necessarily see and for certain it is that which we cannot touch. This seemingly “vague” part of the classroom is that which can have the most impact on the whole experience for both adults and children.

Let me try to give more definition to the intangible environment. It is the spiritual quality of the classroom, the affective or emotional climate within the space. It is the harmony or disharmony present from day to day; it is the cohesiveness or lack thereof of the social group, and it is the presence of true grace and courtesy or not. We seem to have come

back to where we started- grace and courtesy. We must remember that our premise, as Montessorians, is that children are in a state of grace.

It is the responsibility of both the directress or director and the assistant to create an intangible environment that is harmonious, that supports cohesion within the group, that offers emotional security, that balances the needs of the individual with the needs of the group, that encourages the growth of each child emotionally, spiritually and intellectually and that is resplendent with joy of life and love of learning. It is paramount that the pedagogical guide and the assistant are fully aware of the prepared environment's potential. This awareness should be coupled with the joyful acceptance of their responsibility to it.

Is this possible? Absolutely, and it begins with the relationship between the pedagogical guide and the assistant. These two individuals must endeavour to establish a good relationship between themselves. They must be companions on a voyage together. A privileged voyage to work with the elite, the next citizens of this world, the children. This is important because this relationship sets the tone for the classroom. How the two adults in the classroom interact will be a model for the children to follow. We must consider that outside of the relationship between their primary caregivers, mom and dad or what other arrangement there may be, the adults in the classroom are the ones that the children are going to be spending time with the most. The children will absorb modes of behaviour from all of the relationships that surround them and especially from the relationships that are most constant in their environment. Children from 0 to 6 years of age are in a type of "marination" process and will absorb all that surrounds them.

From the *NAMTA Journal*, Volume 23, Number 2, Spring 1998, page 84, I quote from Mario Montessori: "Between birth and his sixth year, he (the child) shows great attachment to his parents or any other persons in charge of his upbringing, and feels strongly that they are more important, more beautiful, more heroic than anybody else."

So we must ask ourselves some questions about the relationship between the directress or director and the assistant:

- Do they set a good example of a working

relationship for the children?

- Do they get along?
- Do they like each other (keeping in mind that true feelings can never be hidden entirely from the child)?
- Do they have mutual respect for one another?
- Do they value each other's work?
- Do they appreciate the contribution that each makes to the classroom?
- Do they communicate?

How can they establish a good relationship?

- The pedagogical guide can take part in the interviewing and hiring of the assistant. At this time the directress/director can reflect on the great opportunity to work with another, to be together with someone who can share in the experience of the classroom.
- The directress or director can become acquainted with the assistant as a person, as a co-worker, as a collaborator to the success of the whole.
- They can spend time together. Usually a good time for this is prior to the opening of the school term as they both set up the classroom.
- Directress/director and assistant can set up the classroom together so that it is a "home" to both of them. Setting up the classroom together allows for both to have a vested interest in the prepared environment.
- They can make some materials together, repair materials, shop for materials. The directress or director can help the assistant to begin to have an appreciation for what is meant by the "perfect jug" or the "exact colour of sponge." How long has it taken you to develop the *Montessori eye*? Do not assume that it will be immediate with someone else.
- The pedagogical guide must talk to the assistant about the environment, the materials, freedom and discipline. It would be wonderful if the assistant had taken the AMI assistants' course so that they could be "speaking" the same language but, if this is not possible, the pedagogical guide must help her or him to "understand" the classroom. The Montessori environment is very unique for someone who has never been a part of it.
- The classroom directress/director must find out

what wonderful talents the assistant has because we all have things that we do well along with things that we do not do well. They must see how these qualities can be utilized in the environment. The assistant may have a particular talent, ability or skill which would enrich the quality of the daily life of the children: does this person read stories beautifully, with feeling and the “voices” of the characters; does this person have a beautiful singing voice or an unlimited repertoire of finger plays; is this person a natural storyteller, having varied tales both fiction and non-fiction; does this person have a capacity for organizing outdoor games like hopscotch, Red Rover, soccer, etc.; does this person have a keen eye for art of any type and an extensive knowledge of art periods and artists; is this person a natural crafter - having the golden touch with glue and paper, string and yarn, etc.; does this person have a “green thumb” - how about an outdoor garden or some lovely window boxes- the list is limitless. It is up to the directress/director to find out the special qualities of his or her assistant and how best to use those qualities in the Montessori environment. How can those marvelous qualities, amazing skills or wonderful talents be adapted to the Montessori prepared environment?

- The directress/director must talk to the assistant, talk about the classroom, the first day, the first minute with the children, the plan for the week, the month, till Christmas, for the year. He or she must try to talk before things happen; they must try to foresee and discuss as much as possible before the children arrive.

Understand that communication is crucial to the success of any relationship, and certainly this relationship is no exception. They must set in place time for communication: it could be at the end of each day, or at the end of every other day or over lunch, but it must be at least once a week. They must not allow questions to go unanswered or concerns to go unaddressed. They must not allow things to brew. A communication plan must be in place.

If we reflect on our first example of an assistant, Mario Montessori, we can see that there was always communication between Dr. Maria Montessori and her collaborator. Mario in his writings, whether it be in the transcripts from his lectures or from letters, often

mentions “talking to Dr. Montessori” or “discussing with Dr. Montessori.”

They seemed to have an “uninterrupted dialogue,” their discussion revolving around one common goal, one vision. Mario dedicated himself to Dr. Montessori and her work. Marilena Henny Montessori in *Communications* 1998/1 describes her father as “... a man with no real scholastic or academic background *but* with amazing clarity of total understanding of the working of her (Dr. Montessori’s) mind.” It was his intuitive intelligence and openness of spirit that made possible his ability to remain a constant collaborator - an integral part of her success and of course the success of the Montessori method. It is the quality of this relationship that we must take our example from: two people working together, constant allies, one giving strength to the other, each respecting the talents and abilities of the other, one making possible the work of the other through working well in his own right.

Is it possible for two people to work this closely? Yes, this is not only possible but necessary when we are looking at a relationship that has such a profound and long lasting effect upon the quality of a child’s development and life. It is a relationship based on enlightenment- the knowing that the child is the creator and it is the child who provides assistance to humanity by presenting himself as a hope for the future.

What responsibilities should an assistant have with regard to the tangible environment? Here are some examples of responsibilities. This is by no means a complete list, a definitive list or, for that matter, a universal list but a list to act as a guideline. All assistant responsibilities should be agreed upon by the school team - administrator, directress or director and assistant. Here are some responsibilities that could be undertaken by the assistant:

- To assist the directress/director in the preparation and maintenance of the prepared Montessori environment as directed. This can include dusting and cleaning the environment, wetting the sponges in the exercises prior to class starting, filling the jugs for pouring exercises, emptying the jugs at the end of the day, checking to see that all exercises are complete and intact, checking that the exercises are in the correct order on the shelf, ensuring that all the bottles

contain the correct amount of liquid (for example, that all the polish bottles are full) and any other responsibilities of maintenance as required.

- To keep an inventory of supplies needed and maintain a proper storage area for all supplies.
 - To prepare, with guidance from the director/directress, classroom materials and to repair materials and apparatus as required.
 - To oversee the arrival and departure of the children from the classroom or cloakroom area.
 - To set up an area for the proper care of children who may need assistance with accidents of a personal nature. To set a standard of basic hygiene.
 - To assist with the supervision of children in the playground area.
 - To prepare the snack for the day and to assist with the supervision of the lunch period.
 - To have knowledge of first aid procedures. To have knowledge of the definition of child abuse and the possible indicators of child abuse. To know the legal responsibilities associated with child abuse.
 - To supervise the classroom as directed by the directress or director. To work with individual and small groups of children as directed by the directress or director. Remember, the assistant is not to give any presentations with the materials.
 - To attend staff meetings as requested or required.
- To assist with any projects, programs, school trips or planning as assigned by the administrator.
- To help maintain current and accurate classroom records concerning children.
 - To have knowledge of the procedure for fire drills and the location of all exits.
 - Very importantly – to model appropriate behaviour.
 - To help the directress/director to maintain harmony of the intangible environment by protecting the child's freedom to choose, to be free from interruption and to be free from emotional or physical harm. To help the directress protect the confidentiality of each child in the classroom by not discussing the child with anyone (including the parent) other than the directress/director.
 - All responsibilities should be purposeful so that the individual can find meaning in what he or she

does. Remember, purposeful work helps all of us to be normalized.

The assistant is an integral part of the prepared environment and thus can aid the child's wholesome development. It is important that the assistant know and understand the responsibilities that are assigned to him or her. Open communication is important to the success of any relationship. The relationship that is in place between the pedagogical guide and the assistant will have an effect on the children in their care. With our world in a state of chaos, it is important that the directress/director and assistant set an example of harmony and that they are united in their efforts to provide an environment that is choice with respect to all its elements, including human interaction.

The role of the assistant is also defined by what he or she does not do. The assistant should not do any presentations with the Montessori materials. That responsibility belongs solely to the classroom directress or director; he or she is trained for that work. The assistant should not be discussing the child's development with the parents and the 'child's development' means physical and emotional as well as intellectual development. The child's progress is based on a holistic approach, and it is the directress or director's task to report to the parents.

The assistant should not be responsible for "discipline," for freedom and discipline are intrinsic parts of the whole Montessori philosophy of education. Freedom and discipline must be understood as something separate from encouraging good behaviour and stopping bad behaviour; they should be regarded as part and parcel of a complete development. It is the responsibility of every directress/director to understand freedom and discipline and their subtle relationship. This does not mean that an assistant should ignore a child who is about to do harm to another, for this is a question of safety and needs immediate attention. The directress/director must help the assistant to know when to intervene and must know how to help the assistant avoid creating an adult dependence in the child. The best advice to give an assistant is probably, "When in doubt, stay out."

The assistant makes possible the work of the director/directress. The assistant protects the "presentation" time. She facilitates classroom

management by being an example of appropriate behaviour at all times, by being gracious and courteous in her conduct, by addressing the children in the classroom with respect, by demonstrating beautiful movement and by using choice, exquisite and appropriate language at all times. It is our responsibility as directresses and directors to help the assistant to know the expectations of the classroom. The directress or director must present preliminary exercises on language and movement to the assistant, not so the assistant can show the child but so that the assistant will know the how-to's of the prepared environment. Simple things like how to walk in the environment, how to carry a chair, a table, a mat, how to greet the children, how to approach the children during classroom time, etc. If modeling beautiful language and exquisite movement are crucial aspects of the role of the assistant, the classroom directress or director must make every effort to take the time to show the assistant what is appropriate in the environment. The pedagogical guide may not be able to condense his or her knowledge into a mini-course for the assistant, but certainly taking some time before the children arrive will facilitate the success of the whole classroom. Do not leave too much to self-correction; in other words, do not wait for things to happen and expect mistakes to work themselves out. Try to anticipate events and guide the assistant to a mode of conduct that is acceptable. Remember, diplomacy is everything.

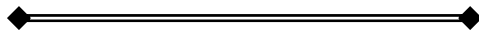
The assistant will always be in the process of personal development, never settling for anything less for herself. Working with young children doesn't mean that our learning needs to stop. The assistant should seek out opportunities to further her education. Certainly learning about Montessori would enable her to understand better the context in which she is working. Reading Dr. Montessori's books and attending lectures or workshops for professional development would allow the individual to have a fuller experience with the children. The directress/director could help in this by suggesting which books to read and certainly help with pointing out the chapters that would be most relevant for the moment. Two possibilities: the passages in *The Secret of Childhood* in which Dr. Montessori discusses the "tyrannical adult," and the chapter on the young teacher in *The Absorbent Mind*.

The assistant will strive to develop her powers of scientific observation. This will allow her to begin to "see" the children and to shed prejudices or misconceptions that she may carry. We all need to do this. As the ability to observe scientifically is pivotal to the success of any classroom, and yet is one of the most elusive of talents, we must help the assistant to develop this ability. Could we as directresses and directors model scientific observation? - to observe without showing that we are actually looking at a child or a situation, to keep detailed records of our observations which are documented with objective language, to avoid reaching conclusions, to be vigilant about protecting the children's privacy, thus not discussing our observations with people not directly involved with the child. The directress/director must help the assistant to clear the mind of any preconceived notions about children and to be "quiet" in the mind when looking at children. Sometimes the best example of a peaceful, intense, fully concentrated observer is given to us by the child. During communication with the directress/director the assistant could contribute what she has seen with regard to individual children or the classroom.

The assistant will be constantly in the process of helping the children to be independent through avoiding giving unnecessary help, and thus not becoming a hindrance to development. Mario, together with Dr. Montessori, realized that interdependence and independence were parts of our society that made up a successful equation for cohesive living. The Montessori classroom is a microcosm of the world, a place in which the child experiences what it means to strive for personal development within the context of working with others. It is our role as the adults in the classroom, both as pedagogical guides as well as assistants, to model a relationship based on trust, understanding, honesty, respect, service, joy, and grace and courtesy. We cannot have any other expectations of ourselves and assistants if we do not have the expectation to work in harmony with the other adult in the prepared environment. Thus we can provide the most conducive environment for the development of the children in our care, not only with respect to a tangible environment, but also with respect to an intangible environment. We must release ourselves to greater possibilities. The purpose of our creation is far

greater than our imagination will allow us to know.

Mario has left us a legacy to follow. He taught us through his words and writings, but most importantly through his actions, what “education as an aid to life” truly means. To follow the child. We must always keep this in mind: that Montessori is not a teaching method but a help to the unfolding of life, a help to life during the child’s development. Mario demonstrated the ability to serve humanity by working closely with Dr. Montessori and eventually taking over her work after her death. Let me leave you with a quote from Mario, taken from the *NAMTA Journal*, Volume 23, Number 2, Spring 1998, page 78: “This world, with its rapid evolution, outdistances the grown-up, who cannot keep pace with it, who seems to live always in the past. But the child keeps level easily, as though this were his mission in life, the work to which he is born and for which childhood is made. The adult, then, observing this child, sees himself renewed, and draws from him hope, courage, inspiration, and faith. No longer the ruthless dominator, obliged (as we used to say) ‘to be cruel to be kind,’ his mission is more one of service, of bringing to a master builder the materials he will need for his creative work- in this case, the building of himself. It is the child who makes the future generation. We can only assist.”



International Day of Peace

Remember, **September 21st is the United Nations International Day of Peace**, why not join the international movement to sing the song “Light a Candle for Peace” composed by Shelley Murley of Canada?

You can download the song free at www.shelleymurley.com/samples-3.htm#01 and

you can sign your school up for this international event at www.shelleymurley.com/SingPeace.htm.

Let us know how your school plans on celebrating this important day.

NOVEMBER SEMINARS

The Montessori Society of Canada will be holding its annual November seminars in Ottawa, Ontario.

Date: November 14 & 15th, 2009

Location: Ottawa Montessori School

Primary level:

Speaker: Sandra Giralto

Elementary Level:

Speaker: To be confirmed

DVD Series

‘Because No One Was Born a Parent’

This 3 or 4 disc DVD set created by Eduardo J. Cuevas G, Director of Training, is now available for purchase online. Check the website:

www.themontessoriparentinginstitute.com

“Because No One Was Born A Parent”
Live Workshop, Vancouver, British Columbia
Labour Day, Sept. 7, 2009
See the above website for details.

Have you seen the Global TV piece by Terese Sears on how to identify a Montessori school?

Google: Global TV Montessori

You will find it on You Tube.