FOR PROSPECTIVE AND NEW MONTESSORI TEACHERS

An excerpt from Perspectives on Montessori: Indigenous Inquiry, Teachers, Dialogue, and Sustainability

Central Research Question:

"What insights on implementing the Montessori educational concept can experienced practitioners offer to Montessori teachers?"

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The Braid

The braid illustrates how coresearchers ultimately responded to the central research question:

What insights on implementing the Montessori educational concept can experienced practitioners offer to Montessori teachers?

One strand (blue) represents Montessori becoming a way of life and one strand (green) the abilities effective Montessori teachers need to cultivate.

The ribbon (pink) interwoven through the two strands represents the support teachers need from teacher educators and school administrators on the path to becoming effective or able to fully implement the concept.

The website montessorispeaks.com was created to disseminate the research free of charge to the Montessori community at large.

You are encouraged to download and print the excerpts and use them in ways that cultivate dialogue. Downloads are formatted to be printed as a booklet by a printing service provider that can be stapled and distributed for a more pleasurable read.

Background

The main research question asked: "What insights on implementing the Montessori educational concept can experienced practitioners offer to Montessori teachers?" To explore the research question, the following two subquestions were asked to small groups of Montessori educators during six different dialogues:

1. What is the essence of Montessori?
2. How would you describe Montessori teachers who are able to implement the Montessori concept effectively?

The six dialogues occurred over a period of five months (July 2016 to December 2016), involved 20 experienced Montessori educators, and were held in five different locations—four in the continental United States, one in the Czech Republic. The participants (considered as coresearchers and elders) represent a collective 770 years of experience in Montessori, have worked with Montessori teachers in 30 countries, have experience in Montessori classrooms that cover all levels of instruction, and hold credentials or diplomas from either AMS (14) and/or AMI (9). Three of the 20 contributors are non-native English speakers. The insights of these elders add to the literature; the dialogues with the elders were held specifically to inform the Montessori community. For more information on the elders (including their names) see Chapter 4 of the research and for the limits of selecting only 20 participants, see **Number and accommodation,** p. 62 of the research.

The research involved gathering responses to the two dialogue questions and communicating them as a collective; direct passages cited from the dialogues are not attributed to

any one participant. The nature of dialogue is to open opportunities to share individual and collective consciousness in a spirit of discovery, free from fragmentation and judgment. Themes and patterns were gleaned from repeated, thoughtful, and manual review of the transcriptions. Fifteen of the coresearchers read and affirmed the analysis and findings.

The intent was not to distill nor ascribe more value to any particular insight. It seemed fitting to include what had been spoken in its essence because it could not be known what thoughts might become meaningful to the reader.

Last, this research intended to deepen understanding of effective teachers and does not profess to cover all aspects that might define and support effective Montessori teachers nor cover completely what the essence of Montessori involves.

The perspectives offered for Question 1 provided the philosophical base established by the coresearchers. Responses to Question 1 also revealed information relevant to the question that followed about teachers who are able to implement the concept effectively.

Summary of findings for Question 1: What is the essence of Montessori?

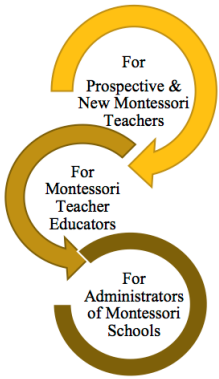
Coresearchers appeared to believe that Montessori essentially becomes a way of knowing, being, and doing that exhibits respect, peacefulness, and love and embraces the interrelatedness of everything. Montessori as a way of life appeared to mean having a viewpoint that values each child for their place in the universe, the importance of community, and learning environments that attend to developmental, physical, and psychological needs. The elders seemed to believe that for Montessori to become a way of life, most people undergo a transformation that leads to viewing the world with a deeper level of consciousness.

A full excerpt of Question 1 findings also is available.

Question 2: How would you describe teachers who are able to implement the Montessori concept effectively?

Coresearchers determined that the term effective is used to mean those Montessori teachers who are able to implement the Montessori theory and methods in the classroom. Analysis of the data determined that coresearchers believed the term *effective* is tantamount to being able to apply the Montessori concept.

During Question 2, dialogue participants discussed ideas about effective teachers that included the role of teacher educators and school administrators. It seemed important to include in this research all reflections offered by coresearchers that would support teachers. It was determined that the findings relevant for prospective teachers would be similar for those already in the classroom. While most practicing Montessori teachers already have taken the teacher preparation course (giving them a decided edge in understanding the concept), for those who find the implementation difficult, the information pertinent to prospective teachers could be equally relevant. Thus, data that addressed the ability of Montessori teachers to implement the Montessori concept became allocated into three groupings: prospective and new teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators.



Under each grouping, insights are offered that could increase understanding of and support for effective Montessori teachers. **This excerpt** (the longest one) **represents the section For Prospective and New Teachers** and begins after a short section describing what participants said regarding characteristics, traits, and dispositions.

Note: The recorded responses have been consolidated and relay numerous reflections from the transcriptions with select passages represented directly. Short passages taken directly from the transcripts are cited in quotation marks and are not ascribed to a particular elder. Longer direct passages are italicized and are not ascribed to a particular elder. Use of ellipses indicates the need either to reduce a long passage or to omit superfluous phrases or names. Brackets replace pronouns or clarify phrases a reader might not understand.

The Issue of Characteristics, Traits, or Dispositions

Maria Montessori spoke a great deal about the role teachers must play in establishing Montessori programs and included many thoughts about the disposition required of a teacher (1936, 1949a, 1949b). Coresearchers were aware of her thoughts regarding desired teacher dispositions, yet it was found that most elders were hesitant to explore that area. Many noted throughout the second dialogue what one declared, "[I'm] not [thinking of] any one person, but just what I have seen over the years." Perhaps more importantly, another contributor began Question 2 by articulating the concern of identifying individual traits:

I think we have to be a little careful because there's as many different styles as [teachers], and one of the reasons we suggest people visit three or four different schools during their training is so that they see [the differences] . . . I think when I first got into Montessori I thought that there was a little bit of a model of how to be, and it was based on a European, not very spontaneous, pretty quiet padding around the class, very, I don't know exactly how to describe it. And then as I mentioned [a notable Montessorian] came and she was all over the place and giving lessons to kids that had never had the five things that came before it, and she was loud and she was whatever. I was like wow, oh so there is room for spontaneity in this work. But I think there's a lot of, it depends on your personality. So I think we have to be a little bit careful not to type or discuss a type.

Several descriptors of effective teachers were repeated in most every dialogue, phrases like "love to learn things," "firm but tender," "comfortable in their skin," and "empathy for children and parents." Those short descriptors, however, became elaborated under certain abilities. The overall hesitation by the coresearchers to feature specific traits

guided me to focus on the salient teacher *abilities* elders described. Those abilities are discussed under "Insights For Prospective and New Teachers."

Insights for Prospective and New Montessori Teachers

"Each journey is so different" frames the insights for prospective and new teachers about which elders spoke. Prospective teachers include degreed adults who consider taking the Montessori teacher preparation course for a self-selected instructional level or plane of development. Most adults who consider becoming a Montessori teacher enter into a teacher education program with some formal, experiential, or anecdotal knowledge about Montessori education, though as contributors noted, there are many reasons.

Teachers who have undertaken the teacher development program and are already in the classroom experience varying levels of abilities to implement the complex concept. As indicated earlier, coresearchers acknowledged that grasping the full intent of the concept can take years. The elders noted that for many adults, the Montessori approach is significantly different from what they experienced themselves, and while they might embrace the theory philosophically, the implementation could be challenging; it is natural for one during actual incidences in the classroom to default to that which they have the greatest tacit knowledge.

Coresearchers acknowledged that in some Montessori programs, often in public schools though not exclusively, teachers must deal with two competing approaches and are tasked with the impossibility of satisfying both requirements (e.g., meeting standards-based criteria and state curriculum mandates, as well as the Montessori elements such as mastery learning rather than performance- [grade-] based learning, having long periods of uninterrupted work time, and classrooms filled with developmentally appropriate multiage

levels). For some, grasping the concept fully, perhaps needing to unlearn ways of educating from their own experience and/or dealing with a school situation that requires managing two different sets of expectations, constitutes issues, some or all of which a new teacher must contend with. These matters could impact the Montessori experience for both prospective and new teachers and are addressed in the discussion below. However, before sharing what elders revealed about teachers for prospective and new Montessori guides, I think it helpful to readdress the subject of transformation.

On Transformation

Transformation was discussed under the essence of Montessori, and elders discussed transformation when talking about prospective and new teachers and teacher educators. The crux of the meaning behind the term transformation seemed to involve looking at education from a perspective that in a very broad sense promotes education's role as enhancing a love of life and learning and pertains to teachers and their students. Coresearchers believed that to be able to apply the Montessori concept in the classroom effectively, a teacher has to be transformed in this broad sense. One elder clarified,

So back to the transformation point, I think it happens. I think some people are already transformed by the time they come to take training. But I also think that the process of transformation is lifelong and I think this work, I think it's lifelong work.

Another coresearcher expanded upon a transformation that teachers, parents, and students might realize through the experience of Montessori education:

We think we're going to do for people, you know, what I will do for these children. It's a two-way street . . . And it's not just us helping children and parents transform their lives. We get transformed by those interactions with them too, and it's a lovely little loop. But that's something you don't see . . . until you do it. And you do it from a place of being curious rather than from a place of expectations . . . [i.e., a teacher believing] this [curriculum] has to be accomplished by the end of the year.

One contributor thoughtfully reflected,

When many people go to school to be educators they get what would be considered a traditional style of learning how to be a

teacher, which can be a lot of times, especially in the past, frontal teaching or direct instructional teaching. Well, when you become a Montessori teacher, all of that goes away and you have to be willing to guide or to lead children to plant those seeds and water them and let the child come to knowing or wanting or yearning to learn more.

In heartfelt words, the coresearcher concluded,

And because these traditional educators, there's nothing wrong with that at all, have been taught that you must do this, you must lead, you must control, that giving up of control and transforming into a role of trust, trusting the curriculum, trusting the philosophy, trusting the method, is really hard. And some of them cannot do it. They just, they try, and I think at times they don't even understand why they're not finding joy as a Montessori teacher. They don't see it, and it's not their fault. It's just something they've already learned, and they can't unlearn it and . . . relearn.

Coresearchers indicated that implementation of the Montessori concept involves the ability to apply the complex concept in the classroom, to demonstrate certain abilities that enable a teacher to guide students in the manner Maria Montessori envisioned.

The descriptions listed for effective teachers in Figure 5.3 were ordered based on the importance elders appeared to give to these abilities. Teachers who can have trust in children, the process, and self; exercise keen observation skills; cultivate mindfulness and self-awareness; create psychologically safe and physically appropriate prepared learning environments; flow with imperfection; and communicate and keep records well are the abilities

coresearchers seemed to indicate are needed to implement the Montessori concept effectively.

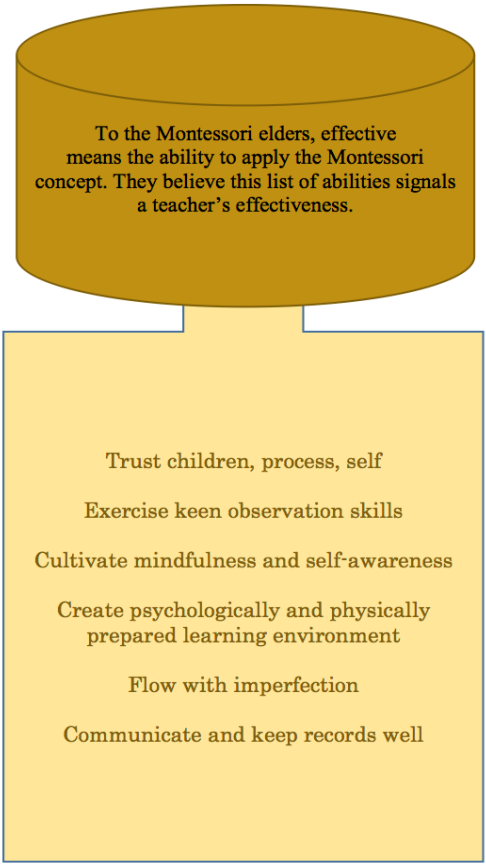


Figure 5.3. The image shows a list of abilities the elders in this study on Montessori perspectives revealed about Montessori teachers who can apply the Montessori concept effectively. Coresearchers' insights were ordered during the analysis phase based on the importance they gave to these abilities.

The six abilities listed were viewed as abilities that a teacher continually cultivates. The list was created with the intent to capture the spirit, depth, and breadth of abilities about which elders spoke and are discussed in detail under each heading. Sections that provide examples of what applying the concept might look like and why effectiveness matters to the coresearchers follows. A reminder that direct passages cited from the dialogues are not attributed to any one participant; the intent remains to represent coresearcher voices as a collective.

Trust

References to trust occurred throughout the dialogues when coresearchers discussed both the essence of Montessori and in describing effective teachers. Trust refers to having a firm belief in the nature of children, the integrity of the Montessori educational concept or process, and in one's own self. Trust, as in a firm belief, elders indicated, is needed in these three areas in order for a teacher to take his/her understanding about children and the Montessori philosophy and methods and apply those understandings in a classroom of children situationally. One passage from the dialogue transcripts seems to speak to the trust needed in all three areas:

You said something really important there, you said how can I ever do this? That's the wrong thinking. It's not, [the teachers] don't do it. [The teachers] just allow [a child's development and learning] to happen, but they have to have that confidence and trust that it will happen if you do your part.

The reflection signals the belief that being an effective Montessori teacher involves steady belief that a child wishes to engage with learning, that the educating process in its complexities is designed to support a child/adolescent holistically and developmentally, and that a teacher believes s/he possesses the skills to accommodate the child/adolescent's learning.

Another coresearcher continued by alluding to the amount of time it might take a teacher to develop trust in the three areas (child, process, self). The reflection below includes a personal challenge the elder faced at the beginning of teaching and offers suggestions that might prove helpful to a new teacher:

And I would say you don't really know that [trust] until you've been in a classroom for two or three years, and you begin to see some of these manifestations. And meanwhile you're just saying well they said this would make a difference, I guess I'll keep doing what I'm doing. Or I don't see any change but I'm gonna go back tomorrow . . . so perseverance. Montessori said to be an effective teacher takes two things: patience and perseverance. So patience with yourself, with the children, with your boss, with everybody, and then keep doing it. You know, don't give up too soon. I always tell people don't quit after the first year. You might want to. I did . . . I cried every day the first year of my teaching. But don't. Now after three years if you still wanna quit, do.

Elders acknowledged how wonderful it is to see a teacher have trust in a child or the process and/or themselves and seemed disheartened when trust is difficult for teachers to exhibit. One participant shared, "[This teacher] trusted the child enough, and the philosophy and the process, that she knew there was gonna be success after this process was worked through. And a lot of teachers just don't do that and… we need more." Another followed with these comments:

I think [this gets down to teachers having] a lot of trust in themselves, you know . . . we say trust the process [but] we're also in a hurry. If we don't get the results real fast we wanna intervene because it might not happen, so the trust isn't there.

While it was difficult to separate the kinds of trust about which coresearchers spoke because the types of trust seem intertwined, it appeared that the issue of trust holds great importance in terms of being able to implement the concept effectively. The descriptions below intend to provide

clarification for what trust in children, the process, and oneself each might involve.

Trusting the Children

Elders explained that Maria Montessori believed each child possesses gifts and abilities when s/he enters into the world and that the teacher/guide's primary role is to help each child in the development of her/his full potential. One elder stated, "It's back to again that awareness that you can let go and let the child construct themselves instead of wanting to construct them. And that's a lot of trust in children." Another elder reflected, "Montessori teachers need to . . . provide an environment that allows children to construct themself [*sic*] which is probably the definition of unfolding that we talked about earlier." One contributor added to that sentiment, referring to the Montessori concept and trust in children: "It's all about [children] constructing themselves and who they're gonna be." Another offered an example of what it looks like when a teacher appears unable to honor a student's ability to self-construct:

There was a person that said to the students as a criterion of doing really well on a project was to wow the teacher. You know, and that was the biggest indicator that [the teacher] didn't get it. I said it's not about wowing you, it's about wowing themselves . . . But the criterion was to wow [the teacher] . . . and . . . it's not about [the teacher].

One coresearcher talked about overcoming the inner conflict a teacher could experience when trust is put in the child to learn what needs to be learned. The coresearcher considered

that a teacher has to have trust in the child so that [the teachers] are able to implement the method and [when a teacher does, the teacher] seems to grow in appreciating their training over a period of time . . . [because the work is] kind of overwhelming . . . How can I get all these lessons out?

As if in response, an elder spoke,

We have some children with really high behavioral problems with good reason and it's really easy to get angry with them. Because what they're doing, and you know I mean if we can look at it as a child that acts out like that is a hurting child rather than a child who is hurtful, it's like I always tell the [adult learners] I say let's not talk about difficult children. You know, talk about children with difficulties. It's a very different conversation. So I think it's really hard to be patient when you see things that are hurtful to other children, but that child probably more than ever needs you to love him or her . . . Somehow that's always at the base . . . It manifests so differently, it's amazing how different each of those periods of development are. You know, graphically different how an adult approaches a 3- to 6-year-old or younger. Completely different approach. And yet from 6 to 12 still, and with the adolescents, still at the gut bottom of it is this respect and this love. Once you have that, it's like your antenna is adjusted to what [the students'] need is.

A couple of coresearchers talked about *why* it was deemed important to trust children in their self-construction. One contributor explained,

Montessori said that it was a series of independences and what you were saying about helping and knowing the difference between helping and fixing and constraint over getting in there and being an obstacle in [the students'] way versus, you know, letting kids struggle with appropriate amount of challenge. Because that's how [students] get into flow and just trying to . . . be able to have the right kind of independence for each level when [students] grow in each one of those areas, but I think Montessori really wanted the child to unfold and you know, you can't, nobody can unfold for you.

Another coresearcher shared a metaphor for why it remains important to allow a student to construct his/herself:

Reminds me of the butterfly story in which the little boy was trying to help the butterfly come out of the cocoon and so he tried to get the hole a little bit bigger so it would be easier. And then when the butterfly came out [the butterfly] hadn't struggled enough, so the blood didn't go to the wings and it couldn't fly. You know, which is a nice metaphor that the struggle is part of the journey, and if we help kids too much then they don't have the tools.

Offering another perspective on the value of trusting children, an elder remarked on a benefit that comes when a teacher puts her/his trust in students: "Then you can watch children do different things, they come up with far greater ideas than you ever thought of, and it's like wow. And it's so wonderful."

Trusting the Process

Trust in the process seemed to refer to trusting the Montessori philosophy as a way of educating children. The concept of education Maria Montessori devised and implemented entails a holistic and an encompassing and purposeful view of what education for children should look like. As has been noted, the Montessori educational concept remains complex. There exists an order and a structure for learning, yet the process allows for the organic nature of students and their learning. One must "do Montessori," as one elder noted, with "dignity, humbleness in humanity, [to] work for life to a better world."

Elders acknowledged that trust in the process is difficult for many teachers and considered that trust is critical in implementing the concept:

A lot of teachers don't trust it, they don't trust the process. They don't trust that the child can experience mistakes or experience failure, learn from those mistakes or failures by a natural consequence and then recover and come out ahead because they have grown from that experience. Which is actually what we're doing the whole time in Montessori is supporting children so that they grow with every experience so that in the end they're very strong people . . . strong and independent, self-learners, self-directed.

One participant shared a personal story that exemplifies for her what trust in the process entails:

I was trying to be one of those moms that wanted to fix it for [my son]. Fix whatever it was, who knows, didn't do his project, I don't know. But [his teacher] came to me and said . . . this environment is the place to let your child fail. If he's going to fail

let him do it here where it's safe, and he can learn what it feels like, what that is, and how he can recover. You want him to know how to recover from failure or mistakes or whatever it is. And I looked at her and I said wow, you're really right, thank you.

Another coresearcher described a situation that conveyed what trust in the process means:

I had this opportunity to work with children, worked as a trainer for eight years, and then I went back to teaching in [an] inner city [school] . . . and it was so different that teaching experience . . . I co-taught with [a new teacher]. We had 35 kids and it was inner city . . . it was the little . . . five-year-old who could have lived on the street himself, his little friend who was a girl was found frozen in the winter because she was outside and it was cold and she had no place to go . . . And the children whose grandfather was shooting the TV because he got angry at a program. So there was lots of wild behavior. The kids were wild, and we started with too many. But, [the other teacher] was a new teacher, and I was not. And you know it didn't bother me. And I thought about this later . . . I just kept telling [the other teacher] it'll, you know, just, let's tweak this tomorrow or let's do that but it'll be okay. And what I realized is it wasn't all about me. What my years in training had given me [was] a deeper insight, and I realized that the children were only where they could be in that moment, and so . . . [if] it was crazy I didn't feel like it was all my fault. The children developmentally were not ready to be completely settled yet, and so they weren't. You know, but I didn't take it personally. I knew that at this moment I was doing everything I could do, and that next year it would look different. And it did. But that came from experience, not only understanding I think how to verbalize but also knowing that everything was going on is not because of you, and that it's

a little pompous to think that it always is. But I think a new teacher thinks it's all about them.

The remarks below followed after hearing the classroom situation described above and indicated support for having trust in the process, humility, patience, perseverance, and discernment, all abilities coresearchers discussed in various ways that are required of an effective teacher:

That's the humility of it isn't it? To be comfortable with small steps, to see something tiny. And that's a discernment issue too. To see something small, maybe it's simple as a child does not jump on a matt but walks around it for the first time, and that's your sign. But if you don't notice that, you know, you don't grab on that as a sign that this child is beginning to be more aware of that environment, which is a step. And to be happy and comfortable, not that it's gonna stop there, but to know that you're making progress.

Several contributors acknowledged the challenges many teachers have to consider in trusting the process:

And that really is a lot of faith and trust and letting go . . . And in our world where every 15 minutes you have to be accountable it gets in the way. And you know all the benchmarks and things. When you used to get tested in the end well that's a long period of time, but when you know it's every three weeks or whatever it is then teachers can't trust the process and can't let go very easily without repercussions.

Another participant said,

You know our society puts the blame on the adult a lot of times. Certainly on teachers . . . the responsibility of the test scores being whatever, however it gets delivered, and so you can't let go because you know it's your responsibility. So I think you have

to go inward and find out what you believe is your responsibility for the child before you can let go of [those testing pressures].

One contributor added,

If you feel like you're responsible for [students] to learn certain things, or responsible for them to act a certain way, or you know that you own it as a reflection on you versus who they are, [it is difficult to let students] figure it out themselves.

Trusting Self

Coresearchers seemed to imply that being able to trust children and trust the process infers one is able to trust oneself. Having confidence appeared to equate to self-trust and arose several times during the dialogues. One contributor talked about the need to have self-confidence, "as confident a person as they are I think is the measure of their success." Another addressed self-confidence and indicated what self-trust means personally:

You have to believe that what you're doing is right. I mean and it's not right or wrong, you just do it and you progress on that, but do it. Go ahead, think what you think is right and do it. And for me that was a big, big lesson.

One coresearcher shared a classroom example that illustrates what having trust in the child, in the process, and in yourself could look like:

[I watched this] little guy pouring and pouring and the glass has been full already, but he's talking and the glass is still full, and I wait, and I wait for it to drip off the table onto his pants, and then I see slow motion he looks down, he looks up, and his hand comes back, and I just, I knew what my instinct was and I knew I couldn't act on it, or there was no reason to. And then you have to just smile and stand back and think if I wasn't here that's what would have happened anyway so why do I think I should change it, you know? As long as [the children are] safe, and I was so happy you said trust because it is trusting them and then trusting yourself to let that flow happen naturally.

Many times when discussing trust, the phrase *letting go* appeared. A brief overview of what elders said about trust in children, trust in the process, and trust in self is provided, in

essence, by a review of the term letting go that follows, concluding this discussion about trust.

The oft-invoked phrase letting go was interspersed throughout the discussions. Those discussions appeared mainly focused on letting go in order to trust the process or trust yourself. I must allow the reader to distinguish the application coresearchers meant when using the phrase letting go; the references often seem to overlap between trusting the child, trusting the process, and having trust in yourself. In one sense, letting go seemed to mean allowing the child and/or the process of learning to happen, yet inferred that it is the teacher who must let go within her/himself.

One elder attempted to describe letting go by referencing stressors one might feel and the value of detaching from stressors:

It's that detachment so that one can begin to think about well what did I do here, what can I do now? And that's about that letting go again of all of the things that have been laid on us. It's learning how to detach, I guess is the word I would like to add to it.

Another coresearcher opined that letting go involves relinquishing a sense of control over things for which one should realize there is no control:

I think when you can let go, which people have deemed something hard to do, it should be the easiest to do right? The more you let go the less there is to do, and the more you give up the sense of control [the better], it's an illusion anyway, but we think we have [control] and we fight to keep it.

Another suggested letting go means stepping back from an incident that might be out of control emotionally: "I think

letting go is a process, and I think it's ongoing all the time, and you know just conflict management, knowing that when you're angry it's not the time to try to resolve anything." Some elders seemed to have empathy for those who struggle to let go. One contributor said, "I think there's different ways that you can learn about letting go. One is Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication."

Every participant seemed to agree with the sentiment echoed by one coresearcher: "What I consider to be really beautiful is the ability to really let go and let the children take control of as much as they can of their learning, of their environment, of just the planning, the organization, just guiding them, but really supporting them to do it themselves."

Several contributors suggested that letting go involves allowing a child or the process to succeed. One contributor pondered, "Maybe it's like letting go of enough things so that you can make some progress, like not getting so stifled and making everything you know, everything has to change at once. Like being patient with yourself." Another elder added that letting go could signal a shift in perspective on a situation, a shift that considers another's viewpoint (in this case, seeing a student's view over their own teacher perception): "I kinda think letting go . . . is just not taking things so personally that you do get your emotions in it . . . saying I think I can see [the students'] point of view."

Exercise Keen Observation Skills

For the elders, taking time to daily observe students and the classroom was considered crucial for a teacher to be effective. Contributors offered descriptions of what observation means, how it might be done in the classroom, and why it is so important. Observation seemed to involve careful, attentive, detached watching, meaning that "you learn how to just rinse yourself of your previous thoughts and . . . observe what is happening with those children in the environment."

Coresearchers noted the attention Maria Montessori gave to observation in her speeches and writings. "I mean again look at [Maria Montessori's] comments about observation. Those are not just superficial comments. The depth of what she's saying about observing, observing and standing back, pulling back and observing." Pulling back indicates that a teacher must step back literally and watch what is occurring in the classroom free from the preconceived ideas or biases within the teacher; observing involves watching the children without judgment or without making assumptions.

One contributor indicated the amount of time a teacher might spend observing: "It can be one minute; it can be 10 minutes." Another elucidated the importance of observation and explained it might involve only a few moments. The speaker acknowledged that taking time to observe might seem difficult and inopportune to the teacher initially, but the time to observe remains invaluable. The comments below are from the same speaker and were not continuous.

It's not just to control those very far away who are talking . . . because we tend to do that as well. It's just, it's some special moment that is [when the teacher] maybe [has an] a-ha

moment or [thinks] wait a minute maybe this is not how I thought the noise or the silence was.

You notice that [this boy or girl] are stopped in their action to think. And they might be thinking in another way on this reality that I'm looking [at] now. So that's beautiful . . . to take the time to observe and not completely control or present [a lesson] or do, do, do . . . It's a difficult thing for a teacher.

One coresearcher described observation in greater detail, suggesting the subtler actions or movements children might make for which a teacher should be observing. The elder also noted the importance of continually growing one's observation skills and how observation of the children can supersede focus on the curriculum:

One thing that I think the best guides are the ones who continue to really hone their ability to observe, you know, in a really deep way. Not just what children are doing but the small things that will tell you what they might be interested in, and even if they touch something or they always go over to that shelf, I mean if you don't notice those things you might be missing your chance. So it's not just going through your albums.[1] *Albums are not the answer. I mean they're a guide but it's that observation, and I find the best guides they really see in a different way than some who get more curriculum based.*

[1] Albums are put together by teachers during the teacher preparation course. The term albums refers to large binders that contain all the lessons or curriculum for which a teacher/guide is responsible in the multiage-level classroom in which the teacher is preparing to enter.

One contributor struggled to describe what observation means and what its purpose is:

It's almost like I wanna find another word, not observation, how do we impart the honoring, observing what is . . . honoring the entity, the spirit of that child and who she or he is so that as you say . . . you know how to give him [the student] what he needs.

Another expanded upon the purpose of observation and how a teacher could ascertain not only what a child needs in her/his learning but also how a child might wish to learn. The elder explained that observation was to

not impose your own idea of what this child should be doing . . . but to stand back and watch and get in that child's mind and see what he needs and wants and how you can approach it. Because not only just know what he needs and wants because that is easier I think. We can always say oh he needs this or that. But how does he want it? Does he want it with a hug? Does he want a tight structure? Does he want some more adult [interaction] . . . you know, I'm just giving examples.

The purpose for observation seemed to be, in short, to allow the child to reveal her or himself.

One coresearcher continued to clarify why observation is so important and how insights arrived at through observation, though fallible, could prove beneficial in interactions with adults:

Children are not who we thought they were. They are more than we thought. There is an invisible potential there, and [we learn] that through the observation . . . once you have a little information learning how to look at a child and notice what they may be telling us without being able to say it. And that's probably true not only of children but at all ages . . . That

sensitivity to the message that the other person, the needs of the other person, and then a willingness to do or to figure out or to be creative enough to pick and choose to offer something that might be what they needed, [though] we never know for sure.

Addressing the reasons for careful observation, another coresearcher explained, "We want the [teacher] to respond, not to react. And you can only do that when you become an observer." A contributor offered a specific example for a teacher in a younger children's class:

I might add that an inexperienced guide might have become upset when children begin mixing the materials, taking a block from a basket and a key from dress-up and a cylinder from a shape sorter to the infant toy. A more experienced guide will sit back and observe what problem the child is exploring.

In terms of the teacher not being an obstacle to a child's learning and knowing when and how to support a student, one elder explained,

[The children/adolescents] have to do their own unfolding, and [for the teacher] not being an obstacle in that unfolding but also, you know, being ready to support in an appropriate way. I think that's really a challenge. It comes from observation of really knowing when to step in and when to . . . watch them struggle.

Another contributor elaborated on the teacher's learning that comes from regular observation:

For me all [effective teachers] have great observation skills. It's just knowing when to stop and observe . . . Observation of a child's interaction with her environment is key. The adult will assess when it is helpful to become part of the learning process and when it is imperative to step back and allow the

environment to do the teaching. A Montessori guide is a facilitator for learning rather than a provider of information. In many ways, a Montessori teacher is a fellow learner rather than what is commonly considered 'a teacher.'

One elder reflected that for the teacher, "to be respectful of that process [of observation] is transformative."

The comments made throughout each dialogue touched on observation from several perspectives. Some coresearchers elaborated on the literal practice of observation and the different ways it might be done. Others expanded upon the reasons why observation is so vital to a teacher's ability to serve each child's learning and create the desired community of learners. Several talked about the need to avoid holding onto one's preconceived thoughts about a child or situation, considered an obstacle, when making observations. Observation skills seemed to predominantly involve one's ability to look inward, within themselves while at the same time being able to detach from one's own perceptions or prejudices. The next ability addressed below continues to highlight the inner-self work that coresearchers believed is needed to implement the Montessori concept.

Cultivate Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

The ability to cultivate mindfulness and self-awareness seemed to naturally follow the discussion of observation skills. Coresearchers described an ability to understand one's own thoughts, beliefs, and emotions when making observations; they talked about cultivating a certain inner state of being and having an open heart and mind. Some referenced a selflessness or withdrawal of one's ego to determine a student's needs. One contributor stated, thinking about effective teachers, "I think [effective teachers] think in terms of what does *this child* [emphatically stated] need? This new child I'm getting into my environment, what's going to make it successful for this child . . . I think a strong Montessori teacher can and will do that."

It was determined from what was said in the dialogues that mindfulness is a state of conscious being and pairs well with the ability to be self-aware. The terms are in sync and not synonymous. Both terms were included to describe one who is able to take an awareness and connect that awareness to one's own beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and motivations. In featuring observation skills as a requisite of an effective Montessori teacher, coresearchers described the importance of a teacher/guide focusing attention on a child or situation in a nonjudgmental way and removing biases within themselves to observe without prejudicing what a child is doing and needs.

One elder, speaking about the need for a teacher to remove her/his prejudices to serve the child/adolescent, connected mindfulness and self-awareness explicitly when referencing the need for teachers to be self-aware:

To really have their lens clean like Maria says, you know, to clean our own lens so we can see who the child is. Because if we've got a lot of our own stuff we just get annoyed. And so I think that that's a real key, is a certain level of self-awareness that makes it happen.

Another contributor noted the need for effective teachers to be able to understand and share the feelings of another, to have "empathy for children and parents." While grappling with descriptors for what enables a teacher to successfully implement the concept, one pondered, "[Effective teachers] are confident without being, what's the word . . . they're humble." Another elaborated in this same vein, speaking about effective teachers:

They're also humble and willing to look at themselves, you know, to say well I could get better here. So I think there's a certain level of consciousness that we're talking about, and how to name that I think the quality is what we're talking about and being able to truly understand the child.

The elders considered that the task of being an effective teacher is demanding because, as one said, "Montessori teaching is harder because it requires our full attention for as much time as we can possibly manage. And that being willing to be in that attentive moment with the class." That statement was followed by another contributor who agreed and added,

And to be able to be gentle with ourselves around those points and say, I mean step one is to even notice where the obstacle in ourselves is happening and then not to get bummed out about it, and to be able to say oh yeah, I'm doing that again. Does that call for another action? Do I have to apologize to that child? Do I have to do something more with that, or just have to notice you know that I lost my cool, or that my prejudice about this point is

coming out again, or this child that I really don't like very much, I love that child . . . but is getting under my skin?

One coresearcher summed up *why* being mindful and self-aware matters in terms of a Montessori teacher's work:

The job description of a Montessori teacher boils down to four things. There are really just four things you need to do . . . So the first thing . . . is observe. You know, and observe not just the children but observe the environment and observe yourself as part of . . . and then assess. Assess not just the progress of the children or how the environment is equipped or not equipped or whatever, but assess yourself. You know, am I using my resources, whatever those are, emotional, intellectual, material resources to the best of my ability. And that changes. The best of your ability is never the same, it changes from moment to moment . . . And then you know the fourth bullet point . . . is connect the child with the environment. And so that the child can discover the world. It's not my job to say [to the child] 'oh, look, look here, learn this, recite that.' You know [the learning is] like 'here it is, you tell me what you think' . . . not to give [the students] everything, to give keys as we say.

That coresearcher continued by concentrating on one aspect of that four-point job description deemed most critical, a point that requires a certain mindfulness and self-awareness:

So observe, assess, remove obstacles, [connect to the learning] and I think [one] is the most important . . . success you know is greatly based on our ability to remove obstacles because ultimately I think any environment could work if you know how to remove the obstacles. It's not just the obstacles . . . in the environment, you know? [For example] that shelf is in the way . . . it's what obstacles within me are getting in the way of my offering an authentic learning experience to the children? Are

my choices about what the children need, or are they about me looking real good when people come and observe my classroom? So coming to terms with that, you know, how am I becoming the obstacle here?

In concluding the insights shared around mindfulness and self-awareness, one elder suggested that Montessori teaching becomes a spiritual practice, yet the Montessori teacher should never feel superior to others. The coresearcher seemed to be speaking about teaching in a broad sense with an eye toward Montessori teachers in particular when this reflection was uttered:

[Teaching is] a journey of self-discovery too, and if we're not very patient we may not know that until we begin teaching. If we're not very humble, very quickly we will become humble. And so I think in that way teaching is a spiritual practice, and in that practice we come to flush out or develop our own beings even while we're serving . . . [Yet] I think we have to guard against being too pompous, and that although I agree our work is important I like the word meaningful better because I think, you know, there is a tendency for Montessori teachers to feel a little pompous especially in regards to parents and the general public and other teachers and . . . there's no room for that.

The next section discusses how elders believed that exercising keen observation skills with mindfulness and self-awareness aids a teacher in establishing the requisite Montessori prepared environment.

Create Psychologically and Physically Prepared Learning Environments

The ability to create a psychologically and physically prepared classroom appeared to rest upon the classroom teacher/guide. Creating the proper environment involves a teacher understanding the theory well enough to establish the elements the theory requires. In this section, coresearchers talk about what psychological preparation involves, what a physically prepared classroom could mean, how each type of preparation manifests in the classroom, and why both types of preparation are important. The need for the teacher to be mindful and self-aware seemed to be imperative.

To begin, however, I want to share how one coresearcher broadly explained the Montessori concept and why the prepared environment is so important. The elder noted, "Instead of a linear teacher to student, student back to teacher . . . there is a three-dimensional student–environment–teacher model where the student largely interacts with an artfully prepared environment with the teacher as a guide."

An effective teacher, one contributor declared, maintains preparation of the environment on a daily basis:

I don't think [a teacher] can walk out of your class at three o'clock or three thirty every day and be doing your job. I think it takes some reflection, I think it takes looking at the environment, it takes inventing something new to do tomorrow or whatever. It takes some planning.

Another coresearcher explained that in fact, a teacher needs to prepare several weeks ahead of time. The elder, offering the metaphor of flooring to mean preparation of the curriculum, explained why:

[You need to prepare] ahead of time so you're free to be with the kids. But if you're always worried about what are you going to teach next or preparing for the next day you can't let go because that's where your mind is. But if you've uploaded for lack of a better word the foundation, the floor, then you can dance upon it. But if you don't provide that floor then you're always being pulled in so many directions and you can't be present. And I think in elementary and early childhood the materials on the shelf provide that, but it's not really the same in infant, toddler, or secondary because we have to provide [the curriculum] in a different form.[2]

Another contributor echoed a similar sentiment: "If we haven't prepared or we haven't gotten a clear idea in the present moment, we're not [present with the children/adolescents]."

[2] For infant/toddler and secondary level Montessori classrooms, there are few prescribed Montessori learning materials in large part because Maria Montessori did not write in detail about those student age groupings. Teachers at those levels have more preparation of curriculum.

Psychological Preparation

Creating the appropriate psychological environment, elders noted, requires what might be described as mindful action. Mindful action seemed to begin with establishing a welcoming classroom that children would feel every time they enter: "Teachers need to be able to go in and recognize that before anything can really happen in the classroom that the children need to feel that they're loved and that they're safe and that they're a part of it." Speaking in a micro and macro sense, one elder said,

I suppose I'd call the classroom a sanctuary, and I don't mean that in a religious sense, I mean that in a unique special sense. That the microcosm of the classroom to me is how we would like our world to be, how we would like everyone to be able to work together, and to realize that yes some have strengths, and others, you know have other strengths . . . because that's what happens in a [Montessori] classroom.

Another coresearcher said,

And in addition to that I think that the teachers that really want to create the best environment for each child, and that take the time to think about it and really chart out well if I do this what will happen, I think this is the best path, that really take the time to be mindful about what is the right thing for each child right now.

The notion of a teacher's need to be present surfaced often. Presence seemed to indicate the teacher exhibits an attentiveness—an emotional, genuine, and caring presence—to the students. The contributor indicated that the success of the Montessori student–environment–teacher

concept is contingent upon the ability of a teacher to bring this kind of presence to the children/adolescents:

And yet the secret to the success of the process is to let all that go and be present to the child in that moment and let that bonding, observing, begin. And then slowly the treasure of the environment is there for the picking, but it's the picking of the child. It's an interesting process.

Commenting on how an effective teacher creates a well-functioning classroom, one in which children are happy and working well, another contributor noted the need for a teacher to exhibit a presence: "And I really think how that happens is that the teacher when she's with the children is always present with them. Not on a computer . . . Not trying to do something else."

One elder included the need to be present, trust the children, and exercise restraint in creating the proper environment. This coresearcher noted, "Being present and waiting for the children to ask for help is an exercise in restraint for the adult. Trusting the children to work out their issues is a matter of knowledge." Another referenced a teacher's need for restraint and staying fluid in order to establish the right classroom conditions:

It is a dance, it's a dance [between the teacher and the children/adolescents]. When to step back, when to step forward with them. It takes, it's a process, you know, and you have to let it, you can't force it. The [students] will turn you off, they'll just shut you off because you're doing too much for them. But when they know you'll give them the space . . . they [become engaged].

A contributor who had worked with very young children offered a specific example of how the children had been taught

a particular skill and how it is up to the teacher to let the children practice that skill accordingly:

We teach the children the ASL [American Sign Language] sign for the word 'help.' We see it constantly. If a child gets too close to another child's eye and the poked child cries, the child who poked will turn to the adult and sign, 'Help!' If a child's pats are too hard and the other child cries, the child patting will look to the adult with a puzzled expression asking for 'help.' And when that older child is unsuccessful in picking up the distressed younger child, she will turn to the adult and sign 'help' and point to the younger child. I have seen these and many more examples numerous times in my work with infants.

Physical Preparation

The physical environment in a Montessori classroom, it was explained, should be aesthetically pleasing, orderly, tidy, and developmentally appropriate. Developmentally appropriate involves having suitable Montessori learning materials arranged on the shelves according to a specific pattern and furniture that matches the size, mobility, and agility of the students. Just as the psychological environment is the responsibility of the teacher, however, so too is the physical preparation. Some of those physical features were discussed during the dialogues.

One coresearcher clarified what physical preparation entails, indicating why each feature is important:

So that could be low furniture for independence, or it can be [students being] able to find things on the shelf, or know how many people can sit at a table by the number of chairs. You know. Having a rug so people know to walk around and respect your work. So all of this, I think all that preparation is what allows what we want to happen.

While considering effective teachers, ones who are able to implement the Montessori concept, a contributor in one dialogue said,

What you were describing brings up for me there's a sense of energy that I experience when I'm working with a person who's really got it . . . there are some teachers that talk about negative things all the time about the kids, but the ones that are really thinking about [the environment] are talking about how can we fix that and what am I going to do tomorrow to really get there with that child . . . And I think that a person who can also turn

out the appropriate, developmentally appropriate classroom materials is definitely an indicator.

A coresearcher in a different dialogue talked about effective teachers who prepare the desired physical environment:

They're the people that I'm most impressed with . . . when I see a child walk up to maybe a dishwashing or a hand washing [work], this teacher has thought of everything. So when the child meets the lesson and meets the soap or the certain size of the drying rack, or the apron can fit on the hook or . . . stay on the hook . . . is it a slippery hook . . . did [the teacher] sew in a hoop that holds it on the hook? She thought of everything and she almost went through the processes as if a 3-year-old. She got on her knees and walked around and looked, what do I see as a 3-year-old . . . You know, it's something beyond, like she prepared herself for being there . . . It's not just physical, it's emotional, it's social, and she really prepared herself.

Two different coresearchers brought up what Maria Montessori considered was the test for whether the learning environment has been adequately prepared, both psychologically and physically. One explained, "Montessori in essence said that the great, you know, the greatest thing a teacher can say is that they did it, you know [the children] kept working as if I were not here." Another contributor spoke about the properly prepared learning environment: "If I can leave the classroom and [the work of the children is] still going on, [that is] success."[3]

[3] It must be noted that a teacher is *loco parentis* (in place of a parent). Should a teacher need to literally leave the room, another adult (assistant, co-teacher, administrator) must be present.

One elder talked about why the psychological and physical preparation are equally important. Noting that psychological includes establishing clear routines and that routine exceeds in a sense even the demeanor of the teacher, the coresearcher said,

I think that flows right into how a child develops trust of the order that I've always conveyed to the new parents that the child has to develop trust, not necessarily in the new adult that's going to be in that environment, but the trust of the routine . . . and the patterns that are developed . . . so they can relax and not worry about [the] unexpected. And that . . . helps them to then feel free to explore the materials and environment and to be themselves.

Another added,

I think all of those things that I hear said is the prepared environment, both psychologically and physically. I think it comes up because what [a teacher is] doing is setting a foundation for the kids to have that freedom to express who they are, and if the environment wasn't prepared psychologically or physically then none of that can occur. So I think that's a preparation that makes it possible to see what we want to see.

Just as coresearchers noted the critical importance of a carefully prepared learning environment for the children, elders delved into details of how to create that environment both psychologically and physically. Attention was paid to what a teacher must do to plan ahead, be present with the children each day, make sure the physical environment accommodates the students' needs, and assure students feel safe and welcomed.

Flow with Imperfection

In capturing what elders included about teachers who can apply the concept, I feel it is necessary to highlight what was said about perfection. Coresearchers attended to the topic of perfection by reminding of the need for teachers to be patient with themselves as they learn what implementation entails. Teachers have to prioritize the most important aspects of the concept to implement. Coresearchers discussed how perfection can sabotage implementation and included how it looks when a teacher is able to demonstrate the ability to flow with imperfection rather than be ensnared striving to do everything and perfectly.

It was noted as a collective that coresearchers had witnessed many highly capable teachers grapple with the need for perfection. Seeking perfection means wanting to do and be everything that the Montessori theory covers. Many of the teachers about whom contributors spoke were considered those who are "confident and not afraid to make mistakes" and see "possibilities in everyone." While teachers about whom elders spoke in relation to perfectionism exhibit many of the abilities that have been discussed above, coresearchers seemed to believe that some teachers still struggle with feeling imperfect in terms of implementation. Several declared that Montessori seems to attract people considered perfectionists and reflected, as this one elder did:

Probably the teachers that I see that are the most successful and stay the longest . . . have an intrinsic motivation to perfect themselves, and they understand that the interrelatedness, all of it is very, very important. You can't just prepare your environment and then expect it to go magically well. [These teachers] continually try things and observe, and then if it's not

working you know they try something else. They ask good questions and they encourage the students. . . . They want to learn from others as well, so they bloom where they're planted. And they've got roots. They're not floating around. . . . Yet there's a tremendous desire to do it perfectly from day one and to beat up [on themselves] in a big way when they notice these things we've talked about, the way we are obstacles.

One coresearcher invoked Maria Montessori's thoughts and the need for teachers to recognize that fully implementing the concept took time:

Maria Montessori says we move toward perfection but I don't recall her saying you have to be perfect before you start. So one of the things that came to me as you were talking too is the need for patience in all this process, because as we said at the very beginning it doesn't happen even in a summer's program . . . I mean it's a lifelong process. And I think really how important it is to help the new adult learners to be patient with themselves too, to know that it, yeah, we just keep moving on and learning from it and perfection is not necessary.

Coresearchers offered descriptions of teachers who demonstrate being able to flow with imperfection. The reader can see how terms and phrases like trust and being open emerged. Two comments referenced flexibility. The passages below reveal how elders continued to dig deeper to understand what defines effective teachers. The space between passages separates the comments made by different contributors.

They handle things peacefully, there's no rush, there's no right answer, there's no only one way to do something. They're so open about how things can flow, just taking things as they come,

not being flustered by something changing their idea or plan. Flexibility is big.

Another thing, you know, and I think we touched on it but related to the effectiveness of the teacher I think is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, and I think you kind of touched on that too. It's not exactly the same I don't think as flexibility but it's being able to not be quite sure, give it a moment or give it a day or give it a week to look at it again, to see, and especially for the younger years . . . and even with the older child, you know, you have to be able to tolerate not exactly knowing at every given moment what's going on. And then I think you also have to . . . cultivate, I don't think everybody has all of this . . . a certain sense of trust that there is something going on there.

One coresearcher brought up a kind of spirit and attitude found in teachers who could be comfortable with imperfection.

I find that also the coming out of training and beginning their work you see a lot of joy in them, and I think that that's not how everyone feels when they start working with children. Some of them have a lot of trepidation. But they seem really happy people to me, I mean people who, and you know maybe it goes along with this love that we're talking about but I think they tend to be optimistic and happy rather than you know sometimes you hear just the bad stories, you know, from teachers. And [teachers comfortable with imperfection] don't look at [the teaching experience in a negative] way I don't think.

A few coresearchers cautioned about teachers who seem to have difficulty with letting go of perfection. Sometimes teachers, elders noted, become obsessed with making sure everything is done just right. One postured, "The rigid teacher has a harder time, because that is a person who has to loosen

up and not feel like he or she is in control every second of every day." Another contributor, talking about establishing the proper priorities between the classroom atmosphere and making sure to cover the prescribed curriculum, remarked,

Curriculum's you know set but so open that, you know, every level leads to the next level just perfectly. There's a perfect flow between each of the levels and what's taught . . . I also found, I mean lately, especially in elementary when teachers have to really weigh what is more important now. Is this academic or is this, it's a very fine line sometimes. So fine that many don't, cannot deal with this. But you know putting [a material] away and what is more important? You know this academic thing and how you get to the end of this, or how to balance these two together. And for me a teacher who strongly decides, well this is very important, and I will go for it. Or for me this is important, but it's just that thing about why the person does it, why does that teacher do any act or any, you know, keep going on this path. It's crucial because sometimes it can lead to obsessions, to be obsessed with one thing or the other. It has to be balanced, it's very difficult, even for strong Montessorians.

The examples elders offered of how a teacher indicates a flow with imperfection included the ability to try out different approaches in the classroom, ask for help, and accept feedback received that is intended to aid in a situation. One coresearcher described a simple example that involved a teacher's openness and straightforwardness: "It's the ability to say alright let me try it this way . . . while training does help you stay stable through those stressors you have to be willing to go to others and say I need some help here."

Another described the ability to accept input given in a performance review, finding tips for improvement when

feedback is offered instead of becoming defensive. The contributor declared, "They need to be willing to accept feedback. And I think that's critical. I really think that's at the heart of a really robust teaching situation where [the teacher's] always looking for something that's going to help." One elder relayed how a teacher might handle a situation with students when s/he realizes a misjudgment has occurred:

I know for myself there have been times when I have miscued so to speak, and I go over and I think these kids are goofing off, and they weren't goofing off. I interrupted, I interrupted their work. And I apologize, I apologize for that because I made a mistake.

Communicate and Keep Records Well

The emphasis elders placed on a teacher's communication abilities concludes the list created to inform prospective and new teachers on what seems to foster a teacher's effectiveness. Coresearchers considered that good communication and record-keeping skills are critical for effective Montessori teachers. By design, they explained, assigning students' grades is not done in a fully authentic Montessori program; learning for students is based on mastery as opposed to performance-based learning (where grades are issued). This fact in large part is why effective Montessori teachers need to have strong written communication skills. Student progress charts are meticulously kept so the need for careful record keeping becomes imperative. Student evaluations include written observations made by the teacher. Teachers must also be able to verbally articulate to parents about their child's progress; parent involvement in a child's education is considered vital in Montessori programs. The ways teachers give feedback to children/adolescents remains essential in applying the Montessori concept effectively, coresearchers maintained; comments teachers make to students should focus on abilities over which the student has control.

Referencing effective teachers, one elder stated, "Usually they're really good communicators." Another explained, "They have to be able to handle a certain amount of administrative work in just keeping records for their own classroom." One elaborated,

[Teachers] need to be able to keep up with the details of paperwork or documentation that is required to a certain level.

And then of course being able to communicate with the parents and with their coworkers [about a child's progress].

A teacher, one contributor proclaimed, "has to know and be aware of what every child is doing, and has all the written documentation to back it up, right? And I think that can be just as . . . [demanding as everything else they must do]." Another coresearcher said, "And one additional element of the finest teachers: the ability to communicate, in a straightforward, pinpointed and encouraging way, the strengths and needs of individual children to parents in a parent conference."

One elder who had been an administrator for many years described the need for good communication skills this way:

Well I don't know why it took me so long to learn this, but a teacher in our Montessori classrooms really has to be able to handle a certain amount of literacy. They have to be at a certain level of literacy, not just in written but also spoken because they're going to be communicating with their parents that way . . . and there are people who are wonderful teachers and not wonderful communicators and really need help with that.

In closing this section, I believe it important to include that one coresearcher turned the perspective on the topic of communication toward *how* effective teachers communicate with students. The elder bemoaned the fact that too many teachers are inclined to offer students feedback that does not seem to foster the kind of development desired in Montessori education or most educational models. Teachers who give praise to a student simply for being intelligent, for instance, offer the student little substance upon which that student can draw down the road. Acknowledging *habits* that students display instead of using superficial clichés, one coresearcher

said, could nurture a student's potential more substantially (see also Costa & Kallick, 2008). The coresearcher elaborated:

But I guess also, I mean and this is the knowledge and the philosophy of Montessori and all basic pedagogical philosophies, that children or people are not blank slates and it's experience what makes us, you know, experience in doing things, experiences with communications, experiences with ourselves in self-assessment . . . the trying again, the honesty in doing [work] in the humbleness, trying again and always, always encourage this instead of [saying] 'You're brilliant doing this'. . . [you say] 'You took this test and you worked a lot I know, you were hard working for months, you were determined' instead of 'Oh you were very brilliant, you're very smart because you got this grade' . . . [That kind of remark to students] is what we need to eliminate in all education.

Communication and record keeping were mentioned in several dialogues and discussed briefly, though it was apparent both abilities should be addressed in order to provide a complete picture of teacher effectiveness. Adept communication involves verbal skills needed for "conferences, parent education sessions, informal meetings with parents, and to contribute to the school community through regular, positive interaction with other staff members." Written communication consists of "written reports and other written exchanges with parents, and [sometimes] the public at large." In this short section, coresearchers spoke to what it means to communicate and keep records well, how communication extends to the way a teacher interacts with students, and why communication and record-keeping abilities are important.

Final Thoughts from Coresearchers

Coresearchers seemed to determine that effective Montessori teachers are those who have trust in children, the Montessori process, and self. Effective teachers seem to cultivate observation skills that require mindfulness and enhanced self-awareness so they can take those abilities and create a caring and safe psychological place to learn and a physical environment that is safe and provides all the materials for learning that is developmentally appropriate for the children/adolescents. Contributors seemed to believe that teachers need to balance their drive for perfection with the ability to discern the less important aspects of the work, letting lesser things go while at the same time being diligent in developing verbal and written communication skills, including good record-keeping practices.

Coresearchers also considered that the commitment effective teachers should make is to continuous improvement. One contributor explained,

You know we're all engaged in a lifelong process of . . . getting to know ourselves . . . And I think the moment that we stop asking who am I? Why am I doing this? Then we become stagnant . . . So it's constantly going through that observation, assessment, removing obstacles and connecting the child and ourselves to the environment.

Another expressed,

A teacher should get better with experience, and must make a conscious, continuous, serious effort to understand children at a deeper level, to communicate with parents more effectively, and to expand the repertoire of materials and presentations in their environment and at their command.

One elder mused upon the discussion around insights that could be offered to prospective and new teachers:

It would be so interesting to get their [effective teachers'] perspective on the different developmental stages of a teacher/guide, you know? What was it like the first three years? The first seven years? And for some of them, 30 years?

While it is not an ability, elders suggested having the desire to teach seems essential. The thoughts from contributors on desire are offered below.

We can throw out a lot of things that help make an effective teacher, but . . . maybe the most important thing is a desire to do it. A wanting to feel some call to do this work . . . who feel called in some way to serve the world in working with the younger beings.

Those teachers that I think are the most successful seem to have something within themselves that they go back on how they were trained, and they start to implement immediately.

If they don't feel it, they don't desire it, they don't want it, it's not gonna happen, and it really goes back to you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink . . . you can't cause somebody to be transformed.

The final word on desire, however, is left to a coresearcher, who expressed,

Not everybody is a teacher, but more are than think they are. More can be than think they can be. And I think one of the things you learn or can learn . . . is that you can learn to do things in different ways than you knew how to do before. And if you aren't, have not been particularly good in the aesthetics of an

environment for instance you can learn how to do that if you want to. But there has to be a strong motivation.

Applying the Concept

Having reviewed the abilities elders believed effective teachers exhibit, this final section created for prospective and new teachers provides examples of what applying the concept might look like and offers pearls of encouragement and wisdom. Then there is a brief look at why elders said effectively applying the concept matters. Throughout the dialogues, several classroom scenarios were offered by participants to this end. Some coresearchers described the classroom stories as nuggets from which they continue to learn many years after the incident has occurred. Embedded in each tale, elders appeared to believe, are numerous lessons from which a teacher might draw.

Several stories were shared that spoke to the demeanor and wisdom a teacher exhibits when handling behavior incidences. One veteran educator explained the need for a teacher to be directive at times:

And Montessori, I think it's in the first volume of Spontaneous Activity but . . . maybe it's Discovery of the Child, anyway she says pretty much you can do anything when there's disorder and chaos. You can jump on the tables, you have to get the child's attention. And I think more teachers make error on [not getting the students' attention] these days than on the other side. I think [they believe] . . . this cosmic view, this wonderful loving whatever, but they forget that if they don't have the child's attention, if the child is disordered, [the child] needs something else to attach to and that something else is going to be me [the teacher] until I find that thing, or the child finds that thing that gives that child some sense internally that [s/he] can act differently, that this behavior isn't fun anymore and [the student can say], I'm gonna stop being so crazy in the class or whatever,

and . . . begin that development of concentration. And then [the child is] gonna pay more attention.

Another coresearcher spoke about two incidences that occurred in a class with 3- to 6-year-olds. The contributor who relayed these tales considered the occurrences as treasured examples of what Montessori education means. Referencing the stories, the coresearcher concluded by saying, "I learned that when you focus on certain things a lot of other things take care of itself, you know?" One story involved a student who threw his pencil across the room:

I had one mentor . . . she was an older lady from Ukraine I think, and a little boy got very angry. I was an intern. And he threw a pencil across the room. And I was scared, what would she do? And she looked at him, and she walked over to the pencil. She very delicately picked it up and she just touched it and made sure it was not broken, she stroked it, and she adored the pencil in that moment and she brought it to her heart as though it was a jewel. And she took a big sigh . . . and then she just slowly walked and put it back where it belonged. And she smiled. And this boy just stood there dumbfounded. And by then a lot of the class had watched and they saw him throw it. She had the attention of everyone in the class including me. And she just went on her way after she replaced the pencil. She was happy that it made it, that it survived, and that was a lesson. I was 25 and I remember like yesterday, and it taught me how to handle everything, it really did, when she took care of the pencil.

Another story involved a young child who had lied about an incident in which he was involved and how the teacher responded:

Something else happened when I was first becoming a teacher and a little boy did something, and we both happened to be

nearby and I was just the intern, and he came, the teacher asked him about how did this happen, and he just told a lie. Blatant, blatant, he just told something that didn't really happen. And she looked and she said okay, and he walked away. And later I said why did you do that? And she said well that's his business. He has to know what it felt like to get away with a lie. Now the lie sits with him, and he gets to feel do I want to carry that and do I want to be the liar? I found it worked and I didn't get in trouble, but it didn't really work in the end because it will come out in a day or so that he has to tell the truth to feel better. And she [the teacher] didn't press it, she just let it go. And I have always let the children fib to me now, and teachers have asked me why and I have the same answer.

Several examples were offered about how the academic learning looks in a Montessori classroom. In the words of one elder,

[A student can] get so close to the answer [in math], their thought process is so much going in the right direction . . . and at the end they get the wrong answer. And instead of [focusing on what is wrong], [you say] okay so you got this far and right here you went this way instead of this way. So let's look at how many steps you were going in the right direction . . . Once we go over it together we realize it was only one last step and look at that, that's the answer we were looking for. And that's the answer that's more logical, or you miscounted by one, or you carried over by the one wrong way. And it was like celebrating what they did do and forgetting it was wrong.

In another dialogue, a contributor discussed the issue of grades:

We had to take grades, at one of the schools I was at we had to record a grade, [so I would say to the children] you tell me when

you're ready to take a quiz or assessment on that. When you're ready that's when we'll do it. And that was it, and they all did it. It wasn't because I forced it, it came from them.

On the topic of assessments, coresearchers spoke to how the process of assessing could work well for the teacher and the student. One elder recalled a lesson from a mentor:

She used to say about children and conferences, she said I don't use a benchmark. I just, my question is the child making progress . . . [She believed] I'm privileged to participate in this unfolding in front of me, this life unfolding in front of me, the respect and reverence in a way for the life that is in front of me.

A section of a dialogue that had three participants is shown below that reveals a Montessori perspective concerning test taking and illustrates the kind of back and forth exchanges that were common among dialogue participants on many topics (speakers are separated by spacing).

[A student] just kept taking [the test] until you passed it. And so everyone felt like a success in class . . . [the student would] get through it, and that's the goal isn't it? To learn the words, not to just get them marked off and never look at them again. And [the teacher] just stayed with [the students] until they eventually got them all . . . But that was more in line with how life should go. Why can't every time you climb a tree you get a little higher?

Because in the end it's not the grade that matters, it's that they learned whatever the goal was for learning.

And [the students] wanted to keep going.

And they wanted to keep going and they never looked at it as a negative thing.

There was no reason to give up because you were going to succeed no matter what. It was how, if it took you a couple days, a week, it didn't matter. And that is a whole different perspective to assessing children.

Often coresearchers acknowledged the struggles teachers/guides can have in knowing what to do, how to handle expectations versus what is best for the child/adolescent. One elder expressed the dilemma:

We have to take the child where they are and follow them through because we don't know what their potential is or when they're going to blossom or when the light's going to come on or when mastery occurs. And it's really difficult because we take the training and we think well this is the way it's supposed to be. This is my checklist and so they're supposed to be here, and when you're truly following the child it doesn't always turn out that way.

More examples of what applying the concept might look like during classroom challenges surfaced when the issue of flexibility was mentioned among coresearchers. Pondering flexibility as a specific trait, one elder spoke, "I really think that that freedom to be flexible within kind of a construct makes the best guides." The descriptions in which flexibility was discussed offered examples of how being flexible within the philosophical structure might present itself. Two different coresearchers in two different dialogues spoke about the flexibility required at times to be directive during certain situations. One contributor said,

You know the child who . . . says I wanna do this, well they don't really, you know, they may not really . . . and they don't do it, they just get it [the work] out so they look busy and then you walk away and then they put it away or they're rolling it around,

and you know those kids need to be told what to do, or they need to be brought into a group and sing songs and do little dramas or whatever is going to, you know, if you have a passion and you love plants then take them outside and explore plants. But you have to be very directive I feel in those settings. And then of course flexible enough and not attached as you said to the ego thing, where oh now I'm the great teacher because I'm standing in front of everybody and I've got everybody's attention, but to keep in mind the purpose of doing that is to help [the child] attach to something other than their own deviations, and to bring them further along so that they no longer need you to be that person . . . it's rare in a class that there's [not] somebody who needs you to be directive. Even in a normalized class there's always a couple who need the adult.

A coresearcher in another dialogue spoke similarly:

And you used a word that I think is critical for an effective teacher, and that is flexibility. And the ability to understand that at one moment you might be a dictator in the class so to speak. You might have to be very directive. And two weeks later with individual children, and eventually with the class, you have to be able to withdraw.

Two contributors, speaking about flexibility, addressed the need for individualization within the Montessori concept. One reminded,

And so your job is not one job in a way in the class. That's why I say flexibility, because with this child I might have to be this way, with these three that way, with this one I don't even need to pay attention. And of course you have to be careful that you don't ignore the children who are cooperative and peaceful and working well.

Another shared an example remembering the need for flexibility involves what one elder had learned from Maria Montessori's youngest grandchild, Renilde, and an illustration of how a teacher might respond to a child's development progressing at varying rates:

I remember Renilde Montessori saying, they edited the albums for 3 to 6, she did the language. And every age said, 'To be determined.' You know, we do give ages but I thought that was so right, you know? I mean I had a little 3-year-old who was a giant because his parents were both almost seven feet, well his dad was and his mom was tall, and he was so clumsy . . . [but] he would wanna do everything in math because that was where his comfort zone was. And you know people would say he shouldn't be doing that. You know what he needed, and what was hard to do, was carry a tray. So . . . we'd take out the decimal beads and I would make sure the mat was way over at the other end of the room, and then had him go get his beads and he had to carry a tray. So I guess it's being able to be really flexible.

The discussion about applying the concept concludes with how coresearchers believed the Montessori perspective of educating evolves over time for teachers; for some teachers, the transformation proves a greater challenge than others.

I think that [comfort with the concept] is a transformation that happens as the teacher, you know, develops a little more finesse with using the materials and working with kids. And it also depends on if they're brand new to teaching or not, although sometimes teachers that have been trained traditionally that is even harder for them.

Another elder added,

With adults you know . . . I think you evolve as your own traditions and your own values change that you understand Montessori in many different ways, and I think this understanding to me has come much later . . . as you were saying that every piece becomes very important, but it's not just one part of curriculum. It's everything that's rolling in and how do we find that goodness in each child so the peace can be brought?

Why Effectiveness Matters to Coresearchers

Coresearchers seemed to value the fundamental Montessori beliefs that each child has gifts for the world, and that it is incumbent to provide each child with an education that brings out that potential as fully as possible. One contributor proclaimed, "The child is the source of love." Another echoed a sentiment heard throughout the dialogues:

I'm doing this because I know this is the only way to transform humanity. You know, like Maria Montessori said in The Absorbent Mind . . . the child is not just learning how to walk and talk and do this, the child is refashioning humanity through that process of self-creation. So when [teachers] see their work as that wow, you know, this is important work. We don't receive the kind of salary that important work should receive, but it is important and then the passion is there to know the difference that you could make not just for that one child and that one family but for humanity.

The elder concluded those remarks by adding the sentiment that also seemed like every participant voiced in some manner: "You know if we could get every child to grow up feeling valued, respected, you know a contributing member of society, this would be a totally different world."

The devotion to the Montessori concept that elders hold seemed to spring from the impact on students that they had witnessed for many years. It is with this sense of reverence for their work that coresearchers had considered beliefs and abilities they deem important for a Montessori teacher to continuously cultivate. One spoke about what students had revealed many times, from toddler age through adolescence, with an eye to what the future might promise:

A word that comes to mind . . . is civility . . . what stands out with many of these Montessori children is how gracious they are. And you know how they can collaborate and share. And they care about, even the toddlers, you know story after story where a little one's crying and a slightly older one comes over, you know toddles over and starts patting them on the back. I mean that whole altruism that we see spontaneously in these children I think really stands out. . . . [Just like how] the older students were so different in their demeanor and everything when they were around the little ones. And I've seen that just having our toddler and children's house be in the same area as the junior high [adolescent] students. They're so nurturing . . . they love those little kids. And . . . yeah, who they are becoming is just amazing. You know you watch them, junior high students, they're becoming the Montessori teachers of the future.

Another coresearcher considered what transformation from the perspective of a Montessori student might look like after having been in a Montessori program for years:

So fast forward many years, my son moved here with me as a junior and he did online classes and he was very, very nervous. And they [his teachers] would ask questions . . . [and he would say] I don't know, I'm not sure, and finally I think the experience from [his Montessori upbringing] just clicked in and I heard him say, 'Can I just tell you what I do know?' And they always said yes, and he got his best grades of his entire high school of that year because he had this dialogue with the teachers . . . So it's [the way Montessori educates] more of like a life skill or something. You [a teacher] don't always know you're even participating in giving it [a life skill] but you know [this transforming way of educating] is the right thing to do.

It is fair to say that coresearchers view their work in Montessori with love and full of meaning and purpose. The interest they voiced in providing more clarification for prospective and new teachers about what Montessori teaching entails seemed to resound with each one.

Contributors' thoughts about how teacher educators and school administrators might support effective teachers appeared equally important. The last two sections of the chapter on findings cover what coresearchers shared for teacher educators and for the role school administrators play in fostering effective Montessori teachers **and are not included here in this excerpt.**

The entire chapter on findings ends with this passage:

In closing this chapter's presentation of the findings, I share one coresearcher's thoughts that seemed to offer sage insights to all three groups— prospective and new teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators:

Montessori described to us an educational philosophy and, in great detail, an educational practice. But describing Montessori as an educational approach only, which we almost always do, gives her short shrift. She described a path of human development from birth to maturity with the goal of living in an interdependent, peaceful world. This is the vision that excites our teachers, but also sets impossibly high standards for performance. Teachers I have worked with who achieved the highest realization of Montessori teaching combined great technical proficiency always undergirded by a strong understanding of the needs and tendencies and the psychological characteristics, all wrapped in a steely pragmatism toward the needs of the children before them. The finest teachers never fully implement Dr. Montessori's

philosophy. This is not a pessimistic statement or disparaging in any way of the extraordinary efforts our teachers make every day. But we tend to cling to abstractions and miss the wonder of the grainy, messy delightful complexity always present right in front of us. The best teachers stay clear-eyed, in the moment, and deeply rooted in universal principles of human development.