

# Finding my way in public Montessori

**There's more than one way to meet each child's needs**



BY **GENEVIEVE D'CRUZ**

I came to Montessori training through a whirlwind of life changes. After college, I immediately moved from North Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia, to work for Teach for America. I knew I wanted to do Montessori training eventually, through working summers at a language immersion Montessori school in North Carolina. However, the pressures placed on millennials today to “discover their passions” and “find their way” are higher than ever. I became enamored with the idea of a plan and system that was already created for me. What's the harm, I thought, in getting a few years of experience and then going to training?

I knew I was interested in AMI Primary training, and the international diploma appealed to me (I had even visited the training center in Buenos Aires, Argentina and considered training abroad). The beautiful problem about Montessori education is that once you've had exposure to it, nothing else can compare. I knew after a few weeks into August that I wouldn't be able to spend the next two years working at a conventional school, knowing that there was a more balanced, holistic, and child-centered approach that existed.

It was sheer luck that there was an AMI training center just outside Atlanta. I found myself on the phone with the trainer, Joen Bettmann, to discuss the training and my background. She



*Children finding their way at Lee Montessori Public Charter School*

told me to rush my recommendations and come in that week to meet with her. “I promise I'm not crazy,” I reassured her, over and over again. I quit my job, picked up my final paycheck, and went into the training center the very next day. I spent the following week reading *The Absorbent Mind*, purchasing books and supplies, and began training.

The beginning of training was like the beginning of any new school year or class. Nobody in our cohort knew each other, and we were uncertain about what to expect. After some orientation to the space, policies, and structure of the training, we jumped right in.

None of us expected how detail-oriented the training would be. After being presented hand-washing, we discussed the process, and were all taken aback at how specific we needed to be. Which hand did what? With what grip? In what way? How do you bring the clean water? Where do you put the used water? How? The first few weeks required a sort of “switching over” of

the mind to a particular attention to our movements and language. I am fortunate enough to be a detail-oriented thinker, which served me well in the training, but training still required us to think in ways we may not have otherwise considered.

Training also required us all to find the most efficient way as possible to use our time. Between class all day, required practice time with the materials, and the actual writing of the albums, finding a way to balance life was tricky. By spring, as we scrambled to finish papers and presentation write-ups before exams, every spare moment became an opportunity to accomplish some work: an edit on an existing paper, a note at the bottom of a write-up, or ten more minutes of practice time.

After speaking with other AMI graduates over the past few years, I've gathered that aspect most lacking from the training has been skills and techniques for systems and management: the

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actual meat of how to guide a smooth, structured, and balanced community. Fortunately, I've had a supervisor who was a guide herself, as well as access to a few seasoned guides, but if I hadn't had this, the public sector exploration would have been extremely difficult.

Opening a school with a commu-

There were some implicit preparations embedded in my experience. The thorough preparation became second nature when I began guiding because analysis of movement and attention to detail was expected throughout the training. Time to practice with materials without the children was essen-

## There is never a shortage of work to be done in a public Montessori school

nity of 21 children (only two of whom had Montessori experience) required a speedy and thorough creation of systems to provide predictable and safe physical and psychological limits. The AMI training is thorough and traditional, two of my favorite aspects, but fitting all the content into one year (to make it accessible to trainees, financially and temporally) does not allow for much time spent on management. Of course, it is important for new guides to find their own styles, for practical reasons as well as for ownership and empowerment, but some universal management ideas and training might also be helpful to new graduates.

My training did offer a day of discussion and ideas around beginning a new community, ideas for re-engagement, and joining an existing community. For the sake of time, my trainer would categorize some questions as management (or "art of teaching") questions, and she did offer a lecture/discussion series on this topic to guides in the community. Luckily for guides in other areas, I've heard of similar groups that have begun to provide support to both new and seasoned guides. Perhaps the lack of time spent on management in the formal training can and should be made up for by the surrounding Montessori community, if schools are fortunate enough to have one.

tial to becoming acquainted with them without the added pressures of a child-filled environment. Though some moments of training seemed hectic and stressful, the skill of making time, working efficiently, and not wasting a single moment, was also built into my work habits. This was immensely important as there is never a shortage of tasks and work to be done in a public Montessori school.

Perhaps the most significant part of my training was embracing the Montessori approach for each individual child, while knowing that it can look different for different children. A response to our frequent "what if" questions was that seeing "a way" of doing things was more helpful than being stuck on "the way." One of our classmates arranged a vase of flowers using only stems one day. It was so well-received that it stuck with me as an example of the capacity for creativity humans have when given space to be themselves within necessary limits. Our trainer told us a story of a child who had gone around the line using his nose instead of walking on it. She simply responded that that was "a way" to arrange the flowers, "a way" to experience movement on the line. Immersing ourselves in the details required of the primary training, we always wanted the "right" answer to our questions for our albums and own

knowledge. To our frustration, we were often just told, "that's 'a way' to do it."

This drove us crazy during the training, but it resulted in a more balanced and less constrained point of view when I began guiding. As in most schools (public schools in particular), I had children and families with a wide array of needs; thanks to the introduction of "a way" into my thought process, I did not feel bound to a *particular* way. I was less reluctant to make needed accommodations for children. In my first year, it seemed I needed to make accommodations left and right, but due to my preparation, I was able to get to the direct aim of a material while still serving the child's individual needs. A combination of this outside-the-box, flexible, thinking paired with the thorough training (in theory and materials) is essential in order to both stay true to the fidelity of the training and follow every child.

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