

Community and Engagement: Restoring the Process
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“As we learn to live and work in this process world, we are rewarded with other changes in our behavior. I see that we become gentler people. We become more curious about differences, more respectful of one another, more open to life's surprises. It's not that we're either more hopeful or pessimistic, but we are more patient and accepting. I like to believe we become this way because we're willing to work with life on its terms. Although life's dance looked frantic from the outside, difficult to learn and impossible to master, our newfound gentleness speaks to a different learning. Life is a good partner. Its demands are not unreasonable. A great capacity for change lives in everyone of us.” ~ Margaret Wheatley

From: *Bringing Schools Back to Life: Schools as Living Systems in Creating Successful School Systems: Voices from the university, the field, and the community.* Christopher-Gordon Publishers, September 1999

Several times a year we close our school for the day and focus on a day for teachers to work together. We call it Professional Development Day. We struggle to make the schedule balance the need for collaborative curriculum development and the need for a way to be together that reinvigorates us in our mission. We are not unique in that push and pull to take care of business and relationship, unless it is that we at least recognize that we need to do both.

Every organization faces the problem of creating an engaged community. With the focus on peace and education for a new world, Montessori schools are positioned to be organizations that exemplify a better way of being. We live, however, in a world that is always in a hurry, that does not always value interrelatedness, or acknowledge our interconnectedness. There are a million reasons for this, but the path leads us to observe that there may be a gap between the way a school operates and the way in which we'd like to exemplify a new world of peace and understanding.

THREE SHIFTS

The restoration and reconciliation of a school community requires a three-way shift. We must shift in:

Thinking: to pay attention to the power of our words and to be willing to reframe our language.

Being: to show up as a possibility rather than a problem solver.

Belief: to invert the way in which we have been taught to understand cause and effect.

For example, we begin to see that students create the teacher, teachers create the administration, and citizens create their leaders.

Those three shifts in thinking allow us to have choices. Instead of waiting for others to change, it gives us the opportunity to co-create the future. Maria Montessori expected us to help young people believe that they are the heirs to a world that exhibits hope and progression of the human spirit. Certainly, the only way for us to live into her expectation is by creating communities that are actively engaged in the process of becoming a future we desire. By doing this we can engage

our intentions toward a future that is more hopeful and that exemplifies progression of the human spirit.

While this may be an enlivening thought, there is another dimension to consider. We may feel a little like the 6th grader from a traditional school who came to tour the middle school and became excited about all the freedoms the Montessori students had, only to find out that those freedoms meant the children had to take on certain responsibilities. Like that child, we must engage ourselves in a new way of thinking and being and believing. Otherwise, we have no choice but to recreate the past. Recreating the past may be a comfortable place to go, but it will not serve the school community or the individual in a way that opens up the future.

CONVERSATION

If we are going to enliven the quality of our communities, we have to change the nature of the conversation. Generally, we engage in two types of conversations. One is the conversation of retribution in which we become defensive and offensive. The other is the conversation that leaves us scratching our heads because we can't figure out what the real message is because everyone is trying to be so nice. Both conversations keep us from becoming accountable by blaming or by being soft on commitment.

Listen to the radio in the morning on the way to work and you may notice that the larger public conversations claim to be tough on accountability. When we really look at what is happening in the stance of this claim, there is an amazingly soft stance on accountability. The conversations are retributive, not restorative. We can raise our own awareness and develop better skills in the new conversation, not by being critical, but by being good Montessori observers, by paying attention to the on-going small group or public conversations. Notice the language used in a staff meeting or by the politicians. Was the conversation restorative, or not? Did the folks in the conversation claim responsibility, or not?

To make our schools an example of community, and responsibility, and making a difference, it helps to take a look at the current belief system that perpetuates the unconscious and ineffective way of being together in our organizations. The larger public conversation reflects the idea that rewards and punishments, legislation and standards, testing and tough talk will lead to accountability. While in our classrooms we may understand the absurdity of those beliefs, we may not have made the quantum leap to transferring that notion to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which we work together as adults.

To work together collegially requires that we have confidence in each other and that we speak our thoughts directly to one another. Gossip undermines the confidence of a group. Rather than thinking that we need to change another person, we might begin to understand that change happens when we are all willing to shift our own narrow understanding of ourselves and one another. We might rethink the way the world can work with a more expansive and generous idea of what we can be and do together.

If we pay attention, we will begin to notice the energy created around different types of conversations; one kind consumes our power; the other creates it. As we work toward a public conversation based on communal accountability and commitment, we are challenged to

effectively discriminate and save what is true and good about our relationships, and at the same time to move beyond the restraint of those personal or collective stories we hold near and dear. Just as we recognize the power of community meeting for our students in building trust, when we begin to allow ourselves relatively small amounts of time in our regularly scheduled meetings to reconnect with one another, to acknowledge the gifts we bring to one another and to the school, we make small and significant inroads toward connection and a sense of community as adults. While recognizing gifts is an important aspect to the restoration of a community, other challenges need to be recognized and addressed. As public school Montessorians, we have real concerns around school rankings by the state. These pressures create barriers to our sense of school community and restrain our power by putting a higher priority on mandated benchmarks and concrete steps, over our capacity to hold our relatedness to one another.

While concrete steps may be part of the plan, if we are too concerned about immediate action and outcomes, we realize only small changes. Some of us can remember or have had the opportunity to teach without high stakes test pressures. We have had the experience of observing the results of careful guidance and teaching of our students over time - at least three years. We know that the blossoming of the child is indifferent to speed. While there will always be procedures in place and an appreciation for outcomes, a well functioning school and classroom community remains focused on language, relatedness, and purpose.

RESPONSIBILITY

While we keep our meetings and conversations focused on language, relatedness, and purpose, we also keep in mind that the future depends on our individual accountability. It means that we see our own school as if we were its co-owners. In that way, we care for the well being of the whole and act as if creating the well being of the school is in our own personal heart and hands. When most of us in an organization take this kind of ownership, we aren't preoccupied by every one else's participation.

A few years ago a divorced friend was telling me that he had a revelation about the nature of his relationship to his ex-wife. He said, "You know when we were together we kept having this conversation where we each were sure we'd done our part. We were keeping tabs on our parts, you know 50-50. Then recently it occurred to me that a relationship isn't 50-50, it's 100-100." What my friend was telling me is that he realized that when we make a commitment, we make it with no expectation other than the expectation we have of ourselves. This becomes a promise we make that does not measure and barter. When we commit based on the choices of others, we eventually become cynical, judgmental, and helpless.

Most any staff has the capacity to create the school organization that makes us remember why we went into education to begin with. We do that by changing our language. By changing our language we can have new conversations. By having new conversations, we create the capacity to make ourselves healthier individuals, our students happier and more receptive to learning, and our schools a joy to walk into.

QUESTIONS

In the past we may have had a tendency to focus on test scores, the budget, or the central or local school administration. While mandates and regulations are problems, we need to see that they are really symptoms of something deeper. What is actually happening is the fragmentation of the way in which individuals are accountable to the community. The real intent of engaging the school community is to shift the context we use to solve problems and take action. It is a shift in thinking, in being, and in belief. Those three shifts create the shift in the way we use language and finally create the conditions where traditional forms of action can finally make a difference.

Before we shift our thinking, we ask questions like:

How do we get teachers to be more accountable?

How do we get one another on board? How can we change one another? How much will it cost and how will we get the money?

What new policy will move our interests forward?

These questions tend to build resistance. So how do we create new questions that have the power to make a difference? Questions that engage people to one another? Peter Block, author of *The Answer to How is Yes; Acting on What Matters*, suggests we change the nature of the conversation by asking people from the beginning, to speak to one another about the value they see in a particular venture or discussion (How valuable do you plan for this meeting to be?), the risk they are willing to take in a particular venture (How much risk are you willing to take in this activity?), a statement about their willingness to participate (How participative do you plan to be?) and a commitment to the extent they are willing to invest (To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?). The conversation around questions like these create transparency and help move things forward.

From there, we need questions that confront us with our freedom and invite us to co-create the future as a possibility (What did we come here to create together?), questions that help us engage one another (What are the crossroads you face as an individual? What are the crossroads we face as a school community?), and questions that re-center us in the gratitude of one another (What are the gifts we have received from one another?).

Most of all, it is the way we engage one another that will keep us focused, but not in a hurry, as we redefine the way we live in our schools.

LEADERSHIP

To redefine the way we live with one another in our schools, we need to think about leadership in a different way. This requires that our administrative and teacher-leaders create experiences for the group that in and of themselves are the very examples of our desired future – these are experiences in which accountability and commitment are available to every participant at every moment. The role then of the leadership team is to produce engagement in such a way that creates accountability – where teams care for the well-being of the whole and make promises with that in mind.

While this may sound contradictory, it is not helpful to hold the leader responsible for assuring that plans are implemented and outcomes met. For engagement and transformation to work, we cannot afford to continue to see the leadership in our schools as either benevolent monarchs or patriarchal parents. Those models lead us to passivity. We want to move toward partnering relationships and away from parenting relationships, toward a web of leadership and away from the hierarchical model. Therefore, the task of the leadership team is to move away from directive behavior and mandates and to care more about the experience of the individuals in the school. This means that the leadership team must hold the paradoxical space for community and accountability. Therefore the team is held to two tasks:

- To create a context that nurtures an alternative future – one based on inclusiveness and hospitality.
- To initiate conversations that shift our experience in a way that brings people together, that looks at the nature of questions that are used to engage people as they come together.

ACCOUNTABILITY

When most members of a team are engaged, it means that there can be a shift in caring for the well being of the whole school. That is how we define accountability. Will every person enroll and become accountable? Of course not, but those who choose not to need to understand that they must not get in the way of those who are engaged. The best teachers know this. In those classrooms, teachers work to engage every child. Even so, there may be some children that will want to disrupt or simply not engage. The master teacher includes that child at every appropriate opportunity and focuses on those students who have decided to be held accountable, those who make the classroom a place that is fun and engaging. In other words, those who choose not to be engaged and accountable will continue to be part of the group, but must not get in the way of those who move the school forward.

Once it is clear that most teachers are engaged in the well being of the whole, it is the leadership task to hold the space between the definition of the issue and its impact. We do not need a better definition of the issue or a better plan. We need the issue and the plan accompanying it to have more of an impact. That's where engagement comes in.

ENGAGEMENT

While private school Montessorians are not exempt from the implications of answering to a small hierarchical system, public school Montessorians, as members of large and unwieldy systems, are called to realize that engagement triggers the choice to be accountable for those things for which we can have power even if we have no control. We have tremendous power in our own individual schools, even though we have no control over the mandates we are handed by the board, the government, or the administration.

We engage when we take on the ownership of our schools, even though someone else may be in charge. We commit when we realize we are in a 100-100 relationship, not a 50-50 one. Engagement occurs when we recognize the primal nature of our relatedness, when we are enrolled in possibility, when we value the diversity of thinking and allow ourselves to wrangle with that in an atmosphere of trust. Engagement changes schools through an atmosphere of

invitation rather than mandate. It is the way in which our language changes based on our willingness to shift our thinking, being, and believing. The new leadership is restorative and produces energy rather than depleting it. The new leadership creates accountability as it confronts us with our freedom. Engagement is the way in which we bring true democracy into being.

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