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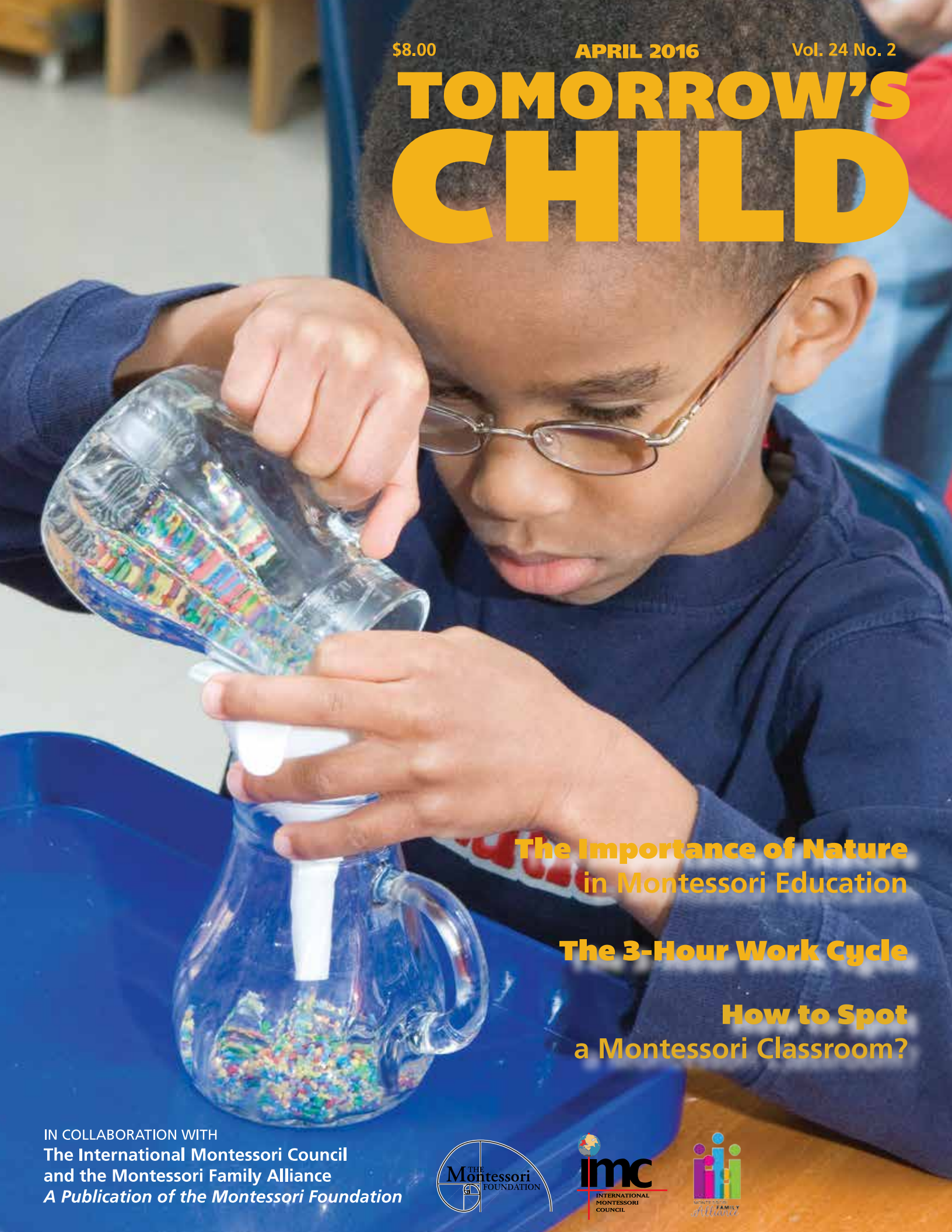
TOMORROW'S CHILD



The Importance of Nature in Montessori Education

The 3-Hour Work Cycle

How to Spot a Montessori Classroom?

IN COLLABORATION WITH
The International Montessori Council and the Montessori Family Alliance
A Publication of the Montessori Foundation

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU HAVE ENTERED A MONTESSORI SCHOOL?

by K.T. Korngold

I have visited many schools over my years as a parent, educator, and CEO of CME|NY. There are a few key clues that I look for to help me gauge how the school is doing on the Montessori spectrum. I'm happy to see Community Playthings™ furniture, the clean lines and clear maple wood create a natural inviting background for all the beautiful materials; I love to see the demure Pink Tower standing at attention, the vibrant span of Color Tablets spread against a white mat, the silvery glow of the Sensorial Bells lined up along a window sill; I delight when I see a collection of genuine fossils, the long extended length of a colorful Timeline of Life stretched across the floor, the gorgeous green of Botany Charts. I hope to notice a cozy place for community meetings and gatherings, where children or teens can comfortably sit, sprawl, or loll. But even without all that, I look for other indications to inform me whether or not this environment is working effectively as a Montessori community.

I start my assessment in the hall. With their primary function being conductors of transitions, hallways are places that either bustle with comings and goings or sit fallow in silent emptiness. With their wide stretches of long walls, hallways create opportunities that do not exist in others part of the school buildings, and often there is a strong desire to fill them with artwork, inspiration, color. Just as Montessori classroom environments reflects a simple, clean organization, I hope the halls are restrained in their design. Certainly, there is a need for children's chairs or benches, strategically placed where students may need to wait. Adult-size seating makes a natural place for visitors to remove their shoes before entering a classroom. I want to see children's own artwork, hung at child's eye level; I'm pleased when I see plants growing, a collection of shells, stones, branches in a vase, nests, etc., all bringing the inspiration and peace of the natural world within the internal borders of the school. When there is a display of artwork, created by the community to reflect the vision and mission of the school itself (a wall mural, quilt, collage), something unique and handmade, I know I am seeing an attestation to the love of the community for the school they call their own.

If you sense placards are talking to you from the walls, that is a signal that their messages may not be getting to the children. It does reveal who makes the rules in the school and who has to follow them. Maria Montessori called her first school Case dei Bambini. It was a name that reflected her vision of a habitat specifically for children to learn and thrive, one that was dedicated to them and also of them. The children themselves were central to the community. Their contributions mattered to the whole, no matter how small or young, they helped maintain and sustain it. How do we set up environments that send that message to the children and families who walk our halls everyday? Here are more questions to consider as you make your way through the school.

Take a look at the artwork. Is it all clumped according to categories or prescribed projects with the similar pieces repeated one after another with only slight variations? Or is it displayed like it might be in a gallery with a diversity of artists, ages, and medium all represented, including young and old, a range of proficient and developing artists? Who is the artwork for? Is it hung to catch a child's eye or at taller levels to impress the adult? Does it celebrate process or only final product?

How about ground rules? Are there inspiring regulations, clever sayings outlining good behavior, catchy wisdoms proclaiming how to be your best? Or are ground rules written by children themselves and formed by the community each year. One of my favorites comes from a community meeting: "Sometimes when you get bumped, I didn't do it on purpose."

How are the children greeted in the morning? One of our faculty members from California told me that she was able to transform the culture of her charter school by the simple act of instituting a daily greeting with each and every student at the entrance to the school. One fellow came in earlier than all the rest. Once she realized he arrived so early, she made sure to be present by that time in order to meet him. As she did with all the students, she crouched down to his level, looked him in the eye, shook his hand, and welcomed him by name. He liked the quiet of the school in the early morning. Sometimes he helped the teachers set up; sometimes he ate the oatmeal breakfast; sometimes he rested in the sofa in her office. She knew it was important to be at the door each day. After she made it her mission to do so, she measured her accomplishments by the mornings she met that singular goal. She didn't know until he had graduated that he had been homeless.

Does it matter when some children arrive early or late? What are the consequences for them? Are they marked

tardy and lose points against their overall strengths as a student? Do they wander into the classroom not knowing where to go or what to do? The time of arrival is seldom in the child's control. Yet, when we punish or call out a child for being tardy, we may set in motion a series of unintended consequences or anxiety that may result in more unwelcome behavior. If the children are being greeted at the entrance by the head and then met at the door of their classroom by a teacher or teacher's assistant, the students feel welcome, accepted, known. When we welcome our children without reference to their clothing, appearance, or mood, it sends a very important message of acceptance, "Hello Freeha, I'm glad to see you today. Good Morning." A warm, unconditional reception is a gift of acceptance we can offer our children each and every day spent with us.

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What if a child comes so late each day that she misses morning meeting? Is the school flexible enough to postpone group time until she arrives? What if the teacher is eager to start individual lessons and can't cut into that important work time by waiting at the door for each student to arrive. One of our faculty members added "greeter" to the children's jobs, so they take on that important responsibility and become engaged in the life lessons of grace and courtesy by shaking a friend's hand, giving a welcoming hug, helping a latecomer walk into the space with a sincere feeling of acceptance.

We all know well enough that Montessori environments don't teach from the walls. We don't use posters or themes to announce our plans or set forth the outcomes of the semester. But where do you look, then, to see learning happening? If I can't see the teacher, and I can't locate the teacher's desk, I know if I get down to child's level and observe, it is very likely that I will see learning in that environment.

I see learning when different types of activities are occurring at the same time, as I did at a recent visit to the New York Montessori Charter School, when I looked in on an early childhood classroom. I saw children engaged in small groups while others worked individually. Students had materials on mats on the floor, while others sat at tables. One student was walking around, in search of a new activity to select; another moved slowly, back and forth across the room, as she carried the red rods, one at a time, to her mat. I saw one young boy wandering—watching, observing, finding his place, learning from what he saw and heard. A Common Core Observer might give this classroom very low marks because the students were not doing the same thing at the same time, the teacher was not giving direct lessons, and some children were "wandering" around. But I am satisfied knowing there is great value here, not only in this period of observation but also for the long term, as these children move toward their own futures. Dr. Montessori said: "Under the urge of nature and according to the laws of development, though not understood by the adult, the child is obliged to be serious about two fundamental things… the first is the love of activity…The second fundamental thing is independence." (*What You Should Know About Your Child*)

I see learning when I am privileged to catch work left out with a child's name marking that it is still in use. Common Core dictates that we teach persistence. Is this even a quality we can teach, or is it rather a quality we encourage? I think of persistence as the will to return to solve a problem, even when the answer is not yet forthcoming or is out of reach. Webster's dictionary defines persistence as "1) the quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people; 2) the state of occurring or existing beyond the usual, expected, or normal time." Consider for a moment your image of someone pondering a difficulty problem. Is that person sitting still, silently, at a desk? Or is he stoking his beard, pacing the hallway, walking the length of the room? Is she talking to herself, scribbling notes on a pad, going for long walks in nature? Benjamin Franklin was not at his desk when he experienced electricity in the lightening storm. Madame Curie was not sitting still when she discovered radium; Nicholaus Copernicus was not in school when he realized that the earth revolves around the sun. In the *Secret of Childhood*, Montessori said, "Movement, or physical activity, is thus an essential factor in intellectual growth, which depends upon the impressions received from outside. Through movement we come in contact with external reality, and it is through these contacts that we eventually acquire even abstract ideas."

Solving problems takes time. The work may not be finished in a single work session between the announcements of period bells; it may not be completed in a day or even in a week. Persistence is the act of returning to something difficult, even after time has passed. And sometimes our brain needs to take a break; our bodies ache to move in order for us to break through and solve the problem. When you see movement in a Montessori environment, you will see it is something that is accepted, not something that is squashed. As Maria Montessori said, "The task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility and evil with activity." (*The Montessori Method*)

Is there work on the shelves that is open and available for the children to discover, select, and self-correct? Or is all work handed to them on worksheets that require an adult to check? Is work graded solely by the adults? Or are there other forms of assessments: peer assessment, peer feedback, self-assessment, work groups? Do children participate in their own conferences? Do students make

decisions about their learning, their goals for the day, week, and year? If children want to work, are they permitted to come back into the classroom later, during lunch, or recess to finish a project or read, or be away from the group? Are adults available and willing to be there for them outside of their mandated work schedule? If a child doesn't want to participate in a group meeting, is there a safe space for that student to be without feeling chiding, embarrassed, ridiculed —a vantage point where the child can observe and absorb without disturbing the others. Not all children can tolerate group time (or sustain as much group time) as others. Are there wiggle chairs for children who don't yet have the muscle tone to sit still or sit for long? Are there Brain Gym™ tools to help children warm up their brains to get ready to learn? Is there heavy activity for children who need sensory input? Are there havens for children who get overloaded or overwhelmed? Are there opportunities for children to move with self-selected activity: yoga cards; movement cards; movement activities; a dedicated movement shelf?

Are the students considered responsible enough to go out into the hallway by themselves? I know plenty of licensors who don't allow children to be anywhere, unmonitored. This is a shame, of course, and another battle we have to fight with state regulators to demonstrate that children can be safe with freedom within limits in the hallways and grounds of their own schools. Are the children permitted to start work without assistance or a presentation? If you came into a class and the teacher was not present, would the students be idle or working, engaged, self-motivated? When I visited a class at PS 31, the children were all playing drums: pounding out to each other in a call and response pattern. It wasn't until five minutes had passed that I realized the teacher had stepped out into the hallway—she was waiting for me, and I had slipped in before her. Just as Maria Montessori's children did that wondrous morning in the Casa dei Bambini, these children had started their work without her. As Dr. Montessori stated, "The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say the children are now working as if I did not exist." (*The Montessori Method*)

How are the children called to attention? Does the teacher make a sound? Count backwards from 10? Flicker the lights? Clap her hands? Threaten to take something away if behavior doesn't cease? In some states, it is illegal to threaten children to withhold food, water, snack, to withhold recess—and yet, schools do this all the time as a way to manage behavior. There are many other methods to announce transitions, change behaviors, and/or modify the tone in a room.

Our lab school, the Montessori Children's Center, serves children as young as three months old. Sometimes we hear crying from our infant room or from the hallway. There is a baby expressing herself, asking for something, vocalizing an unmet need. Our guides listen, attend, respond. After a few days of caring for each child, they can recognize the different sounds each child makes to signify her need: hunger, sleepy, wet, wanting to be comforted, asking to be held. When I hear an adult yelling in a school environment, I ask the question: What is the unmet need that is causing this loud piecing sound? If a teacher or administrator is yelling at students that sends a message that someone's needs are unmet. What has happened that the environment has unraveled so much that an adult needs to raise her voice at the children? Are the developmental needs of the children going unrecognized? Is the urge for movement being suffocated? Is the natural desire for socialization being ignored? What is being missed? I look to the environment first to make a change—not to the child. I look to the ways we interact with our children to help them develop inner control.

In a Montessori classroom, you might hear a soft chime rung by a teacher to signify a call to attention; you might see all the children stand, one at a time, with their hands on their hearts as they ready for the end of a work period. You might catch the soft swish of a rain stick turned upside down to announce a visitor at the door. At the Montessori School located in Wilton, Connecticut, I observed the gathering of the entire community for the monthly meeting. As the students and teachers streamed into the central hallway, the children spontaneously began to sing "Roots and Wings." As each person entered the community space, another voice joined the mix, until all children and staff were singing together.

Is the natural desire for socialization being ignored? What is being missed? I look to the environment first to make a change—not to the child. I look to the ways we interact with our children to help them develop inner control.

At Yonkers Montessori Academy, I observed when the noise level increased a student went over to a shelf and began to play a very quiet music box. The class responded by lowering their voices. It was the students who were self-monitoring the comfort level of the sound in that classroom community.

We should not be yelling at our children in school for any reason. While it doesn't leave bruises, it is a form of violence that can have a lasting impression. Many children are sensitive to sounds; most people do not like to be yelled at by anyone. Unfortunately for all of us, yelling is not illegal in schools. In fact, some might consider yelling a safe alternative to a more aggressive form of punishment, which continues to be an available option,

legal for principals and school heads in many places. There are 19 states in this country where corporal punishment is permitted in schools. How deeply Montessori philosophy and practice has penetrated the culture of the school can be seen in the tools administrators and teachers use to manage behavior and inspire or control children.

At the CME|NY Administrator course, we enroll talented and highly experienced administrators who come from all over the country to attend our adult training facility to learn about becoming Montessori administrators. Some come for a three-day workshop, others attend a six-day week; many choose to complete the course for an AMS credential. Most of our participants have more degrees, certificates, and hours of professional development than I could even hope to achieve or accumulate. These are exemplarily leaders in their work and strongly dedicated to the children and teachers at their schools. But they lack one thing: they don't have a deep understanding of how to run a Montessori school because they have never studied Montessori as an Administrator: what it looks like; what it means; how to translate the rhetoric into real action; real direction; real orchestration. Our course offers these experienced administrators the opportunity to not only learn about Montessori practice but also how to bring the methods into the daily lives of the children, staff, and rituals of their school. They learn this by attending dynamic classes specifically designed for them, observing a variety of successful Montessori settings, with practical experience, and intensive interactions with other peers. They learn as our children learn, working peers, bantering with a mentor, conferring with other successful school leaders in a guided, practical, dynamic experience. Each class begins with an opportunity to bring the cohort to attention without traditional methods, led in rotation by each participant, as we do in our other teacher education courses. Each week finishes with a community meeting, a formal ritual of gratitude, and assessment, also led by the participants. Imagine if you come to our course with only a few tricks up your sleeve, you leave with many new tools in your Montessori Methods toolbox. Last summer, I was able to bring an entire audience to silence and attention at our Pathways to a Peaceful School Conference without touching the microphone, speaking, or creating a single sound.

How do you know if you are in a Montessori school? Look for that teacher—where is she? Can't you find her? If you can't identify the teacher right away, look toward the rug. Maybe she is silently sitting beside a child who is working; maybe she is taking observation notes from a stadium floor chair. We consider our teachers to be facilitators or guides; they are not at the center, but rather moving on the periphery, watching, observing, setting up and maintaining the environment. It not their job to imbue knowledge in the children but rather to support them individually on their journey toward development and learning, as each moves individually throughout the classroom, stretching, and developing the inner force that governs and guides them. And we see the job of the Administrator to support that teachers in the development of this important work. Once you know what to look for, you can see that Montessori environments designed to assist in that natural growth require a culture that accepts these key elements in order for the children, staff, and administrator to succeed. When all those who contribute to making that culture work together, the school thrives and you know you are in a Montessori school community.

K.T. Korngold, MFA (Infant and Toddler, Administrator) is CEO of the Center for Montessori EducationNY, the first TEP to offer a Course for an Infant and Toddler AMS Credential and the first TEP to offer a course for an Administrator AMS credential. Our Infant and Toddler course runs on a year-round schedule, our Early Childhood course is a summer intensive held at the college of New Rochelle, where CMENY also shares in a partnership program leading to a Master of Montessori in Early Childhood and State Teaching certificate. Our annual Pathways to a Peaceful School Conference is held in July. CMENY also provides monthly professional development opportunities for new and experienced teachers and administrators. K.T. has been a frequent contributor to *Tomorrow's Child* and *Montessori Life*. She has been involved in the Montessori Children's Center in White Plains, New York, the Whitby School Infant Room, and the Montessori Middle School in Norwalk, Connecticut.

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