

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

A Montessori School Leader and a Montessori Paradigm

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Montessori school leaders play a crucial role to assure Montessori is practiced with authenticity. This article will show how strong leadership has the potential to shift the cultural paradigm in a school toward a practice in line with the best quality high fidelity Montessori education.

Montessori schools singled out as quality schools are often those where their educators are well-prepared adults with the best quality Montessori training. While I wouldn't disregard this premise, I will make the point that high fidelity Montessori takes place in well-prepared environments within the classrooms, as well as the outdoor areas and within the way the entire school operates.

A well-prepared educator thrives in a school environment in which the Montessori principles are at the foundation of the institution's practices. Does your school operate on Montessori principles? Educators are often torn between the desire to follow an authentic Montessori approach, or to follow certain school practices which may not align with Montessori principles. Educators and school leaders can be easily drawn to defensively proving academic performance and rigour for the parents and community or singling out certain children who have been "exceptional" learners. These are common conventional and cultural forces which are difficult to entirely shed and may dominate the thinking of many trained Montessori educators.

To shield our schools and classrooms from a constantly encroaching culture that has been so well embedded into our own psyche requires hard work and attention. The Montessori paradigm sits on practices which are uncompromisingly based on the Montessori principles. Our prepared environments will not function as intended unless there is freedom of choice and movement with uninterrupted opportunities for work and learning, mixed age groupings, and prepared educators who understand the unique relationship between the child and the adult.

Consider how quickly our focus may change the minute some parents question how their child may be "falling behind academically" or becomes concerned about their child's reading level. This may lead us to control measures and frustrations which alter our relationships and strategies with children. Our Montessori toolbox may suddenly be littered with quick-fix strategies that we swore we would never use. After all, most of us have been educated as passive learners under the authority of an educator who has been prepared to deliver a curriculum and measure each child's progress on some arbitrary scale.

Adult transformation to adhere to a Montessori paradigm is the work of every educator and, most importantly, must also be the commitment of every Montessori school leader. This work is never complete as the ideals on which we base our education model are inspirationally high, providing us with our “North Star” to direct personal transformation toward high fidelity practice.

The leader is most effective when there’s a clear understanding of the Montessori principles, as well as exemplary practices on an administrative level. The school as an institution is a ‘prepared environment’ providing freedom and choice, with opportunities for work and learning, like our classrooms. The prepared adult in the classroom inspires learners and offers lessons at the right time according to individual needs and readiness. The same goes for the school leader – guiding each member of staff to thrive as a Montessori educator. This approach to leadership requires a shift of thinking away from control and authority and towards an attitude of humility and service. Regardless of our character, the leader is often challenged by a culture which defines ‘the principal is the boss’.

Personal transformation for the leader begins with self-reflection while considering Montessori’s principles of freedom and discipline, planes of development, observation, and autonomous learning within prepared environments. How can this be incorporated into one’s leadership? We must be willing to take this journey not as an event, rather with our entire school community on board. The leader must be ready for the challenges and a willingness to set a clear vision. Setting opportunities for personal and professional development for all staff members, and ideally for parents as well, will help set the school get closer to the Montessori paradigm and high-fidelity practices. Montessori schools have a huge advantage over many other schools in that their pedagogical foundation, principles and practices are so well defined in the rich resources found in Maria Montessori’s own books, as well as the excellence found in well-delivered teacher training. The school leader draws on these resources and provides meaningful experiences on a regular basis to draw one towards Montessori practice and away from some traditional practices which lure us away, especially when the going gets tough.

While a school administrator may well be the catalyst to assist the educators and support staff towards high fidelity practice, the administrator may also be an obstacle to genuine Montessori practice. Administrators are just as susceptible, if not more so, to the pressures set forth by demanding parents and an incongruent expectation by state or government education authorities demanding we “prove” we are educating children properly. This perhaps is the administrator’s greatest challenge.

More administrators are being hired without Montessori training and therefore it becomes crucial a community can support the process of learning and transformation of the administrator. Learning the Montessori method through a quality training course and/or The AMI Montessori Administrators Course are excellent beginnings as these courses are founded on core Montessori principles.

Armed with this learning the administrator leads a cultural shift which does not succumb to conventional practices. The school leader is the custodian of quality practice, nurturing and guiding the school community with unwavering adherence to Montessori principles. Transforming thinking and steering our community in the direction of genuine Montessori practice, will be the catalyst to build the Montessori paradigm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Conway has been involved in the field of education for over 40 years. Since his first leadership position at the age of 24 in a small government school in the US, he has served in different capacities with schools in Colombia, New Zealand, and for over 20 years in Australia. Bill received his BAEd, in Oregon (US) and has completed a Master's in Business Empathy (alternate MBA) in Australia. His graduate studies included counselling and bilingual education.

His most recent school leadership position for over 13 years was in a Montessori school in Sydney where he fully embraced Montessori education and its opportunities to define new leadership practices. He co-authored and now presents the AMI Montessori Administrators Certificate Course around the world. He is on the [Board of Directors for Montessori Schools and Centres Australia](#), AMI's Affiliate in Australia and actively supports schools in the country

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