

THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN TEACHERS

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From NAMTA's Whole-School Montessori Handbook

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This model of developmental stages for teachers is influenced by the work of Lilian Platz on teacher development, Malcolm Knowles on adult learning and numerous interviews with Montessori teachers, heads of school, and teacher trainers.

Every Montessori teacher is a unique individual with his/her specific personality traits, skills and potentialities. Yet, in observing teachers over time, we can discern some commonalities related to teachers' stages of development. The stages outlined in this model are intended as a framework for understanding how teachers grow and develop. The years of experience given for each stage are very general. In some cases, a teacher's development may become arrested at a particular stage, regardless of the number of years in the classroom. Sometimes circumstances may cause a teacher to revert to an earlier stage. For example, a seasoned Stage IV teacher who moves to a new school will exhibit some of the characteristics of a new Stage I teacher.

A teacher's development actually begins with formal training. However, the teacher's ongoing development occurs within the context of the school. Awareness of the stages of development for teachers helps the head of school to more sensitively support the professional development of each individual teacher.

Stage 1. Neonate (first year)

This stage is very much like that of the human neonate—that first fragile period when the newborn is adjusting to life in a new environment outside the womb—in this case, outside the womb of the training stage.

The ultimate task of the neonate stage is survival. For the infant, it means being able to breathe, digest, and accommodate one's basic systemic functions to an independent existence in a new environment which is infinitely larger and more complex than the old one. For the teacher, it means making the ideal real. The new teacher must habituate within the new environment of the school by developing independent, autonomous patterns or habits of practice in response to the reality of the classroom and school.

Characteristics

Idealistic. The new teacher is imbued with a vision of the child's potential and convinced of the truth of the Montessori principles.

Drawn toward application. As in the second period of the three-period lesson, the teacher wants to do it herself and believes that it will work.

Vulnerable. Frequently feels overwhelmed by the responsibility undertaken. Fears rejection and failure and is very sensitive to perceived criticism.

Needs

Freedom without abandonment. Must have opportunities to do it by the book (or by the album!), to repeat, and to engage in trial and error.

Ongoing orientation to the new school culture. Guided orientation must be related to issues and circumstances as they arise. The principle of "isolation of difficulty" is very important in the neonate stage.

Support

Protection from overwhelming stresses. Recognize that the major focus must be to establish an intimate relationship with the children in her class. Remove as many obstacles as possible (intervention with a demanding parent, no assignment of faculty committees, etc.).

One key personal relationship (head of school or seasoned faculty member) that provides regular dialogue about the actual implementation of theory into practice.

Hands-on support with practical tasks such as material making, record keeping, ordering supplies, etc.

Seminars or dialogue with trainers to isolate aspects of implementation. The new teacher also values connecting with other new Montessori teachers to more freely share successes and concerns. (E-mail, chat rooms, and teleconferencing offer expanded opportunities.)

Stage II. Consolidation (2-5 years)

During Stage II the teacher begins to integrate the various skills related to her work with the children. She has internalised the theory and specific lessons and is no longer tied to the training album. She can individualize presentations while maintaining awareness of the whole class and is able to communicate effectively with parents.

The second-stage teacher has differentiated the various tasks and skills by isolating difficulties and is now weaving them into a whole practice. The task of the consolidation stage is fluidity—an integration of practice.

Characteristics

Classroom focus. The teacher's energy is primarily directed toward her own class.

Motivated and self-directed. Sets tasks and determines methods for herself.

Exhibits self-confidence and joy. This is a natural result of consolidation

Needs

Attention. There can be a tendency to ignore this seemingly self-sufficient teacher. This second-stage teacher needs specific feedback and dialogue that encourages reflection.

Stability. Consolidation requires the opportunity to complete a three-year cycle with a group of children and begin a new cycle.

Directed Input. This teacher is eager to focus more deeply on one aspect related to the classroom. This focus is often shaped by a specific problem, but the teacher can also be encouraged to examine work that is going very well.

Support

Continued education related to Montessori. Refresher courses, workshops, seminars.

Observations of other Montessori classrooms. Particularly at same level.

Collegial dialogue. At Stage II, the teacher is less vulnerable and ready for more "give and take," particularly when discussions are focused around specific elements of classroom practice.

Collaborative discussion of expectations and goals (with head and/or seasoned teacher) During consolidation, the teacher is asking, "What should I expect of myself? the children?, the parents?"

Stage III: Renewal (5-7 years)

Once a teacher has achieved consolidation, the head (of school) can mistakenly believe that the teacher has reached "maturity." Instead, we need to recognize another stage in the teacher's ongoing development.

Stage three is a very critical period in the development of the teacher and marks a major transition point. During this stage, there is the risk of losing good teachers in two ways: 1) They burn out and leave the classroom; or 2) They burn out and remain in the classroom in a state of stasis.

Positive navigation of this stage results in renewal - a rededication to the work with a deeper understanding of self and of Montessori.

Characteristics

A new period of vulnerability. The teacher frequently doubts herself or rationalizes what she cannot resolve.

Danger of rigidity. Consolidation can become mere routine and the teacher's mode of practice may resemble "automatic pilot".

"Difficult." The stage-three teacher may exhibit behaviour perceived as argumentative or intransigent.

Lack of enthusiasm for work. The teacher may communicate discouragement, a feeling of being "tired of doing the same things", or even talk of changing careers.

In this critical stage, the teacher is asking difficult and essential questions about herself and her work. Where is this going? What are the possibilities? What is my potential? What are the potential developments for me in this field?

Needs

Define self as professional in a broader sense. The teacher needs to understand the larger context of her work.

Discussion of career path options. What are opportunities for advancement? Is advancement possible while remaining in the classroom?

Invest in further study, training, or education. Renewal requires a conscious and personal investment in further developing oneself as a teacher.

Support

Opportunity to experience leadership in the school community. Examples: facilitate faculty meetings, design and lead a parent discussion program, chair a committee, organise a faculty study group.

Exposure to wider variety of experiences with community professionals. The stage-three teacher finds involvement with other professional educators by participating in activities and organizations such as a community study group of Montessorians, a network of teachers and health care professionals focused on the ADHD child, an ecological field study class for teachers, etc.

Participation in regional and national Montessori conferences. The teacher may be asked to write up proceedings and make a summary report to faculty or write an article for the newsletter.

Observations across the continuum. By observing children in all the levels within the school and in other Montessori schools, the teacher sees more clearly how her own work fits into the larger patterns of the development of the child.

Teacher prepares a five-year plan for her own professional development. The head uses her plan as part of ongoing evaluation to set priorities and goals and provides concrete financial support.

Stage IV: Seasoned Teacher

To be “seasoned” means to develop character and resiliency by experiencing challenges and weathering change. For a teacher, this stage is akin to renewing vows. Having gone through the critical stage of renewal, this teacher is now rededicated to her work at a deeper level and with a heightened sense of purpose.

Characteristics

Submerging personal striving. The seasoned teacher is not struggling to prove herself and is consequently more open to ideas, questions, and critiques.

Less need for extrinsic feedback. Motivation and reward are deeply internalised.

Asks the deeper questions in every scenario. Initiates discussion and centres decision-making around key principles and values.

Needs

Opportunities for outreach. The seasoned teacher views her work as extending beyond her own class or school.

Creative opportunities. At Stage IV, the teacher's experience and deeper understanding find creative manifestation in new developments and designs.

Support

Enhanced opportunities for leadership in wider arenas. Examples: deliver an address or present a workshop at a regional/national conference, lead curriculum development efforts, teach a college course, participate in long-range planning, provide leadership on local and national committees.

Sabbatical/release time. The school recognizes the value of the seasoned teacher to the school, but also to the larger educational community. It actively supports the teacher by providing time and resources for intensive study, outreach, project development research.

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