



The Montessori OBSERVER

Safe Words

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IMS Mission in Kurdistan

In September, 2011, Lee Havis conducted a consultation visit to Kurdistan, Northern Iraq, to look into developing IMS Montessori education in that unique region of the middle east. The visit was sponsored by a local investment and development company, RANJ, which is taking an interest in helping to enlarge educational opportunities for the growing number of young families in this area.

During his visit, Lee met with government officials, as well as faculty, staff, and other educators associated with universities in the two major cities of the region, Erbil and Dohok. Erbil is the capital city, which is both ancient (6,000 years BC) and modern as the fast growing hub of trade and commerce in the region. Dohok is several hours drive from Erbil, located in a remote mountainous region near the border with Syria and Turkey. Although Kurdistan is technically a part of Iraq, it functions with considerable autonomy under the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

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Montessori in Macedonia

In 1991, Macedonia entered a new phase of development when it became an independent nation born out of the chaotic breakup of the former Yugoslavia. In that same year, **Bozana Markovska** established the *Izvorche Montessori School* in Skopje, the capital city of this new country. The original intent for her school was to care for her own children and a few others in the local neighborhood. However, her daughter, **Elena de Duran** (Markovska), soon became involved to considerably expand its role and vision. Now, the school employs 12 staff members serving a total enrollment of 70 children, aged 18 months to 6 years of age.

Elena sees the school as a means to contribute to wider knowledge and use of Montessori education in the region. In 2003, she founded the *Southeastern European Montessori Association* (SEMA) to support this effort throughout Macedonia, as well as the surrounding countries of Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Hungary. Elena is also seeking to develop the "Character Teaching" (CT) project as a member of its consultation board. IMS is sponsoring this project to help overcome long-term cultural poverty by providing suitable Montessori learning experiences for low-income families.

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Children practicing writing letters of Macedonian language alphabet at the *Izvorche Montessori School* in Skopje, Macedonia

IMS Montessori Workshops in Philippines

In 2011, Lee Havis, IMS executive director, conducted two Montessori teacher training workshops in the Philippines. Their purpose was to present the IMS technology to interested educators and to open up opportunities for its wider use with children in this country. The first workshop was held in Cebu in June. (See *Observer*, September, 2011) The later one was in Manila on September 17-18, 2011. These first ever IMS workshops in the Philippines also allowed Lee to visit schools and personally meet key persons in the local Montessori community.

While in the Manila area, Lee discussed the *Character Teaching* (CT) project with various government and community leaders. He explained the basic purpose of this project to overcome long-term cultural poverty by bringing about the child's true normal character development. He said, "I was very encouraged by the interest of those I spoke with to improve the care and education of poor children in the many low-income families in the country. There is, however, a serious obstacle to overcome in the current rigid curriculum approach and dependency on authoritarian adult control."

Lee pointed out a number of obstacles to operating the CT project in the Philippines. He said, "IMS true natural Montessori teaching is very different from the typical culture type Montessori teaching which

has become so widespread and accepted in the country. Nevertheless, I believe that the IMS true natural type would gain support once it is seen in actual practice with children."

Lee presented several proposals to develop IMS Montessori teaching in the Philippines. The focus of these is to train teachers in the practical use of IMS technology and to provide suitable equipment and consultation support to assure effective ultimate results in the centers serving poor children.



Lee Havis gives lesson with low-tech Montessori materials at school in Bulacan, Philippines (September, 2011)

Safe Words

by Lee Havis

"Since children are so eager to learn and so burning with love, an adult should carefully weigh all the words he speaks before them."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Secret of Childhood*, p.104

The IMS technology of Montessori teaching provides 20 protocols to guide your actions with children in harmony with laws of nature. It also includes a number of specific *safe words* to control your language while using the verbal techniques, *clear direction* and *questioning*.

With the verbal technique, *reflective language*, you don't need safe words because here you are only repeating the exact same words the child says to you. Safe words also don't apply to ordinary descriptive language, such as "This is red" and "A fraction is a part of a whole." Here, you control language by keeping your statements as factual and truthful as possible.

Safe words are designed to replace various harmful language with children, such as: (1) *negative* ['No', 'That's not the way'], (2) *judgmental* ['You are not doing that right'], (3) *repressive* ['Stop that'], (4) *manipulative* ['You don't want to hurt Michael, do you?'] or (5) *threatening* ['If you can't work there quietly, you will have to move somewhere else']. Replacing this destructive verbal expression is especially important around young children who are absorbing language into their whole personality for life.

Absorbing Language

"It is the child who 'absorbs' language. The reality of this absorption is something deep and puzzling..."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.110

Before the age of six, children are in a sensitive period for acquiring language. During this period, they instinctively absorb what they hear from others. In fact, by the age of two, they have normally already internalized the basic syntax, pronunciation, and meaning of their first native language. Beyond that, young children can still absorb and internalize other language patterns in a spontaneous manner up until about the age of six.

The young child's absorbent mind takes in language as a whole, without discriminating between behavior and being. So, for example, if the child hears negative judgment directed towards his behavior, he naturally internalizes this as blame and guilt into his whole being as well.

Guilt and Blame

"...children...do not understand us, they cannot defend themselves from us, and they accept whatever we tell them. They not only accept abuse, but feel guilty whenever we blame them."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Secret of Childhood*, p.151

In conventional education, the teacher's customary approach is to point out mistakes, often under the guise of "moral instruction" or "discipline." Unfortunately, young children instinctively internalize this correction as blame and guilt into their whole basic self-image.

Montessori teaching aims for a more positive interaction with children, to help them correct their own mistakes. However, we still tend to unconsciously project harmful language on children which is often disguised by such polite words as "please" and "thank you." To many, for example, phrases like "Please stop hitting Martha" or "Thanks for telling John 'sorry' for messing up his paper" seem positive even though they still violate the protocol *no negative attention to misbehavior*. Using safe words is a conscious way to keep your spoken words from interfering with the child's primary activity of concentrating on work with materials.

Spoken Words

"Children find it very hard to concentrate on spoken words, but they have no difficulty concentrating on objects."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Education and Peace*, p.80

Young children enter a state of true normal being by deeply concentrating on physical objects. This is possible because physical objects in the environment can be made to reflect the perfect order and harmony of laws of nature. By contrast, our spoken words don't have that same quality of concrete order and permanence. Ideally, therefore, we must exercise the power of silence by using only non-verbal techniques, such as *patient waiting* and *eye contact*.

Power of Silence

"A new type of mistress has been evolved; instead of facility in speech, she has to acquire the power of silence."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spont. Act. In Ed.* p.128

Montessori teaching follows the protocol *least amount of adult involvement* to carefully limit any unnecessary distraction from our personality presence in the environment. So, for example, the *least amount* protocol directs you to use the power of silence whenever possible to just passively observe the children from a distance. With misbehavior, however, you must usually exert some heavier polishing, such as by using the technique *reflective language*. If greater polishing is needed, you can employ even heavier verbal techniques, such as *clear direction* and *questioning*. For these, safe words help you

control any tendency to verbally scold or punish children in the process.

Scold and Punish

"...a deficient child...becomes more and more discouraged as the zealous teacher scolds and punishes him for his weakness and points out the radiant example of the strong."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Spont. Act. In Ed.*, p.317

Conventional teaching often condones and even recommends harsh, punitive reprimands to suppress serious misbehavior. In Montessori teaching, however, you must avoid this scold and punish approach by using positive language instead. Safe words give you the practical means to do this by replacing reactive negative language with effective positive alternatives.

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Lee Havis, Executive Director

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INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY

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To subscribe to this list, send an email to - intmonsoc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com, and then follow instructions to request placement on the list.

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Moment of Peril

by Lee Haviv

Transitions

In this *moment of peril*, extreme disorder breaks out just when the teacher calls the children to transition from individual work to final group meeting. During this transition, the children are supposed to put their work away and gather together in a group. Instead, they run wildly around the room. **See *Observer*, September, 2011.**

In any transition with children, there is a potential for confusion as they shift from one form of order to another. Here, the shift is from the order of handling materials to the order of putting work away and gathering together as a group. In this process, the supervising adult personality is the primary means of maintaining order. Unfortunately, the teacher's abrupt manner of starting transition, coupled with her wavering and uncertain behavior thereafter, creates a condition of severe abandonment and negativity.

The first issue to correct is the teacher's way of interrupting the whole group all at once. Whether she does this by ringing a bell or simply shouting "clean up time!" the effect is a clear violation of the protocol *Don't interrupt concentration*. The result of this group interruption is to trigger the reactive daily pattern of general chaos among the children. This mistake is only amplified by the teacher's later general abandonment of the children once the transition is under way.

Resolving the initial mistake of a total group interruption, you must approach children one-by-one instead in a calm and natural manner. For example, wait for some single child to look up at you. Then, call that child over to you, and, following the protocol *eye contact before talking*, give a simple *clear direction*, such as, "It's time to put work away. So, put your work away, and come over here and sit down."

In a similar manner, wait for other children to look up at you and give them the same direction as well. Soon, many children will be putting work away. However, if some children continue working, just gently approach them individually, if necessary.

When you first try out this new individual call to transition, it is possible that the group may still erupt into disorder for a few days, just out of a habit from the past. If this happens, use much heavy polishing to direct all the children to

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Negative Language

"Any form of violence, in speech or action, does irreparable harm to the child...beware of this tendency...to say 'Don't do this,' or 'You mustn't do that.'"

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.247

The protocol *no negative attention to misbehavior* directs you to control all negative language while dealing with misbehavior. Safe words help you do this by offering such phrases as "Take my hand" and "Where does this go?" instead of using such negative words as "No" and "Don't." Safe word alternatives are especially important to use while applying the heavy polishing technique, *clear direction*.

Clear Direction

"If there is some child who persistently annoys the others, the most practical thing to do is to interrupt him...Often a question will serve, such as, 'How are you, Johnny? Come with me, I have something for you to do.'"

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.254

The technique *clear direction* typically combines well with a string of other techniques to resolve many forms of serious misbehavior. The ordinary sequence of actions is to approach the misbehavior (*proximity*), get attention by touching (*distraction*), and then use *clear direction* with the safe word phrase, "Come over here. Let me show you something." At other times, the *clear direction* safe word phrase might be "Take my hand" or "Watch."

Safe words can be hard to remember when feeling intense stress and anger



Children engaged in place value math activity at the Izvorche Montessori School in Skopje, Macedonia

while dealing with misbehavior. Therefore, practice using such safe word phrases as "Come over here. Let me show you something" on a regular, routine basis for resolving less intense types of misbehavior. Then, you will more likely remember to use them when most needed with serious misbehavior.

Using safe words, you must also control your personality in other ways as well. For example, following the protocol *eye contact before talking*, make sure you have eye contact before applying the *clear direction* technique. Then, the child will more easily listen and obey the earnest words you may be using with this technique.

Earnest Words

"If a teacher sees that material being used in a way that will not attain its goal...if he shows a tendency to misbehave, she will check him with earnest words, not in a way that will seem to be a punishment for noise and disorder, but rather as an indication of her authority..."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Discovery of the Child* p.153

Controlling our personality not only means to use positive safe word language, but also to remove any other outward expression that is harsh, tense or fast. You must therefore always speak to children in a calm, relaxed manner, hopefully with a steady eye contact and friendly facial expression as well. In this way, you can most effectively employ earnest, serious words while using the *clear direction* technique.

Safe words also apply in the presentation of materials. Using them in this situation also helps you use fewer words as well so that children pay more attention to your actions rather than your spoken words.

Fewer Words

"The best instruction is that which uses the least words sufficient for the task. The fewer the words, the more perfect will be the lesson."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Discovery of the Child*, p.106

Conventional teaching typically relies on lengthy verbal instruction to explain the use and meaning of various concepts and materials. By contrast, Montessori teaching aims for fewer words so that children learn by watching what you do with your hands instead.

In showing materials, certain specific safe words guide your actions through each step of the presentation. With the sensorial introduction lesson, the safe words are: "Let me show you this." "Get a mat and bring it over here," "Watch," and "Would you like to do the next one?" In the nomenclature lesson, the safe words are: (1) "This is..." (2) "Show me..." and (3) "What is this?"

In every lesson with materials, safe words take you logically from the beginning with

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Moment of Peril

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immediately sit down in a circle. Applying the technique *repetition*, therefore, quickly move from one child to the next to give a *clear direction* to "sit down", "cross legs" and "fold hands in lap." If there are some children who are putting work away in an orderly manner, however, let them continue without interruption.

With all children sitting properly in the group, offer some general statement to focus attention on putting work away, such as, "Does anyone see anything out of place?" and "Go and put it away." In this process, keep giving the disorderly children the direction to "cross legs" and "fold hands in laps." [rule of thumb: If a child can't sit with legs crossed and hands folded in lap, he cannot safely be allowed to wander freely among other children and physical objects.]

Each time you restore general order, children will respond more normally as you initiate each day's transition. Eventually, the whole transition process will proceed from beginning to end in a calm and orderly manner.

Emotional Meltdown

4 1/2 year old Sally has suddenly started to obsess about small things. For example, she gets into a total emotional meltdown, crying hysterically when she is asked to get her lunchbox or find a spelling list to take home at the end of the day. She repeats her problem in a loud, screaming voice that is completely out of control. When I raise the issue with the mother, she blames the school and angrily denies any problem at home that might be involved in this behavior. What to do? Answer in **Observer**, March, 2012

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materials on the shelf, to the final stage of leaving the child to work with the materials on his own. Throughout this process, your words are constantly pointing children towards their own self-directed experiences on the environment.

Experiences on Environment

"Education...is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment."

Dr. Maria Montessori

from **Ed. For a New World.**, p.36-37

Montessori teaching primarily aims to control the environment, which in the beginning requires heavy polishing with such verbal techniques as *clear direction* and *questioning*. Safe words give you an extra assurance that you will be using these techniques with only positive, effective language. In this way, your Montessori teaching brings children all the way to the final stage 3 of true normal development. Then, you can retire to silently observe the children from a distant position where you are not using any words at all.

Montessori in Macedonia

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The Izvorche School serves children from diverse family backgrounds and nationalities. Although the Macedonia language is widely employed at the school, English as a second language is also included as well. Elena says they are planning to open a second school location in December, 2011.

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Messages to IMS

October, 2011
Cebu, Philippines

Hi Dr. Lee Havis,

Thanks a lot for keeping in touch! I would like to inform you that we will have an orientation with my preschool teachers to input the Montessori technology that you have discussed to us...Last Saturday... I announced and presented our certificates from the IMS workshop to all the parents. I also presented a brief overview regarding the IMS, its history and other vital information. (I got some info from your website)... We will also set a parents gathering after the semester break and inform the parents of how they can also be a part of their child's formation through the Montessori techniques and principles. I will inform you then regarding their feedback...

Thanks & Best Regards,
Sunshine Lim (Cebu, Philippines)

IMS Mission in Kurdistan

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At one meeting, **Dawood S. Atrushi**, PhD., vice-president of the University of Dohok, informed Lee about plans to set up an early childhood lab school on campus. Dr. Atrushi and Lee discussed the possibility of having this lab school designed for Montessori teaching in accordance with the guidance and support of IMS.

Lee indicated that the lab school could use English as its main language, while still serving the local community of participating families in their native Kurdish language. He said, "This project presents an interesting and worthwhile opportunity to study the practical use of IMS technology with children. However, it also presents some challenges to overcome as well, such as its relatively remote location and a surrounding Kurdish culture that may conflict in some ways with the highly unconventional philosophy of true natural Montessori teaching."