RUNNING IN CIRCLES: DILEMMAS, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE FREEDOM TO COPE

By Olivia Christensen, PhD

I remember it clearly. The first time I cried while teaching. It was the early spring of my first year in a new job at a highly sought-after Montessori preschool, which, though not directly stated, was essentially a lab school. The school shared its state-of-the-art building with an internationally known Montessori teacher education center and museum. The school's mission was to serve children and families from a wide variety of cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds; due to this mission, the school received significant attention and grant funding. My classroom had high ceilings, and sun poured in through skylights; the children and I worked on hardwood child-size tables and bamboo floors; hand-built wood shelving housed premier Montessori materials. The trade-off, however, was that we were often on display at a moment's notice. Prospective parents, Montessori teachers in training, foundation staff, government employees or officials, Montessori leaders, and other teachers frequently came through to observe my classroom in action. Sometimes I was prepared, and sometimes I was not. Some days were good days, and some days were absolutely crazy.

On this particular day, I was trying—and failing—to manage a group of preschool boys who were running in circles. Unknowingly, I had created an open ring in my classroom, one that they had discovered was perfect for running around … and around … and around. This ring spanned half the classroom and encircled three shelves that all pivoted out from a structural post. I was trying to redirect the children, suggesting activities for them to do, politely reprimanding their behavior, and splitting them up. But nothing worked.

At the time, I had a student teacher in my room. I remember the added pressure of having someone in the environment who had just been taught the theory and ideal image of a Montessori classroom and an ideal Montessori teacher. I did not want to disappoint her, but the boys running in circles were testing my abilities.

And then, to top it off, in walked my former Montessori trainer, the head of school, and staff members from one of the many foundations that funded the program. There they stood, watching from the big hallway windows and the open door, talking quietly amongst themselves while the boys ran, gaining momentum and increasing the whole class volume. At that moment, things started feeling pretty bad. But I didn't break. Not until recess. As I was taking a moment to breathe, while helping my assistant clean up from lunch, I heard screaming. One boy had thrown a log; though he wasn't aiming, it hit a girl and cut her just above her eye. She would likely need stitches.

There was my head of school and former trainer. There was the student teacher. There was the injured girl and her mom, who happened to be working part-time at the school. And there I was: exhausted, stressed, insecure, and embarrassed. It was the perfect recipe for a breakdown.

MY DILEMMA, THEN AND NOW

On that day, I faced what acclaimed teacher educator Magdalene Lampert called a "practical dilemma" (1985, p. 181) about managing my classroom. I felt I had run out of options, and I was struggling. As a Montessori teacher, I taught with the belief that children need to be independent and empowered. The idea of commanding them to sit, or telling them what to do and where to do it, was not even in the realm of possibility, especially at a school where I felt expected to portray the ideal image of a Montessori teacher. So I had been trying desperately to redirect, engage, and entice them to do anything but run in circles—to no avail. The dilemma was made worse by the presence of a student teacher and observers; I felt immense pressure to perform. I wanted to prove that I was a quality Montessori teacher, but the situation called that into question. I felt uncertain, insecure, and ultimately pushed to tears.

I had taken so seriously and literally Montessori's words regarding freedom of movement, children being self-directed, and guiding rather than instructing that I had not even considered taking charge in such a directive way.

I eventually resolved the running-in-circles issue, in part by rearranging the furniture, breaking up the circle so there was no longer such a great preschool indoor track. But I also received some advice from my former Montessori teacher trainer. She saw both my dilemma and my breakdown, and offered to help. "You gotta show 'em who's boss!" were her words of wisdom. This was mind-blowing for me, as ridiculous as that may sound. I had taken so seriously and literally Montessori's words regarding freedom of movement, children being self-directed, and guiding rather than instructing that I had not even considered taking charge in such a directive way. With belief statements highlighted during my teacher training such as "the teacher must be quiet and passive" (Montessori, 1967, p. 263) and "the educator does so little actual teaching with the child the center of activity, learning by himself, left free in his choice of occupation and in his movements" (Montessori, 1996/2005, p. 115), I had not, or could not, imagine myself as "the boss" of a classroom. My trainer's words were a revelation that felt both freeing and contradictory to my pedagogical knowledge.

The next day, I limited the lead runners' freedom of movement by providing them work spaces near me and moderated their work choices by offering two or three options I deemed appropriate. As they exhibited more responsibility over the following weeks, their freedoms began to grow. The strategies I explored with my new mindset, combined with a new classroom arrangement, made a world of difference. I had experienced a small but significant teaching breakthrough, similar to what Hargreaves and Tucker (1991, p. 494) characterized as "moments which display innovation, involve teacher ownership, show teacher control and have relevance to teachers' and students' needs." Instead of focusing solely on how to empower the children, I had empowered myself.

While I did learn a lot from that experience, it left a mark and remains a difficult memory that I will never forget. I am not ashamed that I started crying right there during the school day in front of all my higher-ups. They were understanding and comforting, and if anything, it made them realize that I really needed help. What I have come to understand is the pressure I felt and the limitations I had put on myself to try new things and experiment with teaching strategies beyond the Montessori ideal. Of course, many teaching strategies are learned from experience and trial and error. This day of chaos occurred during my third year of teaching, so I was still relatively new to the profession. However, upon reflection and after hearing stories from other Montessori teachers, I have come to question how the social identity of being a Montessori teacher constrains and limits teachers from trying out and taking up alternative teaching strategies and approaches that may meet both their needs and those of their students.

MONTESSORI IDENTITY

To better understand how I, and other Montessori teachers, experience dilemmas in teaching, it is necessary to provide a little context on Montessori teacher identity.

Becoming an authentic Montessori teacher is frequently referred to as a transformative, life-changing experience (e.g., AMI, 2018; AMS, n.d.; Cossentino, 2009; Lillard, 2005; NAMTA, n.d.). It is more than learning how to teach; it is entering into a new belief system and outlook on life. Once transformed and initially accepted into this lifestyle community, a teacher is expected to "talk the right talk, walk the right walk, and behave as if they believe and value the right things" (Gee, 2014, p. 24) to be recognized as an authentic Montessori teacher. Prominent Montessori

organization websites depict an image of a Montessori teacher as a person who believes passionately in the method, guides instead of directs, engages and collaborates with her students, and is able to create and sustain a calm and peaceful environment (AMI, 2018; AMS, n.d.; NAMTA, n.d.). While these descriptions exist in part to entice prospective teachers into training programs, they also shape the image of the ideal Montessori teacher, an image many feel determined to fulfill.

This ideology is not a new phenomenon. Montessori herself focused a significant amount of her work on teacher development and ways of being. She prescribed a process of spiritual preparation and wrote, "The educator must not imagine that he can prepare himself for his office merely by study, by becoming a man of culture. He must before all else cultivate in himself certain aptitude of a moral order" (1967/1972, p. 107). She continued, describing steps for inward preparation, which include critical self-reflection, objective observations, and a new understanding of child psychology. This process, buoyed by modern-day descriptions and imagery of a Montessori teacher at work, has evolved into a belief in the "essential Montessori teacher," a commitment to a certain way of being, a feeling of responsibility, and ability, to fulfill revered philosophical principles (Christensen, 2016; Malm, 2004). This lived experience creates an identity of being not simply a teacher but, more specifically, a Montessori teacher (Malm, 2004)—or, even further, a Montessorian. While the transformation focuses on inward reflection and change, generating a new or additional self-identity (i.e., self-conception and emotional identification with self-descriptions), a Montessori teacher also takes up a new social identity, equipped with specific characteristics and expectations to be fulfilled and maintained (Barker, 2012).

I feel I need to add a disclaimer. I believe the preparation Montessori required of her teachers, the emphasis she placed on skills such as self-reflection, observation, and patience, and her beliefs and expectations of a teacher's role in the classroom and relationship with her students were and still are innovative approaches to education reform. My concern lies with the ways in which these qualities have evolved into a seemingly inflexible social identity that prevents some teachers from experimenting with teaching strategies beyond the Montessori Method.

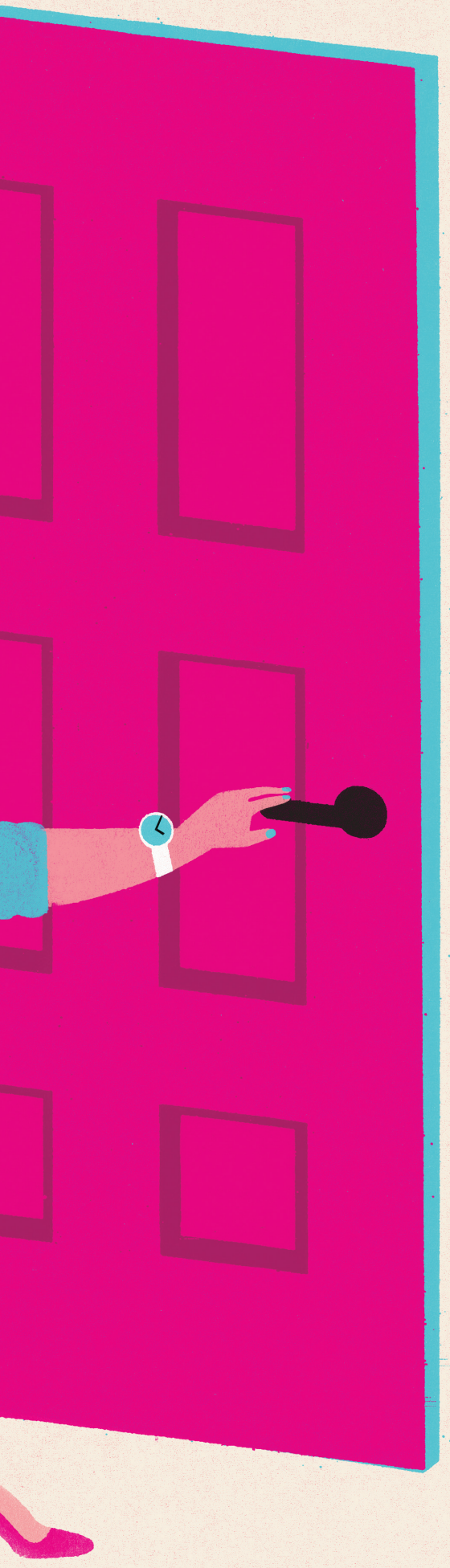
UNCERTAINTY

My social identity as an authentic Montessori teacher played a crucial role in how I responded to dilemmas in my teaching. Lampert (1985) wrote that "who the teacher is has a great deal to do with the way she defines problems and what can and will be done about them" (p. 180). While I had a deep understanding of Montessori theory and method of teaching, I was limited in how I interpreted and defined problems in my classroom and was not able to imagine and utilize any other styles, strategies, or practices that could have helped me address and resolve them. The method I was devoted to did not offer me the right tools to solve the problem. Instead, I would have had to take an approach not clearly outlined in Montessori's writing, creating a tension between what I valued pedagogically and what needed to be done to resolve the challenge I faced.

Helsing (2007) described uncertainty from dilemmas as a situation in which "a choice of action is unclear because choosing one commitment involves denying what may be an equally important alternative commitment, and so to choose results in loss" (p. 1318). The results of such an experience are not always negative. In my case, the uncertainty I felt pushed me to try something new and grow as a teacher. I learned an important lesson and felt given the permission to try something different. However, the other possible consequences of similar experiences could be anxiety and burnout, fueling the already high teacher turnover rate, particularly in early childhood education.

GUILT, STRESS, AND OTHER PRESSURES

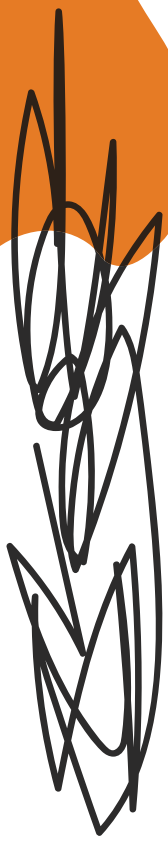
On the day I broke down, I did not know the vocabulary and theory of dilemmas and uncertainty in teaching that might have helped me better understand my positionality and internal struggle. Instead, I simply felt like a bad and inept teacher. In their research on teacher emotions, Hargreaves and Tucker (1991) pointed out that "where researchers talk about pride, commitments, and uncertainty, teachers talk about emotions like anxiety, frustration, and guilt" (p. 494). Several years ago, I had the opportunity to work with a newly trained Montessori teacher as she began her career leading an Early Childhood classroom in a new Montessori charter school, a school vaguely similar to the type I had worked in, and cried in, years prior. However, I had a few extra years of experience under my belt before I took on that job, whereas she was a brand-new teacher working in a difficult setting. As our correspondence continued over the months, I heard more stress, anxiety, and even sadness in her words. Finally, I read a narrative she wrote detailing a typical morning in her classroom. She relayed feelings of guilt when calling a mandatory morning meeting to redirect chaos, as opposed to letting the children freely choose activities. She described her own emotional stress when removing a screaming child who would not heed her initial requests to lower her voice and respect the group. And she listed shame and embarrassment at being seen by her principal while she stepped outside the classroom for a moment to breathe. Shortly after these ev



events, she decided to leave her position as a lead teacher. How could I argue with that decision? This narrative spanned the first hour of her work day, and she had already felt guilt, shame, embarrassment, and extreme anxiety.

Hargreaves and Tucker (1991) named two types of guilt felt among teachers: persecutory guilt and depressive guilt. The experience of the novice teacher, as well as my own experience, depicted a feeling of persecutory guilt, which "arises from doing something which is forbidden or from failing to do something which is expected, by one or more external authorities" (p. 495), stemming from the dilem-mas and uncertainty we both experienced. On the day that I broke down, I felt I had no control over my classroom. While that may have been true—things were certainly chaotic—that belief led to a feeling of failure as a capable and competent Montessori teacher. The teacher I worked with described feeling guilty about choices she made to manage her classroom—choices seemingly forbidden in Montessori practice. Such constant feelings of guilt, anxi-ety, and insecurity can lead to high levels of teacher stress. In addition to stress being an unpleasant emotion, it is also positively related to poor teacher–student rapport and low teacher effectiveness, likely worsening self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy (Klassen, 2010). Research points to a variety of factors that contribute to and sustain teacher stress, ranging from district policies to parent interactions. One factor, particularly threatening to novice teachers, is a feeling of isolation (Hatch, 1999; Klassen, 2010; Pril-leltensky, Neff & Bessell, 2016). Isolation can be felt both physically and emotionally. When a social identity is so clearly defined, moments of guilt and self-doubt can lead to feeling insecure and secluded within a social group. In these cases, teachers may feel unable to share their con-cerns and questions with fellow educators, which prevents improvement and the support and encouragement need-ed in such a highly social and emotional job. This sense of isolation is particularly difficult when felt in a world they want greatly to belong to.

Another cause of teacher stress and guilt is the "push for perfectionism" (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991, p. 502) teachers may feel regarding their teaching abilities, their students' achievement, and their classroom at-mosphere. This was a phenomenon I experienced as a preschool teacher, and one I suspect others in the field have felt as well. In a study I conducted on a Montes-sori teacher bringing the Montessori philosophy to a preschool community, my analysis illustrated an over-whelming pressure she felt to prove herself, most explicitly when she stated: "I have to prove myself. I have to prove Montessori to the



people. I have to prove it to the kids" (Christensen, 2016, p. 41).

The pressure to prove oneself can have significant consequences on performance and emotions. In his book on stereotype threat, Steele (2010) referred to a study that suggested women feel high pressure to prove themselves through their work in order to disprove a stereotype that implies women are less able to achieve than men. However, this need to prove one's ability (and worth) becomes an additional demand of an already busy work life. I speak from experience when I say that there are infinite spinning plates in an Early Childhood classroom, and they are the responsibility of a teacher equipped with only two hands. As Steele concluded, "You are multitasking, and because the stakes involved are high—survival and success versus failure in an area that is important to you—this multitasking is stressful and distracting" (p.111). Stress and distraction can negatively affect performance and lower self-esteem, creating a vicious cycle. While Steele's context was women working in high-tech firms, I believe this applies to anyone trying to perform and fulfill the expectations of the Montessori social identity, particularly if they are faced with challenges that are unable to be solved within the prescribed ideal curriculum.

COPING AND MANAGING

Emotions such as uncertainty, guilt, and stress need to be managed at some point and in some way. In my case, I needed a good cry and some support, whereas the novice teacher I referred to earlier felt she needed to leave the classroom entirely. In addition to teachers finding self-care that works for them, the classroom dilemma also needs to be addressed. Lampert (1985) discussed the many ways teachers approach "dilemma managing" (p. 194) and learn to cope with uncertainty that arises in their work. She suggested that accepting dilemmas is part of managing them and that teachers also need to allow themselves the freedom to experiment around them: "The dilemma manager accepts conflicts as endemic and even useful to her work rather than seeing it as a burden that needs to be eliminated" (p. 192). Lampert discouraged the common need many educators and educational researchers may feel to "eliminate conflict and to think of classroom problems as solvable" (p. 192). Interestingly, Montessori (1967) seemed to promote the problem-solving perspective: "When [the teacher's] class becomes undisciplined, the teacher sees in the disorder merely an indication of some error that she has made; and seeks this out and corrects it" (p. 285). Montessori wrote these words over 100 years ago. I have no doubt that she would have found Lampert's work fascinating and an important part of the evolution of education. However, Montessori teacher training revolves around Montessori's writing. It is imperative that Montessori teacher educators take time to discuss Montessori's words—their meaning, history, and perspective—while also weighing new beliefs and positions. Teachers certainly have a responsibility to self-reflect and look critically at their teaching, but to immediately assume full responsibility for the disorder and chaos in a classroom seems not only unfair but also potentially discouraging. This is especially problematic if the teacher cannot even find the error she may have made, much less correct it. Montessori teachers need to understand the importance of coping by dilemma managing, not dilemma eliminating.

A definition of "to cope" is "to deal successfully with a difficult situation" (Macmillan, n.d.). Here, Montessorians face another challenge regarding who and what will define that success. A morning meeting may have succeeded in reducing classroom chaos but raised feelings of failure by taking up something seen as contradictory to Montessori beliefs. On the other hand, I handled the boys running in circles by implementing a similar teacher-directed strategy but also felt good, even excited, about it, because I was given a candid form of permission by a Montessori authority, specifically the woman who helped me to become a Montessorian. However, not all Montessori teachers may have that same sort of authoritative support or guidance.

It is important to acknowledge the difference not only in skill but also in confidence and flexibility between a first-year teacher and a more veteran one. Newly trained Montessori teachers are less likely to have experiences to learn from and fall back on when times are difficult; feeling overwhelmed and uncertain during the first year of teaching is common. However, when those early experiences consistently lead to guilt and stress, it begs the question of whether teachers entered the classroom with any coping or dilemma-managing support and tools.

THE FREEDOM TO COPE

More than 30 years ago, Lampert (1985) declared, "We need to know more about what kind of resources teachers have available to cope with contradictions within themselves and in their work" (p. 194). She continued with a specific question regarding the roles of supervisors, colleagues, and teacher preparation in supporting the dilemma managing. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have stressed the importance of a supportive and collaborative school culture, stating, "In collaborative cultures, failure and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support" (p. 113). Additionally, Klassen (2010)

found that collective efficacy of teachers is a valuable resource in mediating teacher stress, specifically teacher stress stemming from student misbehavior. Yet group solidarity can also inhibit the possibilities for support. For example, "Group solidarity is valued because teachers need to present a united front in relation to often threatening outside forces. Discussions of teaching philosophies and methods are seen as potential sources of disagreement and negative judgments and are, therefore, avoided as threats to solidarity" (Hatch, 1999, p. 231). I can relate to this in the sense that discussing teaching philosophies other than Montessori felt off-limits with many of my co-workers. Questioning the method at all seemed almost forbidden. Fellow teachers regurgitated the same old ideas, like "Engage the children in work" or "Follow the child" or "Believe in the method." While these are important tenets to remember and value as a Montessori teacher, there may come a time when they do not offer a solution. Collegial conversations that skirt discussion of alternatives and rehash Montessori mantras time and time again become unhelpful.

I gained a sense of permission to try something different when I needed it the most, but it would have been helpful if I had felt that flexibility from the very beginning of my career as a teacher. Of course, not all teachers experience the shock I did with imagining myself as "boss"; they may have the confidence to take that role on when necessary. And not all teachers become so burdened with guilt that they need to leave their job. Many succeed, and succeed well. Many fulfill the Montessori teacher expectations by consistently talking the right talk and walking the right walk; I tried my hardest to do this while I was in the preschool classroom and beyond. But as I learn more about the exciting innovations in education reform, student learning, and teacher education, I cannot help looking more critically at my own experience of transformation into teaching and being a Montessorian. Lampert (1985) wrote,

> *One can be committed to a particular ideology or its opposite while recognizing the limitations of taking any single-minded view of such complicated processes as teaching and learning in schools. One needs to be comfortable with a self that is complicated and sometimes inconsistent. (p. 193)*

I am still a firm believer in Montessori and see it as a superior method of education. I believe that Montessori teachers need to be deeply trained in the pedagogy just as I was. However, they also need to leave their training more open-minded to other methods and strategies that may help them to manage dilemmas and live among conflicts that may be theoretical or instructional (or both).

The Montessori Method is an exceptional framework to guide teaching. The materials Montessori developed are innovative, beautiful, and highly educational. Her vision of the role of the teacher in the classroom setting, and the preparation required to achieve that, is hugely important and was, 100 years ago, far ahead of its time. I am not suggesting that any of these essential elements of Montessori teacher training be overlooked or replaced. However, there is room for evolution. Montessori teachers today need to be prepared for challenges that may not have been directly addressed in Montessori curriculum. Developing an ability to experiment with different strategies to meet the needs of the students and environment should be included in Montessori teacher preparation and identity. After all, Montessori was a scientist, and she knew that, through experimentation, important discoveries are made.

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GALLERY

1 Meadow Montessori School, Monroe, MI 2 Lamplighter Montessori School, Cordova, TN 3 Maria Montessori School, San Diego, CA 4 Stepping Stones Montessori School, Grand Rapids, MI 5 Elizabethtown Montessori School, Elizabethtown, KY 6 Montessori School of Denver, Denver, CO 7 Hamilton Park Montessori School, Jersey City, NJ 8 Gilmour Academy, Gates Mills, OH 9 North Shore Montessori Schools/ Deerfield Montessori Children's House, Deerfield, IL

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