

March/April 2014

Mentor Transcript: Elementary (Charter School, Unengaged Students, Lesson Plans, Research Expectations)

wendyc(P)	Let me start with an apology for getting so far behind on transcripts. It has been a particularly busy time at our school. So this transcript is long because it is from several weeks and has questions that were submitted via email. If I missed anyone's questions please submit them on line or via email again.
wendyc(A)	Summer Institute Registration is open. Elementary Sessions: Class Management, Art, Advanced Math. Dates: July 31 - August 5 http://www.mtips.org/summer-institute-2014-july-31-august-5
D(Q)	Ok! This is my first time on here, although I read the transcripts quite often.
wendyc(A)	So glad to hear it. Do you have any questions tonight or do you just want to read along? Where do you teach? Have we met at any Montessori gatherings?
D(Q)	Hi there - I do have questions, as I'm a newly trained teacher, working in a public Montessori charter school in Minnesota.
wendyc(A)	Got it.
D(Q)	I haven't had a chance to get out to many events just yet, but have every intention of doing so.
wendyc(A)	Professional development is critical to your progression as a teacher.
D(Q)	Absolutely. I observed in another classroom yesterday and have already felt uplifted with new ideas.
wendyc(A)	Yes. You can get so isolated and stuck in your own rut. You have to keep a broader picture in your mind.
D(Q)	However, it also brought out the obstacles that we face as a public school, that 90% of the Montessori schools in our state do not face.
wendyc(A)	I imagine that you have many regulations that independent schools are not challenged with.
D(Q)	Yes. We cannot see any records of our new students coming in, and we do not have the ability to use discretion in admitting students
wendyc(A)	I think that you have to be more flexible in giving children very different levels of freedom and structure.
D(Q)	Absolutely. And as a new teacher, I struggle with that every day. I have approximately 30% of my students who need constant structure and

	promptings.
wendyc(A)	I would only say that we have students who all come from our primary programs, and we are not too much better than that ratio. So don't let that circumstance get you down. Just work with whom you have in the place of development that they are. Take that group and present them some lessons more conventionally.
D(Q)	and 70% who can function in a normal Montessori environment. So therefore, what I have chosen to do is structure my day to have just 30% of my day dedicated to those students needing more direction, and 70% of my day maintaining a regular classroom.
wendyc(A)	You can afford to give those strugglers more of your time if the others are functioning pretty well. In addition, you really have to call on some of these more able students to share the task of helping engage these other students. Do not take it all on yourself.
N(P)	As a charter school we have many students that are new each year. Of my 34 students, only five attended Montessori preschool so I find myself often saying words such as, "Montessori is not a choice whether to work or not, but what work you'd like to choose." My largest challenge lately is the high number of unfocused conversations. I did notice once during my training observations several students that brought it back to the task at hand so I do try to see and end goal in their talking but there's not. Being and Upper El class, it's a large amount of boy-girl talk, "Minecraft" progress, and the latest tv show. Any suggestions on how to reboot my class toward a more academic focus?
wendyc(P)	This is a question from another teacher who works in public Montessori.
D(Q)	Yes, that's what I'm feeling now. I have the weight on my shoulders. I have particularly challenging class in that they have had a new teacher every year for the past 4 years, and have been heavily dependent on worksheets and adult-driven assignments.
wendyc(A)	Just be reasonable about your expectations for progress for yourself and for them. Work slowly and steadily away from the things that are not productive and toward those that are. And have open conversations with the students about it without speaking ill of those who came before you.
wendyc(P)	So you might say, "I have read a bit of research about how children learn, and adults for that matter. And what scientists have found is that people learn better when they are actively manipulating materials and when they have to be creative in some way. Let's take a look at some of the worksheets we have been using and consider them with regard to the research."
wendyc(P)	"Are they creative? No, not really. Do they allow you to manipulate them anything when you learn? No. So let's think of a way that you could work on fractions that would involve using your hands and being creative. What if you wrote your own problems instead? Let's do that together right now."
wendyc(P)	And then try to be fun by writing problems that have repetitive numbers or that all equal 1. You have to engage their intellect in the change you are trying to

	make. Not just place it upon them.
D(Q)	I like that!
wendyc(A)	I totally know how much time will be invested in this approach. But you will find the children really appealing to be with when you get them thinking like this. They will have interesting things to share. They will be excited in new ways. But you have to take the long view. It won't all change overnight. And as long as you recognize that this is acceptable, you don't have to feel frustrated that it is not as you want it to be right at that moment.
D(Q)	Great way to look at it.
wendyc(A)	I just want to be real when talking about this kind of thing. Twenty minutes can get by in these conversations before you even get to the first fraction. But truth is they will all learn fractions at some point. This type of reflection and critical thinking will have a far more significant impact on their lives.
D(Q)	I would definitely say that is something I am struggling with as well. Motivation to work and explore through their own interest. Oftentimes when I ask them what they are interested in (after listing a bunch of ideas of work they could do or topics they could research), the response is, "I don't know."
wendyc(A)	You probably have to be more creative in your approach. Something more like, "The other day I know that you worked on area of a rectangle. Do you think you could figure out how to find the area of a square?"
D(Q)	Just to be clear, can you explain the 'approach' to engaging their intellect? I'd love to take this approach and apply it to multiple lessons.
wendyc(A)	I just mean that through discussion and questions and reflection about the changes you are trying to make, get them thinking rather than just trying to get them to obey. Ask them how they feel the class day is working regarding the balance of chatting and learning time, rather than just saying that they have to talk less.
wendyc(P)	But don't get me wrong, sometimes you just have to put the hammer down. But I have found that the children are far more responsive to the hammer when they feel it is coming from a teacher who respects their opinions, listens to their thoughts, and doesn't just boss them around all day.
D(Q)	Absolutely. We reflect on that quite often. Today I dismissed them by identifying one thing that helps them focus. Most said quiet work time (which they chose to have every Wednesday for one hour), some said music, others said movement, etc.
wendyc(A)	And then I would choose a couple of children to observe with. Notice together what distracts the children from their work. Take notes together and then have the students present what they have seen. Things like, children engaging children with work out in idle conversation. That can lead to a grace and courtesy lesson on how to judge who is available to chat and who should be left in peace.
D(Q)	Yes, I agree. I have been working to gain their trust in knowing that I will

	listen to their insight, and it is valuable, even if it means it doesn't change anything.
wendyc(A)	Absolutely. You can always share genuinely: " I think I understand why you feel that way. If I were you, I would probably feel the same way. But it is still our responsibility to create a positive work environment for our class and talking too much does not allow that to happen. Even though it is a lot of fun."
D(Q)	I also try to put some humor into it as well.
wendyc(A)	This is a must. Don't take everything too seriously. Be playful. Laugh. Really, otherwise what's the point of it all? Joy is highly underrated.
DMN(Q)	Any more genius ideas? haha.
wendyc(A)	:)
D(Q)	It's really hard right now, because as a teacher I am feeling so isolated and unable to brainstorm such strategies as these with my colleagues and administration
wendyc(A)	Can't you find even one other teacher who would be willing to meet after school for thirty minutes once per week?
wendyc(P)	Is there any way that you could come to the Summer Institute this summer?
wendyc(P)	We have such a good time together. And this summer I will be presenting class management, which is a time to consider the challenges just like these.
D(Q)	Yes, another teacher across the hall from me who is also AMI trained and in the same situation. However, we are both fairly new to combining public school curriculum and AMI albums, and oftentimes the curriculum itself takes precedence.
wendyc(A)	I can tell you that no matter the circumstance there will always be something that takes precedence. You have to make meeting a priority because it is what will help you move from surviving to actually moving ahead.
D(Q)	I would LOVE to come to the Summer Institute. Financially I just don't think I can afford it. My school unfortunately doesn't provide enough funds for such events.
wendyc(A)	: (
wendyc(P)	Well you can always post questions here. ;) I am always available.
wendyc(P)	We are almost out of time for the night. Any last thoughts?
D(Q)	I would like to make something work though. Maybe I will convince my husband that his sanity will be saved because I will have an outlet now!
wendyc(A)	HA! That's the spirit.
DQ)	Just a huge thank you for your input. I know it wasn't as directed as previous conversations, but I really appreciate your time.
wendyc(A)	Actually it was very much a sensible thread to follow. People will appreciate the transcript. Truth is that we all have the same darn questions. Montessori is not for weaklings. It is hard work and determination such as you are showing

	is just what is needed.
D(Q)	I am sure I will make a habit of checking in from time to time, with more specific questions, like: What do you do when your parent population is so focused on product rather than process?
wendyc(A)	See, I told you we all have the same questions. We talk about this at our school plenty. You just need a community to share your woes and to be inspired with.
wendyc(P)	I look forward to chatting again soon. But remember that you can post your questions any time. They stay in the queue until I log on and then I answer whether or not the asker is on line.
wendyc(P)	Before I log off, I am going to post one other pre-submitted question so that it shows up on the transcript for me to edit. But I won't answer it tonight.
D(Q)	I KNEW I wasn't alone! We are all human, and the more and more I ask questions, the more I realize we are all thinking the same things - oftentimes at different times. What cool support opportunities!
wendyc(A)	Keep on keepin' on. You are doing good work.
D(Q)	See, in 45 minutes I'm already refreshed. Thanks again Wendy! Have a wonderful night. Stay warm.
wendyc(A)	HA! Easier said than done. Month of March, my ass!
D(Q)	I'm starting to get the hang of how this works. Take care!
wendyc(A)	Then I will expect to see you again soon. Good night.
c(Q)	Our 6 - 12 year olds show forever-decreasing attention spans: they hop from one activity to another and we have a hard time getting them to complete adequately. Most (if not all) of them have plenty of screen time at home (not with us, we do not have TV or games consoles and none of them is allowed the use of a mobile phone. The computer is used in the classroom for research and typing (projects, stories, etc...) but not for leisure. What can we do?
wendyc(A)	<p>Take a deep breath and dig in. This is the ultimate and ever present challenge of teaching. One thing I would recommend is fewer new lessons. Spend your time working with students on lessons that they have already received. So you might gather a group of three or four and ask them to bring a couple of racks and tubes trays. Then just write some problems on the board and stay with them while they solve them.</p> <p>We often mistakenly think that our time is best spent on new lessons, when really it should be a pretty equal balance of time with new lessons, time observing, and time helping children get better plugged in to work they already have out.</p> <p>As unglamorous as this answer is, it really is the only way. You have to be the change you want to see. ;)</p>

	Transcript Date: April 9, 2014
M(Q)	Hi! Sorry I missed the chat tonight. I was having trouble with Java, not being cooperative.
Mandi(Q)	I'm wondering what your thoughts are on scheduling lessons in the Upper Elementary. In your room, did you set out a schedule like spelling and history on Monday, math and grammar on Tuesday, Geometry and Biology on Wednesday, ect? Also, do you teach all areas every week? All areas including: Geography, Biology, History, Math, Geometry, Grammar, etc.
wendyc(P)	I totally get the impulse to make a schedule. The responsibility of teaching all subjects and being solely responsible for students for three years is a big one.
wendyc(P)	But having the students for three years is also a liberating thing. I always had a plan for the week of what I would present. And I always paid careful attention not to leave subject areas unaddressed. But beyond that, you really should not make a repeating plan to follow. You have to be responsive to what you are observing in the class. You have to be responsive to the children's expressed interests.
wendyc(P)	Careful record keeping is what will allow you to have the courage to follow interests rather than follow set curriculum. At one point in my teaching career, I actually made a list of the absolute minimum I felt children needed to know at each grade level in each of the subjects after consulting local public curriculum.
wendyc(P)	But ultimately I made this list to give me freedom. Whenever I got nervous that I wasn't covering enough and that I needed to lock down on a more traditional approach, I would just look at the list. If there was an area I felt behind on, I would give lessons in that area. But most often, I found I was already ahead of the game and needed to relax.
M(Q)	Another question if you have the time: After a history lesson, is there an expectation of student research? Do you set deadlines for a completed research project and parameters for the research? I know that if I don't set the expectation of a deadline or a finished product, then there is a lot of half research that doesn't come to any showing of understanding. How do you guide this?
wendyc(A)	Very important question. And there is not a single right answer. Your instinct that they should not just start and abandon projects is a good one. One thing to consider is helping the students start with small goals at first. They frequently bite off more than they can chew. So you might even start with choosing a few questions from the history question charts that they want to find and write answers for. They don't even have to make it a formal research paper to start. But if they answer some questions well, and are still interested, then they can choose a few more to answer, or choose to answer the first ones more fully. This can slowly be built up into a complete research paper then. But you need to be meeting with them regularly. Don't underestimate what a complex and

	extensive project a research paper is.
M(Q)	one last thing...any thoughts on Montessori Model UN in the classroom as opposed to a club?
wendyc(A)	I have not participated in this project. But people for whom I have great respect are really invested in it and have said it is an incredible experience.