

10/25/14

Mentor Transcript: Elementary (Children Who Need Constant Attention)

wendyc(P)	Welcome back everyone! I hope that your year is off to a great start. I am happy to be finally able to devote some time to Ask a Mentor. It has been a crazy-busy start to our school year at Countryside, but things are finally settling down a bit.
wendyc(P)	To start the mentor season, I am going to answer some questions that were asked at the Summer Institute Elementary Class Management session. I think that you will find the questions familiar because if you have taught for any length of time in a Montessori elementary classroom, you have surely asked them yourself, and in many cases will ask them for as long as you remain an engaged teacher.
(Q)	How do I attend to the needs of those children, who need more individualized attention, without feeling overwhelmed by their demands? One example being the child who continually says, "I need help," another who has to be continually monitored and redirected. Some children just wear you out.
wendyc(P)	First of all, I get it. I taught in elementary for ten years. I have different thoughts for each of these children. Let's begin with the teacher stalkers, who do in fact need our help. But often not with the content for which they are seeking our help. The first step is to determine if the student is not in fact able to gain enough information from the initial presentations to work independently. I think that this actually happens more often than

	<p>we would like to be the case. But your job is to be the detective working in partnership with the student to figure this out.</p> <p>My first directive with students is that they cannot come to me with the phrase, "I don't understand this." They must come to me with a statement that indicates what they do understand about what they are doing and at exactly what point their understanding breaks down. This simple tweak to the interaction is very powerful for the students. Emotionally, it can take them from a place of defeat to place of ownership and hopefulness. "I don't get it all yet."</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>As you work through this process with a student, together you will either discover that he does know what he is doing and can work independently, or you will find the place where the learning broke down. If you have a student, then, that really does struggle to acquire the information being presented in the lesson, your goal should be to get him to ask the questions as they arise during the lesson. Encourage him to ask for repetition or further explanation the moment he realizes that he does not understand. Most likely there are others who have some lack of clarity as well that could use further explanation.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>One caution in this example: if the student needs significant enough remediation it may be embarrassing for him to slow the lesson down so much. You can always have him stay for a few minutes after the lesson to clarify.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>There are so many layers to this question that it will likely be all we get to in this transcript.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>Another caution: we need to push our students to do some thinking on their own. For some students, the first line of defense when things get even a little challenging is to ask someone else. Although seeking other resources is something we strongly want to encourage, we must also be sensitive to the need to help our students "gut it out" a bit. Let them struggle for a while. Help them to see that they have much greater resources within themselves than they have likely realized. And this is a critical element of character that we all need as we navigate life's challenges.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>So we are still discussing the child who is constantly asking for</p>

	<p>help. I suggested two things to consider: does he really need help and if so, can we get him to make this clear during or directly after lessons; and can we help a child to stay with a challenge for a longer period of time making some discoveries on his own.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>But there is also the child who simply has no confidence that he can manage anything independently. This can be tricky. The paradox is that in some ways we must withdraw from a child who has not built any confidence of his own. We cannot build his confidence for him. It is only through his own independent successes that he can start to see his own potential. So our job in this case is to titrate the challenge he faces to present hard work that he can be successful with, and then leave him to struggle with it. Often you can have a child stay right at your table while you do other things. You can offer encouragement, but let him keep struggling. When he succeeds, his surprise and joy will be the payoff.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>And finally you may have the student who has found that asking questions in the road to the attention that he is seeking from adults. In this case, you have to say, "No, I am not able to help." He will eventually see this is as a fruitless effort.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>So, on to the child who needs constant monitoring and redirection. This question also has several underlying issues depending on the nature of the child. But children who need considerable direction should oftentimes be kept close to the teacher so that she can offer this help in many different ways.</p> <p>If we let these children get too far away from us for most of the day, the direction comes in one form: correction. You will notice this child whenever he is doing the wrong thing or nothing at all. So for a good part of the day, keep him close. Have him join you at lessons as an assistant.</p> <p>Whenever you have housekeeping or environment tasks to accomplish, he is your partner. These children are not always set on a better course through academic work. Oftentimes, it is the practical life aspect of the elementary experience that will help them get focused. I think that the relevance of practical life in the elementary environment is sorely neglected, to the detriment of many children and the elementary community as a whole.</p>

wendyc(P)	<p>Practical life in the elementary is the application of all of the skills that the students practiced in primary: dusting shelves, washing tables, washing windows, baking snack, washing dishes, organizing cabinets, making materials, etc.... Most anything that you need to do as a teacher could be done with these kinds of students as your partners. You need to draw them nearer to you. And it is often with these activities, just as it was in the primary classes, that you will see the first glimmers of normalization.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>Unfortunately, the academic pressure at the elementary level can be so strong that we do not devote ourselves to practical life. But the truth is there is not a trade off between practical life and academic work. Very few of us are constructed in such a way to lend ourselves to intense intellectual work for six hours per day. Most are more successful in both arenas with a combination of mental and physical work, and in fact are more productive with this combination than we are with just one or the other.</p>
wendyc(P)	<p>So, that is it for this week. Summer Institute plans are under way. Dates: July 30 - August 4. Elementary promises to be time very well spent: Two days with Bill Robertson on elementary science, three days with Mike Waski on advanced elementary math, and one day with me on class management.</p>