

Choices & Decisions

by Dane L. Peters



“The child’s first instinct is to carry out his actions by himself, without anyone helping him, and his first conscious bid for independence is made when he defends himself against those who try to do the action for him.”

– Maria Montessori

“The children must be free to choose their own occupations, just as they must never be interrupted in their spontaneous activity.”

– Maria Montessori

“A child is an eager observer and is particularly attracted by the actions of the adults and wants to imitate them. In this regard an adult can have a kind of mission. He can be an inspiration for the child’s actions, a kind of open book wherein a child can learn how to direct his own movements.”

– Maria Montessori

“Imitation is the first instinct of the awakening mind.”

– Maria Montessori

All the Montessori quotes in this article taken from Casa di Mir Montessori School website: <http://www.casadimir.org/index.htm>

Now in my eighth year as head of a Montessori School and a firm believer of Dr. Montessori’s philosophy and understanding of children, I have been thinking about how we educators—teachers, administrators, and heads of school—operate when it comes to choices and making decisions in a Montessori environment. Even though I am not trained as a Montessori teacher, I have come to reflect on and embrace the tenets of providing an environment where the child has choices and the principle that the adult models good behavior and practices for the child.

Teachers and administrators are confronted with choices and decisions constantly. How many decisions did you make today? How often have you made a decision where the answer was clear, but upon further reflection, you begin to reconsider? And, with too many weigh-ins, do you become crippled to make a decision? Eventually, do you make a decision for the sake of getting the issue off of your plate and regret the fact that you did just that—made a decision to relieve the pressure? How often have you felt compromised after making a decision to satisfy one constituency only to realize you have upset another?

School administrators and teachers are forever making decisions. The art of making good decisions is essential to a long, healthy career. After my first year as head of school, I had an overwhelmingly, memorable reflection of how I back-peddled on so many issues that I would not have compromised on as a teacher, assistant head, coach, or dormitory master. So many times, I found myself waiting, waiting, waiting to see what someone else had to say on a particular issue. It wasn’t until well into my third year as head of my first school when I realized that it was my job to negotiate, ameliorate, mitigate, and arbitrate among three demanding constituencies—trustees, parents, and faculty—attempting to focus all on the best interests of the children and on the school’s mission, while staying true to my own values.

Now, farther along in my career, I find that people—parents, trustees . . . my wife—are looking for answers, and they are not interested in haggling. Thus, I recommend that you be honest, forthright, and consistent, and if you make a mistake, say so and move on. I have to say that my gray hair does lend some credibility to what I have to say, especially to preschool children!

Two distinct styles of leadership have influenced my decision making over the years: Head as benevolent dictator and Head as a consensus builder. Both work. The trick is to know when to employ each style. The former worked quite well in a boarding school environment (especially when it came to deciding which faculty member would get which faculty housing), and the latter worked well in a suburban day school

(especially when it came to easing out a parent who is an alumna of the school, and whose husband is a trustee). Jim Collins talks about these two styles in his recent monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*:

“...there are two types of leadership skill: executive and legislative. In the executive leadership, the individual leader has enough concentrated power to simply make the right decision. In the legislative leadership, on the other hand, no individual leader—not even the nominal chief executive—has enough structural power to make the most important decisions by himself or herself. Legislative leadership relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen.”¹

It is probably safe to say that Montessori schools with their non-traditional, inclusive approach tend to breed legislative leadership among the adults. In the classroom, the teacher acts as a facilitator and observer tending to promote in the children an executive leadership style and a disposition for making choices.

Based on trial and error, plenty of mistakes, and professional advice from colleagues, consultants, workshops, and many journals and books, I can say that there are certain aspects of decision-making that make the process easier and more reliable in the end.

- Present yourself so that people feel comfortable giving you information, keeping in mind that you don't have to use all of the information you receive. Good information can give you more choices.
- Use colleagues—professionals and educators (in and out of school)—when gathering information. Establish a small cadre of in-house people who can give you honest, objective, and confidential information.
- At the risk of being obvious, establish sound working relationships with your program directors/head of school/board chair—often your most knowledgeable, trusted, and objective sources of information.
- When possible, allow the emotion of a situation to subside before making a decision. Give yourself time to absorb, and mull over information you need before making a decision.
- As Dr. Jane Healy, in *Your Child's Growing Mind*, tells parents, “They (can help their child best and) would accomplish more by asking questions instead of giving opinions.” This is good advice when decisions must eventually be made.
- Apply the following to your own decision making: “Children decide on their actions under the prompting of natural laws. If someone usurps the function of this guide the child is prevented from developing either his will or his concentration.”²
- Do your homework; collect and organize your data before making a decision. Here's what Ben Franklin did:

“When confronted with two courses of action, I jot down on a piece of paper all the arguments in favor of each one, then on the opposite side I write the arguments against each one. Then by weighing the arguments pro and con and canceling them out, one against the other, I take the course indicated by what remains.”³

- There are often times when no one decision will please all of the people, so develop a reputation for deciding on the basis of what is in the best interest of children rather than trying to find a solution that will please everyone.
- Investigate through books, manuals, letters, and conversation established precedents (within and outside of your school community) that might facilitate a decision. I have often found that previously established policies tucked away in school handbooks, e.g. family handbook, faculty & staff manual, board policy manual, etc., to be helpful.
- Being consistent promotes predictability. Predictability engenders trust.
- Consider Thomas Friedman's idea that, “Everywhere you turn, hierarchies are being challenged from below or transforming themselves from top-down structures into more horizontal and collaborative ones.”⁴
- Sometimes we make decisions based on a “gut feeling” (not to be confused with emotion) that prove to be wrong. Acknowledge errors, correct mistakes, and move on! Journalist, Anne O'Hare McCormick said, “The percentage of mistakes in quick decisions is no greater than in long-drawn-out vacillations, and the effect of decisiveness itself ‘makes things go’ and creates confidence.”⁵

As heads of school, school administrators, and teachers, we are always being held accountable for our decisions. We should be. Harry Truman had it right. Whether you are President of the United States or Head of School, the “buck” stops with you. 🍄

REFERENCES

- ¹Collins, Jim. (2005) “Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great,” pp. 10-11.
²Dr. Maria Montessori quotes taken from Casa di Mir Montessori School website, <http://www.casadimir.org/index.htm>
³Cook, John (Compiled by). (1993). “The Book of Positive Quotations.” Fairview Press: pp. 316.
⁴Cook, John (Compiled by). (1993). “The Book of Positive Quotations.” Fairview Press: pp. 314

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