



Lowering the Noise Level in an Open Classroom



by Susan Mayclin Stephenson
for Colegio San Silvestre, Lima, Peru, 1973

The following paper was written for the teachers of Colegio San Silvestre in Lima, Peru at the request of the head of school, teachers having notice that the noise level in Susan's "Montessori" class was lower, and that children who previously had not wanted to come to school were now excited to be there. It has been helpful to many teachers in traditional educational settings, as a guide for using a few Montessori ideas in working with children.

This was written by Susan Mayclin in response to a request of mine. I asked her to give a talk to the kindergarten teachers who, naturally, have our biggest noise problem. However, I think we shall all find it most useful and so I have had it duplicated for you.

—“Steve” Eckford, Colegio San Silvestre

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In order to create a calmer, quieter classroom there need to be changes in the environment, the behavior of the children, and the behavior of the teacher.

First observe what it is about the children's behavior, the routine, etc., that is causing the noise. Then work on one thing at a time to alleviate the problem.

N.B. One you change a behavior pattern, for example - how a teacher handles a situation, there are two very important points to keep in mind:

- 1 — All teachers should agree to react the same way or the children will be confused.
- 2 — Think a lot about the change and don't regress once you have started a new method, or the children will not take this or any following change seriously.

Changes in the Environment, Spacial and Temporal

1. SPACIAL

a. Proximity of people speaking

The children should be close enough to the adult who is in charge of them that there is never a need to talk above a soft voice. This is probably the habit (calling across the room) that causes the most noise and is the most difficult to change. Whenever I have something to say to my assistant or to a child, I walk over to her and speak quietly, so we are the only two hearing the conversation. Aside from this modeling behavior of the teacher, I explain the new policy to the class - first in Spanish through my assistant, and then in English.

If I hear a child calling out to me, not walking up to me and speaking quietly, I do one of three things:

First — the first time I go to the child and explain that I would like her to come to me (or raise her hand and I will come to her) and not call across the room.

After that — I ask another child to go and remind the child who is calling out. This reinforces the behavior of two children.

Then — if I know the child understands the new policy but has forgotten, I ignore her when she calls out to me. Then she remembers what to do.

b. Space for Activities

Children at this age (up to 6 or 7) still have a strong "sense of order" or need for routine in their day. In the space of the classroom they get used to certain activities taking place in the same physical setting. For this reason it is better not to have loud boisterous activities in the

same place where at other times children are expected to sit and work quietly.

c. Materials

All the objects the children need to use in the course of the day should be accessible to them and should be able to be reached without making a noise. Art things in drawers or cupboards which bang? Do doors slam?

Give fun role-playing lessons, games really, at "neutral moments" (NOT when someone has just slammed a door) to demonstrate and give practice on *how to close the drawer or door quietly*. Children love this challenge to silence.

Do children have to ask, or wait nosily, for pencils, scissors, tape, brooms, etc.? Arrange the room so the children can get these things themselves. Play games to see who can remember where things go, in order to teach them to put things away. And challenge them with the game of putting things away gracefully and "without making a sound." Don't do these games too often or they will become tedious . . . just enough to help the children become aware of the noise they make, and to enjoy the challenge to be graceful and quiet.

2. TEMPORAL

The children's "sense of order" applies also to the arrangement of their time. They need the confidence of knowing what they will be doing all day, every day, and there should be little variety of schedule for children at this age. They also need to know that if they begin to become engrossed with a piece of work, focused and concentrating, that they will not be interrupted and asked to stop. Children who are interrupted while concentrating often give up trying to be deeply involved with their work.

For example, in my class we start every morning with a very short group (Less than 5 minutes) during which the expected work for the morning is written on the board (i.e. maths, number book, patterns, story, three or four things). The children are then free to do their work for the morning, in any order and anywhere in the classroom. Then when they are finished, they can read, draw, paint or play a few selected games.

Any school-required out-of-the-classroom activities I try to arrange to take place during the last half-hour or hour so the children know that they will never be interrupted until that time.

Observe your class and see what about the schedule could be changed to eliminate a normally long noisy period. Are a lot of children changing activities at the same time? Is there a period when a group of children have nothing to do — but wait nosily?

CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOR OF THE CHILDREN

I believe that children are noisy in class for one of three reasons, either they have nothing to do, they are unable to concentrate, or they have not been taught to be quiet.

1. MATERIALS FOR INDIVIDUAL WORK

Of course there are the required text books, but there must also be something for the children to do when they are finished with this work. They must be free to select puzzles, extra work, quiet games, art, or other age-appropriate materials.

2. PROTECT CONCENTRATION

OBSERVE — which children are quiet.? When? Why? In my class I know that the children are only quiet during a work period when they are concentrating on what they are doing and that they can only do this when they feel good about themselves and when the work is suited to their interests and abilities.

It is very important that concentration is not interrupted — by the teacher or by other children. I teach this by role-playing and by example, i.e. by never interrupting a child if she is concentrating. If a child talks to me when I am obviously busy I ignore her. The fact that the children in my class have a long uninterrupted work period which is not broken up into short work time blocks helps immensely.

3. TEACH SILENCE, INHIBITION OF MOVEMENT

Just as movement has to be learned (walking, crawling, carrying things, etc.) inhibition of movement has to be learned, and there can be no silence without inhibition of movement.

I have already mentioned lessons of closing a door, cupboard, or drawer quietly. Also we need to teach, as games, walking (instead of running) silently, tucking in chairs quietly, or just sitting quietly. In our class, when the bell rings, for example, the children arrange their work, fold hands, close their mouths and sit absolutely still till their table is excused. Then they tuck in their chairs as quietly as possible and silently leave the room.

This is not a command attained by threats or rewards, but a joyful time that the girls enjoy with smiles of pride on their faces. This is a challenge, and as they do it twice each morning, because of the required outside break for the whole school, the habit subtly lowers the noise level during the rest of the morning, which is an enjoyable and calming experience for all.

4. TEACH HOW TO TEACH

Of course you are doing this all the time because the children are going to imitate how you teach. One of the best things you can help a child who has finished her work learn to do is help other. Start with one or two children and casually ask them to help someone who needs help, and to do this in a soft voice. In Montessori classes more teaching is done from child to child than from adult to child. This give practice in helping others as it strengthen's ones own knowledge. And some children will much prefer to learn from another child than from an adult.

CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOR OF THE TEACHER

1. THINK "GOOD"

The teacher must see each child new each morning, forgetting transgressions of labeling of the past. Here is a saying that I keep in my mind toward this end:

*If we take people as they are,
We make them worse.
But, if we treat them as if
They were what they could be,
We make them what they can be.*

—Goethe

I think the attitude of the teacher is the most important factor. The children are not being loud or chaotic because they are bad! So we should not try to make them feel guilty about it.

Verbally chastising a child does no good to anyone. It is better to ignore the negative behavior and reinforce the positive. In fact I have seen that some children have been trained, unconsciously by their parents, to be rude or exhibit bad behavior because at the beginning it was so cute. Or because it was the most successful way to get the attention of the parent.

Telling the child in class ahead of time that you are going to ignore "the way they act when they aren't feeling well when they are not their real self," that you will help them get over that behavior by ignoring them, is respectful, and engages the child in the process.

If you are waiting for a group to get still, notice casually aloud how quickly some have been able to get quiet this time (without a hidden reprimand of those that are still noisy!) In my class, if a child is naughty I assume that she is, for some reason that I don't need to discover, not feeling well - and that is why she is not "her usual wonderful self."

I make sure that the children know I feel this way about them. If a child cannot settle down to work, she may need to be removed to a quiet corner, but only with her agreement "until she feels better, not "until she can behave herself."

2. TEACH BY TEACHING NOT BY CORRECTING

a. Play games to make the children aware of noised, sounds (birds, music, cars in the street, the ticking of a clock) and, by contrast, "silence."

b. When the noise level goes up, don't add to it by raising your own voice, moving quickly, saying 'shhhh.' Instead, step back, pacify yourself, observe what is going on and why and decide what you can do to help the situation. Then act.

c. To get the attention of the group for a required announcement for example — teach the children to respond to some signal other than your voice. In our class the signal is to turn the lights off. To teach them, play games to see how quickly they can get quiet on signal (by "quiet" in our class we mean "not moving a muscle"). Don't over practise or overuse this device or it will lose its effectiveness.

d. When talking to the group, don't let your voice get louder to compete with a rising noise level, but purposely lower it, even to a whisper, to get the attention of the children.

e. The most important factor in striving for a calmer class is the example set by the teacher. She should move and talk quietly and approach the child to speak to her instead of calling across the room. If you want quiet in the classroom silence in the classroom and the teacher can't be quiet, forget it!

Finally: quiet and calmness in the classroom should not come from threats or force, but as the result of children engaged in concentration on work they enjoy. Not only will everyone enjoy school more, but children will remember what they learn.



(photo) Lima, Peru, 1973.

Susan Mayclin Stephenson has AMI (Association Montessori Internationale) diplomas at the 0-3, 3-6, and 6-12 levels. More information can be found online at: www.michaelolaf.net/susan.html