# *Windows and Mirrors*

## *Seeing Ourselves in the Spaces We Lead*

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### Abstract

This reflective piece on leadership is written from the perspective of a Montessori Head of School. It considers educational leadership as a relational and holistic practice shaped by perception, experience, and context. Using the metaphors of windows and mirrors, it explores how ways of seeing are informed by memory and relationships, and how these perspectives influence the environments leaders create. Through an arts-based inquiry centered on a mixed-media mosaic, the piece frames leadership as an ongoing process of reflection and meaning-making. In a time of increasing complexity, it points toward leadership grounded less in control and more in awareness, presence, and the creation of compassionate, human-centered learning environments.

**Keywords:** *educational leadership, contemplative practice, perception and interpretation, arts-based inquiry, self-awareness, learning environments, experiential learning, relational leadership, holistic education, Montessori*

### For Leaders to Hold

Industrialized systems are built to measure and standardize, so we've come to describe jobs and occupations in the same way: a list of competencies to master, boxes to check. That framing may hold up well enough when the work is the same each time, when you can measure it, repeat it.

Work that involves the education of children, however, is relational in ways that resists being managed, measured, or reduced to competencies. It's dynamic, unpredictable, integrated work that unfolds through experience, memory, and environment. In a world where so much is outside of our control, educational leadership becomes less about managing and more about how we see, how we respond, and the tone we create in the spaces we lead.

There are limits to what we can control as leaders. We cannot determine every outcome or anticipate every challenge. What we do have control over is how we show up, and how we show up shapes everything else. For those of us working with children, it is work that asks something deeper of us.

The tone of a classroom, the feeling of belonging in a community, the presence of joy, curiosity, and safety; these things do not just happen. They are shaped in small moments, by how we show up with ourselves and with each other. Leaders don't just set a tone, they create the culture the whole community lives inside. Everyone in it becomes a kind of mirror, reflecting that culture back, children most clearly of all.

**Layers of Light**

On an afternoon years ago, I was standing in my garage, looking at a stack of old windows in a dusty corner of the home my family now lives in, a home built by my husband's parents in Carnation, Washington. The windows were all different ages, each one having served some purpose on this property at some point in time, none of which I was around for. I started to think about the lives these windows had been part of. Whose hands had rested on them. What a child might have seen looking out. What they had held inside, keeping people safe and dry, letting light in, while quietly framing the world outside.

Looking through those windows, I started thinking about different moments in my life. Relationships and experiences that still live in me and guide how I make sense of things today. The windows helped me understand the complexity of perception. We view the world through layers of experience, memory, and relationships. We are formed through our relationships, with different contexts bringing out different parts of who we are. Each window holds a different view, just as each relationship influences our world views.

Alongside the windows, I started to think about mirrors too. Not as pristine reflections, but as something messier. Some mirrors reflect clearly, like a mirror in flattering light, one that catches you at your best angle, offering us back a version of ourselves that feels recognizable and true. Others distort, like funhouse mirrors, shifting proportions leaving you unsure of reality or truth. A dirty mirror can soften what you see, giving a false sense of clarity. Until it is cleaned and something previously hidden becomes obvious.

**Piece by Piece**

Out of this contemplation, I began creating a mosaic as a means to explore and understand how memory, relationship, and perception shape the way we see ourselves and our outward expression of that vision. I wanted to understand, by building something with my hands, how that layered way of seeing shapes the way I show up as a leader in my school.

The piece, pictured in Figure 1 and titled *All My Relations*, is built from one of those garage windows, layered with mirrors and objects gathered from my life. Some pieces were found in antique stores, each carrying its own unknown history. The mirrors in the mosaic are placed throughout in different shapes, colors, and sizes. They quite literally reflect how I see myself, while also pointing to the more complicated and shifting nature of that reflection.

Each object in the mosaic holds its own piece of that story:

- Two partners' rings, and my mom's wedding ring from my biological father: versions of love I have known, some I came to understand were not meant for me.
- My partner of over 20 years, living within the mirrors: he made me feel safely loved, and reflected back to me a version of myself I could fall in love with.
- My grandmother's watch, worn as an adolescent, and a bracelet my mom gave my daughter as an infant: the passage of time, and the generations of women I am connected to, directly and indirectly.

- A skeleton key: key moments that opened a new way of understanding for me.
- Microscope slides layered over the window: a reminder that looking closer does not mean seeing everything. There is always more beyond what we can fully understand.
- A pocket watch filled with pressed flowers and an embedded geode carry the idea that something small can hold something vast. A whole life cycle inside of a flower, a geode holding millions of years of quiet formation.




When my son was two, there was a period where he started stories by saying, "yesterday when I was older." When my daughter was around the same age, she coined her own time-ambiguous words: "tolater" and "lasterday." I still reference these words and phrases today, because they hold onto something children seem to understand and adults slowly lose: time isn't a straight line we move along. It's something more layered and alive than that. I've come to understand this through my own growth, growth that is really inseparable from growing as a leader: our experiences don't stay fixed in the past. They move with us, expanding and reshaping how we see and respond.

That is what *All My Relations* came to mean. Within a single moment, there are layers of time and experience at play, each piece contributing to a whole shaped by personal history and by stories that existed before me but are still living within me.

**Grounded, Not Guarded**

On any given day, sitting in my office, a rotating stream of concerns enters through the door. An exhausted educator, carrying the emotional needs of an entire classroom of little humans, still so full of love of their work. A neurodivergent child reshaping how an entire classroom functions. A parent's concern I can act on, and a parent's concern that my staff and I simply see differently from the parent and need to hold a boundary on. Enrollment, teacher and student retention, personal challenges, financial health of the school, the pull of a wider economy and politics I cannot control. The list goes on.

Before long, I've spun myself into feeling responsible for every moment in my school community, and there have been times I've felt helpless to influence any of it. As I've grown into the role of Head of School, carrying each additional layer of growing job responsibilities, there are days when the weight of it feels unbearable. We are pulled by constant pressure and urgency in educational leadership roles, and this pressure can quickly move us into reaction. Reaction often looks like guarding: defending a decision instead of examining it, protecting how we have perceived something instead of staying open to what's happening.

The act of making the mosaic and reflecting on the sum of its parts helped to surface a conviction for me: effective leadership depends on staying aware of how deeply we shape, and are shaped by, the environments we lead. Without this awareness, it becomes easy to lose our footing, responding from guardedness instead of groundedness, with the potential of

unintentionally reinforcing the very conditions we are trying to change.

How we respond, guarded or grounded, to issues and concerns brought our way can have immense impact on the outcome of a moment, and that moment can ripple outward, defining the culture of your school over time. I have come to learn that there is power in this, and if cultivated, it can become a point of stability, something to return to when everything else feels unsettled or uncertain.

**Return to Self**

Leadership can be lonely work. There are times when you feel misunderstood, or when the weight of responsibility sits with you in a way that is hard to process or share with others. In those moments, clarity can become the first casualty, and how you see yourself and the situation in front of you is often clouded, like a dirty mirror.

We cannot control outcomes or predict how everything will unfold. Leadership requires making hard decisions, and we will get some of them wrong. The deeper work is in how we learn from those moments and allow them to guide us through future fog.

This is where the return matters. Coming back to what is in front of us is a kind of recalibration, a way of clearing the glass and looking again for something that is more honest. From there, mistakes can become part of building something more intentional and compassionate.

This is not work we do alone. Just as the mosaic is made of many pieces, each carrying its own story, the communities we lead are formed by the people within them. We rely on each other's experiences and perspectives. A mosaic is the harmony of individual pieces finding flow, creating something more beautiful and complex than any one of us could make alone.

The same is true of the systems we build as educators. Like grout between the pieces, healthy systems hold everything together without smoothing away what makes each piece distinct. The strongest ones make space for healthy mistakes, for being human, for being vulnerable. We grow together. We fail together. We learn together. We trust each other.

What is asked of us as leaders is not perfection, but attention. A willingness to return, to notice, and to guide what we can, even when the rest remains uncertain.

**Author Bio**

**Angela Spayde** is the Head of School at Montessori Children's House in Washington, a school that operates using sociocratic governance. She holds a master's degree in Integrative Education and has worked in Montessori education for over a decade. Her work explores relational leadership and reflective practice. She has a particular interest in systems-informed environments and inclusive educational practices that support both children and the adults who work with them.