

WHAT ARE WE OBSERVING AND HOW?

by Linda Davis

In this talk, Linda Davis discusses observation at the adolescent level. She explains that we must “adjust our approach for the third plane of development, for when they are becoming adults.” Using examples, she discusses the characteristics of this plane, which are helpful to recall when thinking about what to expect when observing adolescents. She reminds us that observation at this age is not simply the teacher observing the student. As they work towards an understanding of themselves and their place in society, adolescents “are becoming conscious participants in this process of unlocking potential. They are observing us.”

In *From Childhood to Adolescence* Dr. Montessori compares the changes that human beings pass through in their development.

The changes from one level to the other at these different ages could be compared to the metamorphosis of insects. ...little by little it is transformed even though it remains an animal of the same species having the same needs and habits. It is an individual that *evolves*. (1)

If we watch a caterpillar in this period of the butterfly’s life, we see it eat and eat and eat as it grows bigger and bigger and bigger. Like an elementary age child it becomes a bigger and bigger version of the same self.

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At some point the caterpillar stops eating and starts spinning a chrysalis. It is tremendously hard work. When the chrysalis is complete, we can't see most of what is happening. Finally the insect comes out of the cocoon in the form of a butterfly.

Montessori said that when a child enters the third plane of the four planes of development they are no longer a child. They are also not yet an adult. The entire period of adolescence (12-18) is a time of transforming to adulthood.

At this period of growth, observation is more important than ever, but we have to adjust our approach for the third plane of development, for when they are *becoming adults*. Tremendous changes are taking



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place, but like the butterfly in the chrysalis, we can't see everything. What we see is only part of the work of transformation.

The foundation of our work is that we must show respect for the young people in this 12-18 age group. We must err on the side of showing more respect than they deserve rather than less. This is Montessori's directive.

Why should we give them more respect than they deserve? And what does that mean anyway?

I'll start by contrasting observation of younger children with observation of adolescents. I hope that as we move along through the weekend we can always keep in mind that the ideas we are talking about are not just for the well-off or the middle class. Montessori is for *every* child all the way through the third plane.

My first example of observing the first plane could be from any Montessori school, but it is from a 3-6 class that I observed late last spring. The class is part of a public charter school that is in a Chicago neighborhood that has such a degree of violence Spike Lee is calling it Chi-raque. Children who attend the school are from age three to almost age twelve. It *is* a Montessori school and there is an increasing number of similar schools around the country.

I was in this school and ready to observe for the morning. I entered the room, sat in the chair indicated, and had just opened my purse to get a pen when I was approached by two beaming faces. They quite charmingly introduced themselves, and explained that they could tell me whatever I might need to know about their class. I thanked them, expressed regret that I couldn't chat, and said I needed to do my work. They said they understood about doing work and, with empathy and respect, expressed in that wonderfully grown-up just-turned-six way, they went to do their work.

I hadn't been sitting there too long when a small child absolutely loaded with energy spilled a sizable number of beads in the vicinity of where I was sitting. "Not again!" he declared to himself. He began hunting down each bead, grumbling, and twice yelling at someone who asked what he was doing. Finally the only beads

left were under my chair. He looked at me, straightened himself to an erect stance, looked with intensity and said, "Scuse me, Mrs.," and then dove under my chair as I quickly moved my feet. I love observing in classrooms and pretending I'm invisible, even when there are those little reminders that the children know I'm there. But they proceed with their life and usually do whatever they would do if I weren't there.

That works with children up to around the age eleven or twelve. At that point, the children begin to think that everyone in the world is looking at them all the time. Once I was observing in a 9-12 class. It was spring, and there were signs of adolescence sprouting up all over the place. In the midst of the class' clean-up time, one of the oldest students, a girl who I had barely noticed, said to the teacher in a very loud voice, "Now look at what you've done. Now everyone is looking at me!" Actually, we hadn't been looking until her dramatic declaration.

What are the psychological characteristics of adolescents? Given the last example of adolescent behavior, do we start with *self-centered* and *egocentric*?

They are as self-centered as the butterfly is in its chrysalis. They must focus on themselves and what they are doing, on who they are, so they can find their place in society.

When I say that the third plane is a time of focus on developing as an individual in society you might say, Well isn't that true of all four planes? What about social cohesion in the first plane and the collaborative work of the second plane? The difference is that now, in the third plane, we're talking about the "big time," the society of grown-ups, the real thing. We're talking about young people from 12-18 knowing themselves and their value to others.

...Each individual has to sublimate their will for society to exist. But if the individual obeys without true self-control, if they don't have an "awakened and exercised will" whole nations will come to disaster. The stakes are high. We've got to get it right.

Dr. Montessori called them *social newborns*. They have all that wonderful experience from their first twelve years of life, and all of that comes together and takes a different form in the third-plane transformation.

I should pause here and say that I'm not talking about puberty. All those physical changes that make up puberty are very real, but what we are learning from current brain research is that adolescence is not just about those physical changes. It's not even *mostly* about those physical changes. It's also not about being sassy and clever. It's about their brains going through a very special stage that the world calls adolescence. Adolescence is mostly about brain changes.

A ten-year-old girl with the body of a young adult or bright ten-year-old boy who can recite entire Monty Python skits, they are *not* adolescents. We have to work with our elementary colleagues to be sure that the 9–12 year olds are given an environment to complete their childhood and are not being pushed ahead into the next plane.

We have two different groups of concerns with the adolescent: those of society and those of the individual adolescent. Montessori said that if we were to talk of sensitive periods for the 12–18 group they would be for justice and dignity: *social* justice and *personal* dignity, society and the individual. She tells us that during this time of life they must learn about society, the real thing, with grown-ups and grown-up work. And they must be protected because they are a kind of newborn, a social newborn. Teach them about the world and protect them from the world.

Where do we start? We start, we hope, with a human being who has had the freedom to develop their own individual personality. We observe to see what that personality is. We observe to see how that personality finds its place with peers—yes, peers—but not just peers; they are also finding their place with adults. They must become aware of themselves as an autonomous being and achieve freedom to act without help from others. They will only be able to take their place in human society, to be a contributing member of society, if they can take care of themselves, and not be dependent on others.

We have to offer them a prepared environment where they can feel success in these efforts. We have to observe for signs that they are feeling that success and that it's real. We must create valorization.

It's as much about individual development and self-knowledge as it is about learning how to become a contributing member of the group.

She says, "Individual freedom is the basis of all the *rest*. Without such freedom it is impossible for personality to develop fully" (*Education and Peace* 101). She says that this may seem at odds with the functioning of the human collectivity, which requires laws and restrictions that individuals are forced to follow.

How in the world do we know what to do, or even what to look for when we observe? "Only the child can light our path through it" (*Education and Peace* 102). "Only he can help us understand the complications of social life and man's unconscious aspiration to be free... in order that he may bring about a better social order."

"Education must aim at improving the individual in order to improve society" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 59).

Society depends on the obedience of its individual members. She warns us that each individual has to sublimate their will for society to exist. But if the individual obeys without true self-control, if they don't have an "awakened and exercised will" whole nations will come to disaster. The stakes are high. We've got to get it right.

We need a simple way to keep this all in our heads and hearts and souls.

In the 1990s, when I first began working with adolescents, I was fortunate to be able to discuss these ideas as well as what I was observing with Margaret Stephenson. She said, "Think of the adolescent as seeking the answer to these three questions:

- Who am I?
- Where do I fit in?
- What contribution can I make?

Several months after she proposed these three questions I found myself watching a television show with Elvis Costello and some of his musician friends. One of the friends was Bruce Springsteen. After the two of them performed a song together they sat down for an interview. Elvis said something like, “So, Bruce, your songs seem to continue to appeal to young people, to teens. You must understand what it feels like to be that age. How would you describe it?”

Springsteen responded, “Well, Elvis, I think that when you’re in your teens you’re basically asking yourself, “Who am I? Where do I fit in? What values am I going to live by?” My mouth dropped open. Bruce is a Montessorian! And Margaret Stephenson and Bruce Springsteen agree, so it must be true.

Several years before my plunge into working with adolescents, I had no interest in working with adolescents. Why would I want to work with those obnoxious, sarcastic, cynical teens? The school stopped with the equivalent of sixth grade, and there was no program for adolescents.

But former students came back to visit, and they were greeted with love and excitement. And now they were adolescents. I observed how they walked. I observed the look on their faces. I listened to what they said. The sum of my observations could only lead to one conclusion: They were confident, considerate, sensitive, and were *none* of the things I thought teenagers were.

We observe the adolescent with humility, a humility that is rooted in the knowledge of the gifts that we can use, the gifts that they can develop, and the potential gifts that can become a part of all mankind.

Meanwhile I had been doing some observing of the class across the hall from my elementary class. Through the one-way glass in the door, I could stand and watch the toddler community. I vividly remember a tiny boy standing in front of a table that was just the right height, holding objects that were just the right size for his hands.

He was preparing banana slices and then arranging them on a plate – very carefully I might add. He was about two years old. Isn’t that age known as the *terrible twos*? The age of temper tantrums and non-stop defiance? That is

most definitely not what I saw going on here. I remember thinking, "If an environment prepared for two-year-olds can result in this kind of focused, constructive activity done with what appeared to be pleasure and joy, what could we do for thirteen-year-olds if they had the environment that they need? What might *they* be capable of?"

In 1992 I started working with young adolescents. I wasn't disappointed in them. They constantly surprised me with their ideas and their insights. Where was the sarcasm, the cynicism I was expecting? When I asked Miss Stephenson about this she said, "Sarcasm and cynicism are the adolescent's version of a temper tantrum. They are telling us that their needs aren't being met."

What are the characteristics we are looking for in adolescents? Are they egocentric, emotional bundles of contradictions with the potential for criminal activity, or are they sensitive, self-knowing bundles of love, with the potential for saving humankind? Who are they?

I asked a group of 12–15 year olds in a Montessori school, "Who are you? What is it like to be an adolescent?" Here are their responses, some are condensed.

Confusing.

Fun, exciting, and overwhelming.

Awkward, hilarious, and kind of disturbing.

Extreme. I feel everything more.

It's a time that some things make sense in your head and yet you can't explain it out loud.

Most of all an adolescent needs space. They need to be able to go into their room and think and learn from mistakes. They need someone that they know will always be there for them and they need love.

We need space and freedom. We need our own space to change and really figure out who we are.



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I read this list to the mother of a thirteen-year-old yesterday. When I looked up, she was reaching for the Kleenex to wipe away the tears.

I haven't given you a checklist of characteristics because I'm hoping that you will observe yourself and your expectations of adolescents as much as the adolescents themselves. We still need to observe, but above all we need to understand that they are becoming conscious participants in this process of unlocking potential. *They* are observing *us*. *The* observation of the child is the key to unlocking the child's potential. The observation of the adolescent is the key to unlocking the potential of humankind.

This may not sound humble, which has been indicated as necessary for the act of observation. But I also remember Miss Stephenson saying that to be truly humble you have to recognize what your strengths are. We observe the adolescent with humility, a humility that is rooted in the knowledge of the gifts that we can use, the gifts that they can develop, and the potential gifts that can become a part of all mankind.

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