

# OBSERVATIONS

by A. M. Joosten

*Joosten begins his article by telling us that love and knowledge together are the foundation for our work with children. This combination is at the heart of our observation. With this as the foundation, he goes on to offer practical advice to aid our practice of observation. He offers a “List of Objects of Observation” to help guide our eye and tips for recording observations. He includes a “Guide for Psychological Observation” from The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1 and ends with the message of observation as a key to the improvement of humanity through our work with the child.*

## I

The real help which the directress can give does not consist in blind obedience to the impulse of feeling. In her love for the child, she has to introduce discipline. Discrimination has to guide this love in its manifestations. Love bestows greater satisfaction on the giver than on the receiver. True love serves those in need of it without drawing attention to itself and, when it reveals itself, it is not in the guise of a benefactor, but as one who performs a natural and spontaneous act. (*The Absorbent Mind*)

When we learn to appreciate and value Dr. Maria Montessori’s life-work as a work of art, but also when we learn to see it as a living organism, we have to discover the energy which animates this work of art, this organism. It goes without saying then that we shall first look towards the child who is its ever fresh and living centre around which it came into being developed and continues to develop; this

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*Albert Max Joosten (1914–1980) was one of Maria Montessori’s earliest students and played a major role in popularizing the Montessori method of education. At different points in his career, Joosten directed the Indian Montessori Training Courses, the Good Shepherd Maria Montessori Training Centre in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and the Montessori Training Center of Minnesota. He was an AMI examiner and a member of the AMI Sponsoring Committee and the AMI International Pedagogical Committee. Reprinted from Around the Child 3 (1958): 23-31. Reprinted by permission from Katinka van Hall.*

is right. More right is it, and more natural too that we then think of Dr. Montessori's own personality glowing through it even after she left us. She indeed created this work of art, no doubt guided and inspired by the child, but the child itself could not build it. It could communicate its vital energy and its truth to this was made possible by the adult who gave it this opportunity and recognized its manifestations. On the adults who handle it will depend whether this work of art and this organism preserve its character and its life, whether in their hands also it will live and be a creative act. A merely technical application of more or less exact instructions lowers it to less than well-exercised craft. It then becomes a kind of mechanical routine and loses its inner life (and, therefore, also its power of development). Then, also, it kills life in those who thus apply it.

How can we preserve this life and transmit it? How can we develop it within ourselves and thus also in our work? How can we help it to blossom ever more richly? Can love for the child do so? Yes, and no. It can if we realize that this love must have a positive starting point and must assume a concrete form; not if it remains vague sentiment.

Love requires knowledge and knowledge love. Already St. Augustine wrote that we can know something only according to the measure of our love. We may say also that we can love something only in as much as we know something of it, although love can go far beyond that knowledge. Knowledge, however, must be there as a *starting point*. Love will then find its form in the "help" offered to the object of this love and this effective, form-assuming love, this act of love grows into charity. In its most concrete and real manifestation we find this love when it is directed towards God and towards our fellow men. Both are directed towards a "person" with whom we have something in common. God does not need us, but in our freedom he gives us the invaluable privilege to do something for Him all the same, by building our life according to His Will and His Plan drawing on the strength and power which He gives us and which we implore from Him. Our fellow men need us as social beings. Our fellow men in course of development need us in a very special manner, because their environment of development depend on our creative power and its developmental character is determined by us. Both forms of charity belong together and are essentially

one, although hierarchically they occupy different levels, the lower dependent on the higher. We can, indeed, help out fellow men only in the real sense of the word in as much as we follow God's Will and Plan for them and serve God in them.

Here, we are back at the close connection between love (as an animating, life-giving and life-preserving energy) and knowledge. In order to be able to help truly, we have to know, to recognize.

This knowledge so very indispensable can be drawn from different, again hierarchically different, sources. A direct source which therefore, surpasses all others is Revelation. A derivative source our discursively working intelligence which gathers and constructs science. The intelligence, however, must "observe" the manifestations of truth in order to make true the knowledge it gathers and this particularly when directed towards life and vital phenomena.

Observation, loving, exact, modest, (i.e., humble), continuous and especially objective (this does not contradict its loving character, but precisely makes it true) is the cornerstone of Dr. Montessori's work of art. With this finely shaped and delicately handled brush she painted and retouched for us the very real, majestic and inspiring picture of the "new" child. Observation is the source of the vital and developmental power of her work and it animates the love which flows through it. This is a must do for us also if our work is to preserve its vital and artistic character, if we are to avoid danger of slow, often unconscious degeneration and mechanical imitation. By observation in the above mentioned manner we must render possible for ourselves that we "carry-out" what she has given and shown us.

Observation itself is an art and has to be exercised. It is not easy. We must free ourselves from so much *prejudice* especially with regard to the child (Dr. Maria Montessori, "The Formation of Man"). Observation does not judge, much less "pre-judge." Judgment follows, repeated, pure observations and prudent ever renewed, testing interpretation of our observations. We must also learn to direct our observations so that merely sensorial looking, which is often even more or less sleepy or sleep-arousing "staring," become mentally alert, intelligent observing. We must also learn (and how difficult this is) to spread the field of our observations over ever

more phenomena and individuals. We have to reach a level where our observation does not exclude our direct activity with and for the children, but accompanies it constantly, guiding it continuously, like the beating of the heart.

All this requires exercise, time, much time, patience and perseverance, but also direction. The purpose of this articles is to propose some possibilities for exercise in the hope that they may help to render more easy and efficient our ultimate efforts at observation of the individual children and the group as a whole. They should help us follow the "Guide to Psychological Observation" indicated at the end of Chapter III of *The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1* and to draw up the observation curve described on the pages preceding it. Above all, they should prepare us to animate our work for the children by means of animate observation, to make of our work a real act of love which help their life and enrich and raise our own. "Vast and splendid is our sphere of observation; it is the inner life of man. This we are not only about to observe, but to serve." (*The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1* "The Preparation of the Teacher")

## II

It is obvious that the possession of senses and of knowledge is not sufficient to enable a person to observe. It is a habit which must be developed by practice...Such preparation should generate in our consciousness a conception of life capable of transforming us, of calling forth a special activity and an attitude which will make us efficient for our task. (*The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1*)

A certain acquaintance and familiarity with the Montessori method, its principles and its recognition of the child, should naturally be present before the real exercises in observation can commence. It would be good also to pay a few visits, preferably to different Houses of Children in order to form a global impression, which will, in its turn, arouse interest in details and inspire the will to carry out serious exercises ( "As in the little child internal coordination is the point of crystallization round which the entire psychical form will coalesce, so in the teacher interest in the phenomenon observed will be the centre round which her complete new personality will form spontaneously." Thereafter real exercise should begin.

During a certain period of time one should limit oneself to only one object. A list could be made of possible objects of observation which offers opportunity for choice and change and will thus help to keep interest alive. Often, especially among beginners, a certain boredom appears quite soon. It is caused by the impression that after a while nothing "new" is seen. Deeper penetration and consequently, more discoveries require inner maturation and integration and this calls for time. Precisely during this period of inner development there should be ample opportunity for change in the objects of observation. These different objects should be such as to permit later co-ordination and to stimulate the formation of understanding of their inter-dependence.

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Such a list may now follow. It is far from complete and intends only to give as example and indication. If we compare it with Dr. Montessori's "Guide for Psychological Observation," we shall see how it leads on to that.

### III

#### LIST OF OBJECTS OF OBSERVATION

1. *One child only* (succession of activities; of concentration in work; of its movements (disorderly, orderly, attentive and their succession; repetitions of the activity, etc.).
2. *One material only* (an arbitrarily chosen part of the apparatus as it passes from child to child or remains out of use; repetitions around it).

3. *Intervention or non-intervention* of the directress comparing it with our own inclinations to intervene or not.
4. *Individual, group or collective activities* (spontaneous or suggested from without).
5. *Care of the environment* (out of an inner urge or after discovery of an outer need; the inanimate of animate environment, plants, animals).
6. *Succession of order and disorder* (later on it can be tried to find the cause of this succession, in the child itself, or in the environment; or also the reactions of a child or of the group to disturbance of order can be observed; how order is restored by the children themselves or by intervention of the directress; the nature of phenomena of disorder).
7. *Social behavior* examples of co-operation, how it started, around which activity; helpfulness, when, by whom, to whom; how it started (spontaneously or by request) and how it finished; "leadership" and following among the children; interest for and admiration of the work of others, spontaneously or by request).
8. *Choice of Activities* (how a child chooses; how it expresses its need of presentation of a change of work, of an activity on a higher level).
9. *Errors* (attitude towards an error committed, in different fields: movement, sensorial, intellectual, moral, and social, how errors are corrected; when interest for the control of error is awakened).
10. *Fatigue* (expressions of physical or mental fatigue; how they are expressed; how they are overcome).
11. *Obedience* (when obedience becomes manifest; the "three degrees of obedience" (accidental, directed, constant

and with joy); how it is expressed; in connection with that towards whom (adult, companions, strangers).

12. *Concentration* (by whom; around which activity; how soon; how long; in spite of what disturbance in the environment; how protected by the child, by the environment, by the directress; how regained after interruption; how constant in a particular child).
13. *Normalisation* (how and when deviations disappear; characteristic phenomena of different deviations; characteristics of achieved normalisation).
14. *Abstraction* (how abstraction is reached; when the child himself “discovers” to have reached it, i.e., to be working with using the apparatus; how this discovery is expressed; how and when a particular material is permanently discarded).
15. *Intelligence* (how expressed; with regard to what; spontaneous or stimulated from without).
16. *Moral sensitivity* (how; with regard to what; emotional or objective).
17. *Expressions of will* (positive; negative; perseverance).
18. *Imagination* (with regard to what; in which form; with what technical perfection and fugue; as an expression of more penetrating and further reaching understanding).
19. *Emotions* (joy; sorrow; depression; exuberance; affection; serene calm; anger; slow and persistent or flaring up; irritation; plaintiveness; patience; impatience etc. in whom; when; in connection with what of with whom; how long; how often).
20. *Particular attitudes* (in work; in sensitivity; in social behavior; in moral behavior; in attachment, etc.) Nice, interesting, and surprising anecdotes should also be recorded carefully.

#### IV

Observations regarding these points and their particular details should, of course, also be prepared and this applies especially to some of them. They should be continued too for some time in order to be able to form a clear picture of their process (not always progress). Continued observation regarding a chosen object can be carried out for several successive days or also (especially a bit later) on certain days of the week in order to survey a longer period. It may be helpful to prepare beforehand a kind of framework within which their records can be made. If, for instance it is observed whether a particular material is used, a single symbol (+ or -) is sufficient and it can be placed in compartments indicating a chosen time-unit, say 15 minutes. The page is then divided in these compartments, on top the time-units are indicated and on the left hand side, vertically, the material, or later materials, followed as they pass from child to child or remain in their place. The same can be done when one follows the activities of one (and later more children). Naturally, symbols cannot be used in that case. If, on the other hand one should choose to observe the predominance of certain kinds of activities (exercises of practical life, sensorial, intellectual, etc.) in one child or in the group as a whole, symbolic indications may again be uti-



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lized. The observations concerning some of the objects mentioned above can, indeed, be made with regard to a single child as well to a group of children or even the whole community. For instance Nos. 2, 6, 10, 11, 12, 19, provided one concentrates on the occurrence or not of a single phenomenon or expression. This in turn can give an indirect preparation for more widely spread attention and also for detailed phenomena or details and shades within a particular phenomenon later on. While determining which group will be observed, children of one age can be chosen, or children of the age who were admitted at more or less the same time, or children who have reached approximately the same work-level or who show the same difficulties. The directress responsible for the group can give help and make useful suggestions.

Later on two or more objects of observation can be combined. These can be chosen because of their reciprocal independence or also on the basis of a possible relationship. Or again, precisely in order to emphasize a probable contrast. For instance, two children (from the same family or not) of different ages, but having been admitted at the same age; of the same age; of the same age and admitted at the same time; and only child and one from a large family; a child already orderly and one still disorderly; a healthy and a sickly child; they can then be observed with regard to any of the above mentioned points. Instead of choosing two children, two points can also be observed simultaneously, for instance order and choice of activity, obedience and work-level, normalisation and choice of activity or level of obedience, intelligence and will, intelligence and imagination, to mention only a few.

A completely different exercise which is done outside the real time of observation consists in the interpretation of observations made with the help of the records taken. It is interesting to do this also with regard to observations made and recorded by someone else. To have one and the same observation and series of observations on a single point made by different people compared and interpreted and then to compare and discuss these interpretations is also useful. Those people in turn, could differ in their knowledge and experience of the method. It is very helpful also to have observations compared and put in relation with the phenomena described by Dr. Montessori in her books, with indications given by her, both

of a practical and of a theoretical nature. Perhaps only after a basis has been laid through these preparatory exercises should it be tried to summarize systematically the records made during a term, later on such terminal summaries at the end of the year and the annual summaries finally when an individual child leaves the House of Children.

Ultimately sufficient progress should have been made to make it possible to observe the whole community and each individual child. Then full justice can be done to the "Guide for Psychological Observation" already mentioned more than once.

Often, especially among beginners, a certain boredom appears quite soon. It is caused by the impression that after a while nothing "new" is seen. Deeper penetration and consequently, more discoveries require inner maturation and integration and this calls for time. Precisely during this period of inner development there should be ample opportunity for change in the objects of observation.

## V

### GUIDE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

(*THE ADVANCED MONTESSORI METHOD, VOLUME 1 CHAPTER III*)

#### Work

1. Note when a child begins to work, with constancy, at a particular task, what the task is and how long he continues working at it (the period of time from start to finish, repetition of the same activity).
2. Individual peculiarities in application to particular activities.
3. To what activities the child applies himself during the same day and with how much perseverance.
4. If the child has periods of spontaneous industry and for how many days these periods continue.
5. How he manifest his need to progress.

6. What activities he chooses in their sequence, working at them steadily.
7. Persistence in spite of stimuli in the environment which would tend to distract attention.
8. If after forced interruption, the child resumes the activity which was interrupted.

### **Conduct**

1. Note the state of order or disorder in the acts of the child.
2. His disorderly actions.
3. Note if changes of behavior take place during the development of the phenomena of work.
4. Note whether during the establishment of ordered actions there are (a) crises of joy; (b) states of serenity; (c) manifestation of affection.
5. The part the child takes in the development of his companions.

### **Obedience**

1. Note if the child responds to the invitation when he is called.
2. Note if and when the child begins to take part in the work of others with an intelligent effort.
3. Note how obedience to a summons becomes regular.
4. Note how obedience to commands becomes regular.
5. Note when the child obeys eagerly and joyously.
6. Note the relation of the various phenomena of obedience in their degrees (a) to the development of work; (b) to changes of conduct.

## VI

A careful study of this "Guide" shows clearly that the exercises mentioned in III and IV do indeed offer a preparation for it. The "Guide" is grouped around three headings characteristics of the child's life in the prepared environment; spontaneous constructive activity, normalisation of his personality and behavior, inner discipline as its most splendid result.

Each point of observation indicated stresses of moment of development and presupposes profound study and knowledge of Dr. Montessori's own observations, of the conclusions she drew from them and of the practical preparation of the environment based on them (organization, directions for behavior of the directress and the relations between her and the children, means of development).

Observation following this "Guide" is, therefore, really an achievement which presupposes personal development. It is not a point of departure for this development. The possibility of making full use of this "Guide" is reached at the end of a long road of inner perfectionment and then opens a much vaster field of view, giving entry to a new region which is practically unlimited.

Where, in this "Guide," the child as an individual is mentioned, we can often substitute for it the community of children as a whole and observe it in view of any of the phenomena or points indicated. This, in its turn, will lead to the plotting of the development-curves and work-curves so clearly and inspiringly described in the same chapter of *The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1*. They "illustrate" and "materialize" particularly the victory over labile inner order, of "false fatigue" and the development of the child's choice of his activities. They, therefore, also give an indirect picture of the adult's progressive withdrawal to the background which enables him to concentrate increasingly on his most essential task and to restrict his direct intervention to cases of genuine necessity. They also show, on the other hand, that this development of the adult is based on ever more refined observation. Finally that "Guide" indicates which points have to be kept in mind while making the indispensable daily class notes and weekly individual notes. This is an absolutely obligatory part of the directress' duties.

These daily and weekly notes should, of course, also include a more technical and formal part: which presentations were given to individual children, groups or the whole community, progress and achievements in each of the groups of activities. The observations and records made in each of these two fields must then be summarised and they should be given to the children's parents when they visit us during our consulting hours and on parents' meetings. There also we can discuss and explain them.

The summaries given to the parents should be made in simple language and avoid, as much as possible, technical terms. They should also give some indication of the function of the different groups of activities offered in our children. It is in fact, ignorance of these functions which so often causes misunderstandings and lack of appreciation with regard to the children themselves and to the Children's House. Here, in India, we use a simple scheme for these summaries. Each individual report mentions the full name of the child, his age at admission, stature, and weight and attendance percentage. Then there follow notes under the following headings: 1. *Exercise of Practical Life* (lead to the refinement of motor coordination, independence in care for oneself and one's environment, manners



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and social behavior); 2. *Sensorial activities* (develop consciousness and intelligent exploration of the environment and lay a foundation for abstraction); 3. *Language* (development of spoken speech, enrichment of vocabulary and perfectionment of pronunciation, preparation and acquisition of written language); 4. *Arithmetics* (understanding of number and its applications in arithmetical operations); 5. *Other activities* (singing, story-telling, general knowledge, drawing, handicraft, etc.); 6. *Social behaviour* (manners, attitude towards other children and adults, co-operation and serviceability); 7. *Discipline* (orderly and disorderly conduct, obedience, quiet); 8. *General remarks*; 9. *Date*. These reports are signed by the directress, the principal and the parents.

It would be ideal if all this would be well within the directress' reach before she has completed her training. If this is not the case, we may certainly expect that her sense of responsibility and inner discipline have sufficiently developed to ensure that she reach this point within the first two years of independent application of the method. This should definitely be one of the criteria for endorsement of the diploma.

Outer necessity may, however, and can never be more than a stimulus and help. The inner acceptance of the necessity to observe in a disciplined manner and to continue perfecting our observations and records in order to be able to help the child really and lovingly must give us the necessary strength and urge.

We may mention here also that precisely these varied and ever more penetrating observations will place at our disposal a wealth of material to enliven parents' meetings and individual contact with parents and those interested. With such a vast and comprehensive fund of material in our hands it should really not be difficult to find subjects for talks at meetings, to discuss them in a lively manner with a wide range of practical examples.

In conclusion we have to stress that we owe it to the child, the "forgotten citizen" and still ignored social "value" to develop not only our observations unceasingly, but also to place the fruits of them at the disposal of the still embryonic "science of man" for which Dr. Montessori broke so much ground and which she so strongly

recommended. This is social and moral obligation. Its fulfillment can make a precious contribution to the survival and reconstruction of our world community which is so seriously undermined and threatened by man himself. Dr. Montessori, during the whole of her life dedicated to this cause, reminded us of this social side of our mission. So does our experience of the “new” child. It is an inner conviction from which we cannot escape. It is implied in the title of Dr. Montessori’s book *Through the Child to a New World* (Dutch edition). This also she expresses in “The Formation of Man” when she writes, “Believe me, the attempt of so-called modern education which simply tries to deliver the child from presumed repression are not on the right path...The question is not to deliver man from some bonds, but to reconstruct; and this reconstruction requires the elaboration of a “science of the human spirit.” It is a patient work, an endeavor based on research, to which thousands of people, dedicated to this aim, must contribute. Whoever works for this ideal must be actuated by a great ideal, much greater than those political ideals, which have promoted social improvements which concern only the material life of some groups of men oppressed by injustice or misery.

This ideal is universal in its scope. It aims at the deliverance of the whole of humanity.

