

OBSERVATION

by Shannon Helfrich

Helfrich addresses two perspectives from which to think about observation in the classroom: that of the teacher observing her classroom, her group, and its needs, and that of the outside observer coming into the classroom. Offering advice from her own experience, she encourages and defends both. Do not be afraid of the disruption of outside visitors, she tells us, for “Children are the most adaptive, flexible, go with the moment creatures I know. They love having observers because it validates for them the specialness of the work they are engaged in. Let them share this love of their work with others. You can also share your love of this work with others.”

Observation is an essential aspect of the work of the Montessori teacher. Observation was the most basic tool Dr. Maria Montessori brought from her background as a physician and applied to her work as an educator. As each of [us] progresses in our maturation as a Montessori teacher, we ought to grow in our capacity as a discerning observer and this skill should be applied to the everyday work we do with the children.

To give a focus to this discussion, let's begin with a definition of “observation.” The *Websters New World Dictionary* offers a couple of definitions relative to Montessorians. The dictionary refers to observation as “the act, practice or power of noticing,” it goes on to include, “the act or practice of noting and recording facts and events, as for some scientific study” and then further elaborates on obser-

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vation as “a comment or remark based on something observed” (p. 982, Second College Ed.). Do these definitions relate to our practice or observation? What is observation but “noticing, noting, remarking”? The only word I might be tempted to change is “act to art,” for I believe that observation is an art. It is a developed and honed skill both in the act of noticing and noting, but even more so in the capacity to attribute meaning and understanding to that which is observed, the remarking. We are engaged in a scientific study of the child and the child’s activities. We may not always think of our work in this mode, but it is no less true. Dr. Montessori approached her study of the child as a scientist and she challenges us to follow that same attitude.

There are two perspectives from which to look at this topic. One view is that of the classroom teacher for whom observation is the life blood of understanding the group and its needs. The other view is that of inviting observers into our environments, the life blood of our school communities.

First a look at observation as a tool for the teacher. All of us remember the time spent on observation during training. We played little games, some of which made sense and some of which were “interesting.” And then we followed with observations of children in the classroom. Early on in training, the emphasis was on observation as a skill to be developed and used. What might not always have been so clear was the content of what we are to observe and why this is important in the overall scheme of things. We still play some of the observation games to highlight certain aspects of observation as a skill that can be learned. But now some of the observation training is done with videos of children in the classroom. Through the video scenes we are able to pinpoint specific aspects of the Montessori philosophy, especially those principles that tend to be somewhat nebulous in nature. We can look for concentration events, we can look at patterns of repetition, we can look at child-child interactions or even child-adult interactions. With a short vignette and following discussion, it is possible for students to see in real life the components of the work that are essential to the prepared environment. All the observation skills training are aimed at assisting the development and refinement of a discerning scientist.

You might ask, why then don't we do all the 90 hours of observation in this carefully controlled manner? Have you ever seen a classroom function as a carefully controlled experiment? Me neither, for the reality is, the children don't know the script. They are blithely going about their business in their own somewhat unpredictable way. The art of being a Montessorian is to know how to observe the unexpected, the "what is," and to glean from this knowledge and understanding about each individual child as well as the group as a whole. So off to the classrooms we go!

Let's return to the teacher already in the classroom. Does s/he need to continue to practice observation? I would emphatically say YES!! I recommend that every teacher take a minimum of 15 minutes a day to do nothing other than observe the group. If this is done at different times each day and from different perspectives in the prepared environment, the teacher can gain unique insights regarding the group. I kept a small red notebook near my chair. After finishing a presentation wherein I should "fade and observe," I was automatically reminded of the observation part of this task. In the few seconds it took to jot a note about the presentation just given, I had the luxury of remembering to stay connected with this individual child even though my body and my energy had been removed from



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the scene. The red notebook in my hand was also a signal to me to stop and take a few minutes to mentally check in with my group. My few jotted notes might be about particular children that were observed or about something I observed in the nature of the group. This was always the means from which I planned the next few grace and courtesy lessons—there was always an observable need if I only took time to see it! I could

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see who was really engaged with work, a.k.a. concentrating, and who was successfully using work to just fill time. And yes, I could readily see who was wandering at loose ends and in need of some energy and redirection from me. Don't despair, I wasn't very good at this at all in the early years of my teaching, but I learned it's valued from believing in observation as important in my work and from forcing myself to trust that the group would not disintegrate if I took time out to observe. Over time, I learned to use these observations as the basis for planning the next few presentations for each child and as the key to responding appropriately to the ever changing nature of the group. Each of you will develop, or already have developed, your own style of note taking and interpreting your observations. It doesn't matter what system you use—it does matter that you do it. To use Nike's phrase, "Just do it!" Just believe in the importance of observation enough to make it a priority at some point every day.

The second perspective is that of inviting, or allowing, observers into our classes. This is not some foreign or alien imposition foisted upon us by the administration to secure new students, or even the training centre imposing again with student observers. Observation of Montessori classrooms has been a part of our tradition for as long as Montessori classrooms have been in existence. Dr. Montessori herself wanted the world to come to her door to see the wonderful things the children had discovered. Believe me, these were far from "normalized" classrooms, where all was perfect and

all the children were focused and concentrated, doing just exactly what had been shown to them.

I think we sometimes trap ourselves into thinking that Dr. Montessori set up perfect little showcases. Or we think that somehow, her bleak and limited environments were perfectly designed to allow observation without the children ever noticing. They weren't!! One has only to go into Dr. Montessori's writings to find anecdotes, one after the other, about children's spontaneous interactions with visitors to these classes.

Dr. Montessori was not protecting the children as if their concentration was so tentative and vulnerable that they couldn't be exposed to real life. She welcomed in anyone who was interested. Dr. Montessori trusted that the concentration that was already evident could be recaptured if it was interrupted and that once children were engaged, quite often, they literally ignored the visitors. Dr. Montessori trusted in the activity with the materials to evoke concentration. She noticed that children could even stop what they were doing, have a conversation with someone about their activity and return to it once the conversation was over. The child, indeed, escalated the engagement, because he was able to experience what he knows on another level—through the conversation.

Another misunderstanding regarding outside observers is that too much adult energy disrupts the group and destroys concentration. I must admit that the most intrusive "adult energy" is usually from the adults who are with the children all the time, not from those momentary visitors. I have experience and witnessed classes where a whole crowd of adults descended upon the class at once. At least half the children seemed to be engaged with the visitors and I was sure chaos would reign soon—I would just pray that it would hold off until the visitors departed. And yet, it never happened!! Yes, the

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noise level went up some and the focus on the work shifted, but as soon as the adults left, the children quietly went back to work, as if to say, "That was a nice interlude, but now it's time to go back to work." I found that the children always enjoyed the opportunity to show someone else the exciting things they were doing. This is a little ego trip and builds the child's self-esteem.

My classroom was used for observation and practice teaching back "in the old days" when there were only a few classes available. It was expected that I might have as many as 3-4 observers at a time. The only trick I needed was to put student observers in separate observation places and not beside each other. The children loved the observers and grew much from their interactions with them. I know this sounds like a plug for classroom observation, but it is also a plea to free yourselves from the agony and responsibility you feel to protect the children in unnatural ways. Children are the most adaptable, flexible, go with the moment creatures I know. They love having observers because it validates for them the specialness of the work they are engaged in. Let them share this love of their work with others. You can also share your love of this work with others.

E.M. Standing wrote, "the science of being a Montessori teacher consists in knowing beforehand the general function of the prepared environment and the nature and purpose of every piece of material in it. . . . The art of being a teacher lies in knowing how, and when, to give any particular lesson to any particular child, or group of children." (p. 305, Mentor Books, 1962 edition). The role of the teacher as the dynamic link between the children and the prepared environment requires the art of the observer. For it is only in the moment of observation that true insight into the child can be achieved. It is only through observation that the teacher begins to see the growth of the child, to see the emergence of the true child. It is only through observation that the teacher can affirm and believe in the child!

