

# THE ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE TO THE EYE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARENT OBSERVER

## PART I

by Mary Caroline Parker

*In acknowledging the privilege that we as Montessorians are given, “the privilege of being present as children construct themselves,” Mary Caroline Parker proposes that parents also should be given that same privilege. Parker created an “Art of Observation” workshop for the parents at her school. She walks us through the framework for the workshop itself that includes classroom observation of their children and the follow-up that she did with parents who had attended the workshop, which included a survey and a discussion group. She pulls together the responses of parents as data to analyze, quoting many of the parent responses. She provides us a summary of work that is insightful and affirming to any Montessori educator.*

---

*Mary Caroline Parker is the executive director of the Montessori Institute of North Texas (MINT), an AMI teacher training center in Dallas, TX. She holds the AMI primary diploma from Centro de Estudios de Educación in Mexico City, a BA from Smith College, a JD from American University, and an M.Ed in Montessori Integrative Learning from Endicott College. She is a former head of school at Lumin East Dallas Community School and The Barbara Gordon Montessori School (now Waypoint Montessori). Parker is a former member of the board of directors of AMI, where she served in the Humanitarian and Child Advocacy position, and she is currently a member of AMI’s Educateurs sans Frontières working group. She serves on the board of Lumin Education, which operates four Montessori programs in low-income Dallas neighborhoods, including two public charter schools and a Montessori-based Early Head Start Center. Reprinted from AMI Communications 2 (2007): 59-63. This article has been adapted from a chapter of a longer work: Parker, Mary Caroline, “The Joyous Observer: Montessori, Parent Education, and Human Development” M.Ed Thesis. Endicott College, Beverly, MA, 2006. Copyright Mary Caroline Parker, 2006.*

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;  
what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

—The Little Prince, *Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes my work as the director of a school can seem overwhelming. There are many days when all my plans go right out the window, and I find myself treading water in a flood of unexpected problems. At times I've said to myself, "I think I'll just get in my car and leave" and then could not even make it to the parking lot without meeting the next crisis walking in the door!

But even on the most turbulent day, although I can't just get in my car and leave, there's one thing I can do that never fails to put things back in perspective, and fill my heart with gratitude for my good fortune. I can observe the children. Sometimes I have the excuse of having been asked to observe a particular child.

Other times I slip in quietly, uninvited, and sit in the visitor's chair to enjoy watching life unfold. Sometimes just walking past the window of a classroom and catching a glimpse of the children calmly going about their work is enough to reassure me, and I think to myself, "Well, no matter what may seem to be wrong, in fact everything is just as it should be."

For me, as for so many Montessorians, the joy of being present in the moment with children is the ultimate reward. If we are lucky, we recognize the value of the privilege we have been granted—the privilege of being present as children construct themselves through purposeful activity and interaction with other human beings. We can't do this work for them and we can't make it happen faster. In fact, we can't make it happen at all. Our part is merely to keep them company in their experiences, to be silent witnesses to the fulfillment of the laws of nature in their development. (Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, pp. 283-84). But isn't this the greatest reward a teacher could receive?

And shouldn't that reward be given in even greater measure to those who love and care for children most, their parents? Unfortu-

nately, it sometimes seems that the very people who most deserve to enjoy the beauty that children offer so freely, their parents, are the ones least able to appreciate it, or even to see it at all.

A family therapist friend of mine describes childhood as the monitored life, because so much of a child's experience with adults is about being protected, corrected, reminded, and lectured. "The way I see it," he says, "about 99.9% of all adult communication with children, from toddlers to adolescents, is basically this kind of monitoring" (Ferguson, pp. 13-15). Parents are not used to being with their children without evaluating, judging, and telling them what to do. In fact, many parent-child interactions, especially those that result in conflict, seem to be largely about control—the parent's attempts to direct and control the child, and the child's attempts to protect herself by adapting, resisting, or escaping. Habits of constantly instructing, warning, and scolding, even though they may be rooted in the very loving and protective urges that make a mom or dad a "good" parent, can rob parents of the joy of being with their children in the moment.

At our school we do all the usual things designed to help parents enjoy observing their children. We invite them to observe in the classrooms; we send home information about "how to observe;" we distribute "Observation Guidelines." As a practical matter, however, we wonder whether these efforts really make much of an impression. Too often parents come into the classrooms wearing their anxieties and expectations like dark glasses that seem to color everything they see.

It's sad to hear the judgments some parents make when they observe, and to feel their disappointment that what they saw, whatever it might have been, was less than they expected, was somehow not good enough. "He should be more advanced than that." "She spelled a word wrong and the teacher didn't correct her." "He was just standing around watching, and the teacher wasn't telling him what to do." "I don't

Montessori saw pride and anger as the greatest barriers to the awakening of consciousness. She exhorted us to renounce power and authority, those symbols of adult importance and success.

want him sewing or washing clothes!” “She just played with those blocks the whole time.”

Montessori once compared the untrained adult to a blind person “who passes close to a delicate flower without noticing it, which he crushes out of existence without meaning to, and even without knowing that he has done so” (Standing, pp. 312-13). A moment of peaceful concentration, for example, or an interaction with a friend that seems to the trained guide to be a window into the child’s very soul, can be completely devoid of value for a parent observer, if indeed it was noticed at all.

It can be even more difficult for parents at home. All too often the few precious moments parents have to spend with their children are wasted in the blur of dealing with the minutiae of daily life, the myriad of tasks and preoccupations that seem so important at the time: talking on the cell phone, getting the dinner on the table, folding the laundry, whatever is next on the list. It’s amazingly easy to miss some of the most meaningful and beautiful experiences life has to offer, by being too distracted or too busy. The words of Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche ring true for many, “Our lives are lived in intense and anxious struggle, in a swirl of speed and aggression, in



Sunstone Montessori School, Portland, Oregon

competing, grasping, possessing, and achieving, forever burdening ourselves with extraneous activities and preoccupations.” (p. 8)

What an incalculable loss to the child, who lives and breathes within the relationship with the parent, and who must absorb all the elements necessary for the development of a secure and confident human being from that enveloping psychic and emotional environment. And what a loss for parents, who unknowingly deprive themselves of some of the deepest joy they could experience: participation, through observation, in the miracle revealed in the unfolding life of their child.

#### TO AWAKEN HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Maria Montessori once described the adult’s blindness to the workings of nature in the development of the child as a “prejudice.”

This prejudice impedes the understanding of the fact that the child constructs himself, that he has a teacher within himself and that this inner teacher also follows a programme and a technique of education, and that we adults by acknowledging this unknown teacher may enjoy the privilege and good fortune of becoming its assistants and faithful servants by helping it with our co-operation. (*The Formation of Man*, p. 46)

The remedy she prescribed to open our eyes was nothing less than a transformation in consciousness.

“If the prejudices concerning the child are addressed, the adult will be reformed because an obstacle in the adult will have been removed; part of human consciousness will be awakened.” (p. 49)

Montessori saw pride and anger as the greatest barriers to the awakening of consciousness. She exhorted us to renounce power and authority, those symbols of adult importance and success,

...to shed omnipotence, and to become a joyous observer. If the teacher can really enter into the joy of seeing things being born and growing under his own eyes, and can clothe himself in the garment of humility, many delights are reserved for him that are denied to those who assume infallibility and authority in front of a class. (*To Educate the Human Potential*, pp. 117-18)

Perhaps the most profound and moving definition of this new state of consciousness can be found in Montessori's humble description of herself, "When I am with children I am a nobody, and the greatest privilege I have when I approach them is being able to forget that I even exist, for this has enabled me to see things that one would miss if one were somebody" (*Education and Peace*, p. 85).

Mario Montessori Jr. suggested that transformation of consciousness could be achieved through training. In the Montessori approach, he said, as in psychoanalysis,

the relation of observer-participant and active-participant should be one of alliance based on mutual respect and confidence. The observer-participant should be carefully trained. He should be interested in the phenomena he is observing and understands them; he should allow situations to develop freely, abstaining from intervention when it is not necessary and acting appropriately when it is. His actions should be determined by the situation and its objectives, never by his own impulses or wishes, which might interfere with the process at hand. His aim should be to remove obstacles that inhibit the natural course of events, to promote insights that further it, and to help work this through; his attitude should be one of empathy, cooperation and patience. (*Education for Human Development*, p. 7)

Our AMI teacher training courses emphasize just such careful training in observation, and many hours of observation practice are required before teacher trainees begin to work with children. Thus a Montessori guide may well be expected to be conscious of the role he or she plays as an observer-participant. Yet parents, without any training at all, are required by nature to play the same role unconsciously, functioning as both observers and participants in their relationship with their children.

It's only logical that some level of guided practice in observation for parents could lead to a more favourable emotional environment, increased respect between parent and child, and a happier and more fulfilling experience of parenthood. The challenge is to identify the types of experiences that can awaken consciousness, and help parents set out on the path to becoming "joyous observers." In an effort to discover how schools can support parents on this journey, over the

course of a year I experimented with offering a variety of experiences to parents and gathered information about the results.

#### THE ART OF OBSERVATION WORKSHOP

My inquiry began when I decided to create a workshop using multiple approaches to the topic of observation, then ask participants (1) if they had experienced any changes they would attribute to their participation in the workshop, and (2) what particular segment of the event or approach to the topic seemed to have been most effective as a catalyst for personal change. Knowing that people have different learning styles, with some being visual and others auditory learners, while still others learn best through a multisensory approach, I decided to include various sensory modalities. I had some ideas to talk about and some pictures to illustrate them, so I started by putting together a PowerPoint presentation, and expanded the workshop from there.

I offered “The Art of Observation” workshop nine times over the course of a year at my school and at our sister school; in the afternoon and in the evening; sometimes in English only and sometimes with translation into Spanish; to parents I had known for years and to parents I had never met; to groups as large as thirty and as small as three. I refined the presentation each time, changing the content as I saw that some approaches elicited more participation than others, and adding and deleting quotations from slides and written handouts depending on the response to the material. Of course, the dynamic of the particular group always came into play. My spontaneous responses to participants and their equally spontaneous interaction with each other meant that the rhythm of each workshop—the way we moved from one experience to the next—was always unique.<sup>1</sup>

The workshop begins with a practical exercise, the first observation assignment in my own teacher training many years ago. We sit in a circle around a table on which I have placed an inanimate object (a sweater, a shawl, a plant, a flower in a vase). The parents observe the object silently for a short timed period and write whatever they like. Then I invite them to read their observations aloud, and discuss. Predictably, no two people see the same thing, and no two people

describe the object in the same way. Some invent an entire history for the simple item; some make predictions about its future fate; and some invest it with all kinds of emotional energy and anthropomorphic associations. Everyone is always amazed at what they have done when the observations are compared and discussed.

With this as a foundation, the workshop proceeds through more experiences, including

- reenactment of a teacher's observation from one of our classrooms (there are always plenty of new stories to choose from), followed by discussion;
- exercises in visualization. I ask the parents to close their eyes, and invite them to use their creative imagination as I guide them through various scenarios (for example, an important person enters your kitchen and sits silently watching as you go about your daily tasks; an honoured guest in your home criticizes the refreshments you offer);
- examples of subtleties parents may see when observing, using photos taken in our classrooms to illustrate universal tendencies such as order, concentration, manipulation, precision, and independence;
- tips on how to enjoy a classroom observation ("let your child know what will happen when you visit;" "try to come without expectations;" "observe the other children"), and descriptions of various ways a child may react when a parent suddenly appears at school, all illustrated with anecdotes from the classrooms;
- a workbook containing a blank page for the initial observation exercise, ideas and quotations to think about, our school's "Observation Guidelines," and suggestions and ideas about what one might look for in the classroom beyond just focusing on one's own child; and



- an open invitation for questions, comments, and discussion that tends to transform the workshop from a “parent education class” to an interesting, revealing, and humorous conversation among friends.

### **Parent Surveys**

After each workshop, I handed out questionnaires and asked the parents to return their responses to me after observing in their children’s classrooms. The survey contained the following questions:

1. Did The Art of Observation workshop prepare you for your visit to your child’s classroom? if so, how?
2. The workshop made me think about ...
3. I have used or thought about ideas discussed in the workshop ... (give examples if applicable)
  - when observing in my child’s classroom
  - when having a conference with my child’s teacher
  - when watching my child or interacting with him/her at home
  - when watching other children
  - other
4. The part of the workshop I liked best was ...
5. One idea I still remember from the workshop is ...
6. Has your participation in the workshop caused you to change anything? if so, what?
7. Has your participation in the workshop had any influence on your relationship with your child? If so, what?
8. Did your participation in the workshop cause you to look at your child in a different way? If so, how?
9. Other comments?

Of more than seventy parents who attended the workshops over the course of a year, only twenty-two returned the questionnaires, even with follow-up requests and reminders. And when I reviewed the responses, I was disappointed in the number of questions left blank, and the cryptic nature of some of the responses (“yes,” “no,” “N/A”). I knew that the workshops had been valuable for the parents, but obviously a written survey was not the most effective tool to find out how. It was a passing comment from a mother at one of the workshops that led me to a more fruitful source of information taking.

“Wouldn’t it be fun,” she said, “if we could all get together and talk about this again after we have observed in the classrooms?”

“Great idea! Let’s do it!”

### **The Parent Discussion Group**

At our school parents gather for coffee and bagels once a month, hanging out in the kitchen to talk and laugh together. It seemed to me that the congenial atmosphere of “bagel day” would provide an ideal transition to a parent discussion on observation. So just before the last bagel day of the school year, I invited participants from each of the workshops to come for coffee and stay for a discussion about observation, which I would videotape for later transcription.

Seven parents agreed to participate, and another category of data was born. Our group included five women and two men (plus two toddlers, one baby, and me), representing five families with 11 children ranging in age from prenatal to age five. There were single parents and couples, parents with a variety of occupations and income levels, and parents of different ethnicities and educational backgrounds.

I decided to use the survey questions to guide the discussion. These questions were not new to the parents. They had already thought about them and answered them in writing. But oh my, what a difference there was between writing and talking!

The parents brought their coffee into the after-school classroom from the kitchen, and sat around the children’s tables, which we had pulled into a group. Two moms held toddlers on their laps, and



Courtesy of Michelle Playoust

a couple took turns holding their baby. They very quickly got over their initial stiffness at the presence of the video camera, becoming quite animated in their conversation, using hand gestures, facial expressions, and expressive voices. There was lots of laughter. The back-and-forth among the parents seemed to stimulate ideas and feed the discussion. At times they seemed to speak in a form of shorthand, referring to ideas and parts of the workshop in oblique ways that an outsider would not have understood. I wondered if the common experience of attending the workshop, albeit separate workshops at different times, had not somehow created a bond that facilitated the discussion.

I had initially thought of the discussion group as merely another way of collecting data about the effectiveness of the workshop. As the parents talked, however, I began to realize that this loosely structured, face-to-face interaction had an inherent value of its own. The parents had obviously benefited from weeks or months of experience in observing their own and other children after the workshop. Now the very act of dialoguing with other parents seemed to make

some of their ideas jell on the spot. Connections were made, “light bulbs” lit up, and one parent experienced a full-blown aha moment caught on tape!

We were talking about a visualization exercise that had been part of the workshop. This exercise was designed to let parents experience within themselves how a young child may feel when a parent points out the shortcomings in a piece of work he has proudly offered. (“That’s nice, honey, but look-you spelled “love” wrong.”) In the exercise, I had asked the parents to close their eyes and imagine that an honoured guest was visiting their home (Martin Luther King? Mahatma Gandhi? The pastor of their church?). I asked them to imagine that with all their hearts they were offering to their guest the finest delicacy they could prepare, the very best they had, only to have the refreshments criticized by the important guest as “not good enough.”

In the discussion group, Belinda was recounting how her three-year-old son Kenny had chosen work after work while she was observing, each time looking back at her to see if she was watching.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, she connected that experience to the visualization exercise in the workshop,

You know what? Now that you say that, Kenny was [offering his best] to me! Like what you were saying, “This is my best food,” and all of a sudden you say, “That’s all? I don’t drink orange juice. You don’t have apple juice?” [ ... ] I didn’t realize that worked with what you said! Although I have told so many people that story, your analogy. I’ve used that with so many people I’ve met, like my fellow moms. You know, the whole story about preparing a dish for the most important person in your world, and then them cutting it down. [ ... ] Wow, and Kenny did that to me! I just now realized that! It was in the back of my mind!  
(Discussion Group)

Belinda had attended the workshop. She had participated in the visualization exercise, and had liked it so much that she had told her friends about it. But it wasn’t until she talked about it with other parents that she related the exercise to her own life and her relationship with her child. It seemed that the act of discussion itself was the catalyst that precipitated her realization. Could it be that dialogue

with other parents was the final ingredient needed to complete the learning process? Were the parents experiencing in the discussion group what the children experience as they move toward abstraction? Were they internalizing a change, making an idea truly their own?

#### INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Belinda's experience in the discussion group that spring showed me the transforming power of dialogue. I saw change happen before my very eyes. So that summer and after school started again in the fall, I continued my search for the sources of change by recording individual dialogue sessions with both teachers and parents. I decided to ask long-time Montessorians about the strategies they considered effective in empowering parents to enjoy and appreciate their children through observation. What had their years of experience taught them about how transformation of consciousness takes place? As for the parents, what perspectives did they have? After exposure to a variety of opportunities to become aware of observation as an intentional act, did they perceive any changes in their relationships with their children, or any changes within themselves? If so, to what did they attribute those changes?

The teachers I interviewed had worked with children and families in infant communities, primary and elementary classrooms, and middle schools. All were AMI-trained, some held AMI diplomas at more than one level, and one was an AMI teacher trainer. Most had worked in Montessori education for thirty or forty years. They shared a common philosophical grounding and a reverence for what one teacher

Without exception, they all showed me that not only the workshop, but also their classroom observations, their conferences with teachers, the articles on observation I had sent home, the parent education programmes they had participated in, their association with other parents, in short, all the opportunities the school had offered had profoundly affected the way they saw their children and the way they interacted with their children. And without exception, they all told me that the changes in their relationships with their children were the result of changes that had taken place within themselves.

described as the “content of soul or consciousness within each being” (Teacher Interview). They were generous with their time and experience as they pondered the question, “How can we help parents experience the same satisfaction, appreciation, and joy that we derive from observing children?”

I learned a great deal from the teacher interviews. But as every researcher knows, an investigator must always be prepared to “welcome the unexpected” (Hubbard and Power, p. 138). And since it is unexpected, naturally you will find it where you least expect it. That is what happened to me with the parent interviews.

My very first parent interview alerted me to the fact that this was not a Q and A. It was not a report on what the parent had learned, or even an opportunity for the parent to express opinions or conclusions about observation. It was a precious gift, from a complex, intelligent, evolving human being who was generously inviting me into her life to share in the most intimate of all relationships, the one between a parent and a child.

It might have been when she said she had noticed that insisting on controlling her three-year-old’s actions without observing first to determine the child’s purpose “causes a power struggle, it causes friction.” It might have been when she described as “magic” what happens when she refrains from interfering to correct the little girl. Or it might have been when she told me, “I changed a lot within myself. I’m not judging; I learned to respect her more” (Parent Interview). But that was when I realized that the interview was not just a tool for gathering data. It was this particular mother’s personal gift to me.

I saw it again and again in every interview with every parent. As we sat in my little office and talked about their observations of their children, the parents’ faces lit up and became animated. Sometimes they were overcome with emotion, and had to stop talking to wipe away tears. Without exception, they all showed me that not only the workshop, but also their classroom observations, their conferences with teachers, the articles on observation I had sent home, the parent education programmes they had participated in, their association with other parents, in short, all the opportuni-



Colegio Montessori de Chihuahua, Mexico

ties the school had offered had profoundly affected the way they saw their children and the way they interacted with their children. And without exception, they all told me that the changes in their relationships with their children were the result of changes that had taken place within themselves.

### **Analyzing the Data**

My research project seemed to have developed a momentum of its own. As the data accumulated, I knew I had to organize it before I could begin to understand what it could tell me about the parents' experience.

I started by creating codes for concepts that emerged repeatedly in the surveys, discussion group, and interviews, and dividing the codes into two groups: (1) factors contributing to change in parents' experience observing their children; and (2) changes experienced. Then I graphed the results to see how frequently participants credited particular experiences with bringing those changes about.<sup>3</sup> Here are some of the topics that came up consistently.

*Factors Contributing to Change*

Discussion with other parents  
Discussion with teacher/administrator  
Model/mentor  
Montessori community  
Opportunity  
Practice  
Parent education classes  
Parent readiness  
Reading  
Relationship with teacher/administrator

*Changes Experienced*

Observation relating to child  
Observation relating to self  
Change in way of relating to/interacting with child  
Change in way of seeing or looking at child  
Parent's internal change, change in way of perceiving or being with oneself  
"Aha" moment for parent



I don't know whether I had expected to find that one or another factor was "it"—the key influence that opened people's eyes to a new way of being with children. But if I had, that expectation would certainly have been disappointed. Parents and teachers alike credited just about every possible type of experience with creating new levels of awareness. Here are some of the things they said.

### **Observing an Inanimate Object**

That was a great activity because it allowed me to see that everybody sees things differently, and it allowed me to really be able to see what I bring into it. We all bring something to the table. (Parent Interview)

It struck me a lot that we were looking at the same thing, and everybody saw a different thing. [ ... ] So with my child, I see her this way. Other people might see her another way. So, just observe. And *you* know, that's just how she is, and I appreciate her for who she is. (Parent Interview)

### **Viewing Photographs**

Seeing photos of her concentrating was humbling. I can't describe it. [ ... ] She is a person, growing, while separate from me. (Survey Response)

The photo of the two-year-old pouring juice [ ... ] made me think about the things I might do at home that my son can do for himself. (Survey Response)

### **Guided Visualization**

When I put myself in my son's place I felt so fragile, as if I were a child, and I realized how he strives to do things with all his might. (Survey Response, translated from Spanish)

The workshop made me think about how you might treat a child, and the thoughts he might have. It made me reflect, and I went back in time and remembered how it felt to be little. (Survey Response, translated from Spanish)

The exercises we did imagining and envisioning with our eyes closed, and putting ourselves in the place of the child were very powerful, and it really made you think of a lot more things that maybe I never would have thought of before. (Parent Interview)

When we closed our eyes and did the imagination, envisioning exercises, that really brought to light, it put me in my daughter's place, and it was very powerful. It made me so much more conscious of how I was with her. (Parent Interview)

### **Having a Model or Mentor**

[The parent educator who came to my home] would sit down and she would just hang out with Kenny and watch him and talk to him [ ... ]. Oh, and I watched the way that she spoke to him. [ ... ] I learned so much, I observed so much having her in my home with my child. (Parent Interview)

Watching Jimmy's teacher interact with him helped tremendously. It gives me another side of things I can do with Jimmy [ ... ]. So that was a tremendous help. And then with Scott and [our parent educator], the interaction that she has with him doing the activities that they have during those sessions. That's very helpful. (Parent Interview)

[The Assistants to Infancy student who observed my baby was] a model, a mentor. [ ... ] Some of the tiniest things that he would do, she would note, and would be able to connect to a larger picture of infant development. I just found that really interesting, and also, it just made me more amazed at my baby. And not just my baby. It seems like I've learned even more deeply through observing him and through talking to [her]. You know, there is something universal about my child, and it's very interesting. It kind of just makes me appreciate him so much more, his development, and just human nature and development through him. (Parent Interview)

### **Talking with a Teacher or Administrator**

One of the things that was brought up in my conference about my son [ ... ] with his guide was she helped me see that part of his concentration looks like daydreaming. He sings, and that helps him concentrate. I said, "I'm going to try to remember to look at his behaviour differently at home." (Discussion Group)

Most schools that I've known about have a set of guidelines before a parent comes in that they are to look at to help them really observe. But if they don't know what they are observing, sometimes that can be puzzling to the parent.

[ ... ] We used to have a lot of visitors, prospective parents who would come and observe in a classroom. I never let that parent get down the hallway without stepping out and asking, on the spot, "Do you have questions about what you saw?" Because I don't know those parents, I don't know what level they are, and if they have a question, maybe there is something I could really explain. And it was, I thought, very valuable. (Teacher Interview)

Parents would come in and do parent volunteer work. Very often they would be doing whatever it is that you needed them to do, and they were hanging around you. And they might as a result start talking to you about some things, "You know what, my child is doing such and such." It's usually something they are a bit worried about. And then just being accepting of the parent and listening to the parent helps them to kind of describe it to you more fully. And as they are describing things to you more fully, they are really using maybe some observation that they had, but they haven't been really conscious about that yet. [ ... ] Sometimes talking about things, in other words, helps one to crystallize the things that one has observed. (Teacher Interview)

### **Talking with Other Parents**

We as a culture now are more and more isolated; it is interesting in the age of instant communication that we find ourselves isolated. There are many parents who don't have a chance to really hear what other parents are doing. [ ... ] It's the opportunity for a relationship, to not feel so isolated. (Teacher Interview)

It was an open, adult discussion, so I got to hear a lot of other adults' viewpoints before they had observed and after they had observed. And everyone is a different person, so different things would come up. Different things were important to some people that maybe others didn't have an issue with. (Parent Interview)

That follow-up conversation we had with those eight or ten parents, [ ... ] I think a lot of that said it all. That was a powerful meeting. (Parent Interview)

Participants differed in their assessment of which factors had been most influential in raising their awareness. For example, "reading" had not been particularly helpful for Belinda.

Belinda: Well, I have to tell you the truth. I'm very busy, and normally I find myself reading the [school newsletter] very late at night in bed, and I kind of read it as I'm dozing off to sleep.

Mary Caroline: So reading about observation isn't as effective as, say, going to a workshop?

Belinda: No, because, no, no, no. Of course not! (Parent Interview)

For Sam, on the other hand, reading had been "very important ... because it provides some additional support and ideas. [ ... ] The memos, good books, journal articles, all of that is important to support whatever is being presented." (Parent Interview)

Sam also thought that talking with his children's teachers had given him insight into observation. But other parents didn't think talking with teachers had much to do at all with developing observa-



Sunstone Montessori School, Portland, Oregon

tion skills, like Sharon, who said, "I don't know that the guide needs to be the vehicle. I don't think that we've really learned anything verbally from her guide about observation." Perhaps the single experience that everyone agreed had increased their enjoyment and appreciation of their children was "practice"—taking advantage of opportunities to observe at school and at home.

The workshop helped me look a little bit deeper, beyond what's going on on the surface. Pay a little bit closer attention to what the children were doing. When Kenny first started, we came in and observed. [ ... ] After doing the workshop and observing again, I was paying closer attention to what the children were doing. [ ... ] It seemed to make more sense what the children were doing. They were working together, older children helping younger children. (Discussion Group)

The first time we ever went to observe I didn't know what to think. I was sitting over there by where they put their little coats. I was just looking. I didn't know what to look for. I saw everybody doing their own thing. Some were over in the kitchen, some were washing dishes. [ ... ] "What the heck's going on? This is school?" That was my very first experience. But after [the workshop], it was like, "OK, all right, everybody's doing what they're supposed to do." I could see what was going on. There is school going on here. (Discussion Group)

I've been more patient, and more curious about what's going on in the moment. I know that sometimes when I'm with my daughter I try to be present, but then I'm thinking, "Oh, I've got to start dinner." But I enter in now, to either playtime or walking or whatever, more slowly. I'm more present and curious about little bitty things. I really enjoy watching how her fingers work with something that she's doing. Looking at the details of that. (Discussion Group)

Having some reading and training on what to be looking for has changed my idea of what's interesting. [ ... ] It does not have to be him smiling at me that's fun or interesting. It's just him in his own world that is interesting to me. [ ... ] It's much more just an end in itself, just observing him in an unobtrusive way. And observation, I think, has become more of a parenting technique for me. [ ... ] It has helped me to step back and see where he is and be more

in tune with him, because my first instinct is to observe him first and to respect his work. (Parent Interview)

I don't remember being so respectful of my [older] kids when they were concentrating. [ ... ] I wouldn't have even necessarily recognized that they were really concentrating, or realized the value of letting them finish what they are doing, or that they are actually doing something [ ... ], which includes looking. Oh yeah, looking. And I can tell, because of the hours I've spent observing, by his breathing patterns, by the look on his eyes, in his eyes, by his body movements, if he is just spacing out, or if he is concentrating, and there is a difference. And I haven't been to any training. It's just from watching him. (Parent Interview)

Most of my observation happens in the backyard. I'm an outdoors person, and she is also, and so I observe her with insects. She does a lot of what I call catch-and-release, like in fishing. And I think my experience here, whether it's been at the school or through your workshop, has helped me really observe her hands and how she is so, I don't know if "gentle" is even the word, but she barely touches an insect. She knows just enough how to hold it and touch it to where it doesn't hurt. So she's like an insect collector. (Parent Interview)

I thought when I came [to the school] I was open, but yet [ ... ] my initial visit was to see what was here in relationship to what I wanted. So that was the first initial prejudice. [ ... ] In the process I realized I have to set all of those aside and begin to look at things from their point of view and stop trying to make them adjust to what I want them to see and understand [ ... ] and just allow them to naturally explore things. And what I watched is, they ultimately get to the point where they should get to. It's just that I wanted them to get there faster. And that's what I've learned. [ ... ] It's not about putting myself into it, but sitting back and allowing them to discover it on their own. (Parent Interview)

Regardless of which elements they cited, or how they ranked them in importance, almost everyone believed that a number of factors, not just one, had contributed to heightened awareness. The combination of discussion, which brings live interaction, and PowerPoint for visual satisfaction, and the exercises for deep brain thought. (Survey Response)

I liked the integration of doing the exercise, kind of like doing your own work, you're in your own little bubble doing it, and then sharing with everyone. And, getting a visual of the slides up there. And then having an open discussion—with the exercise, and the slides at the same time. Like whole multimedia. [...] We really got our hands in it—seeing it, talking about it, sharing. (Discussion Group)

You never know what's going to awaken or touch someone. [...] Create opportunities, [...] and different types. (Teacher Interview)

Opportunities, yes, exactly. And having a community, a Montessori community. [...] I have not even been the most active learner here, mostly because I've had small kids and I've not been able to come to some of the more formal training, but a lot of the informal training and conversations. (Parent Interview)

I guess first of all, what's new is just even the idea of observing my child as part of my quality time with him. And I learned a lot of it through [...] parent education and talking to people, and talking to you, and talking to Sarah [an Assistant to Infancy student observer], and then, of course, reading some books that were recommended by you, by Sarah, by others, kind of changed my perspective a lot on how I want to spend time with my child, and just how fascinating, interesting and wonderful it can be to just observe your child. (Parent Interview)

[The research on how parents' experiences with observing children contribute to personal transformation led to some interesting discoveries. Four ideas about change and the sources of change will be described in Part II of this article.]

#### NOTES

1. I am grateful to my friend Ann Edwards, a skilled observer and experienced Montessori primary guide, who described to me a parent meeting on observation she once presented and encouraged me to use some of her ideas in my workshop.

2. The names of the parents, children, and teachers mentioned in this article have been changed.

3. I had not attempted to conduct a scientific, quantitative study. Rather, my research design and data analysis followed the qualitative model for “teacher research” described by Hubbard and Power in their book *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers*.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dallas-Area Montessorians, “Unpublished Interviews: 15 May 2006 - 23 Sept. 2006”

East Dallas Community School Parents, “Unpublished Interviews. 17 May 2006 - 13 Sept. 2006” “Unpublished Survey Responses: 11 Oct. 2005 - 10 Oct. 2006”

Ferguson, Stan, *What Parents Need to Know About Children* (Dallas: Ludic, 2002)

Hubbard, Ruth Shagoury and Brenda Miller Power, *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 1999)

Montessori, Maria, *The Absorbent Mind*, translation by Claude A. Claremont, 1967 (New York: Henry Holt, 1995)

Montessori, Maria, *Education and Peace*, translation by Helen R. Lane, 1949 (Oxford: Clio, 1992)

Montessori, Maria, *To Educate the Human Potential*, 1948 (Madras: Kalakshetra, 1991)

Montessori, Maria, *The Formation of Man*, translation by A.M. Joosten, 1955 (Oxford: Clio, 1989)

Montessori, Mario M. Jr., *Education for Human Development: Understanding Montessori* (Oxford: Clio, 1992)

Parker, Mary Caroline. “East Dallas Community School Parent Discussion Group.” DVD, 18 May 2006



Rinpoche, Sogyal, "Bringing the Mind Home", *Breath Sweeps Mind: a First Guide to Meditation Practice*, ed. Jean Smith (New York: Riverhead, pp. 5-10, 1998)

Standing, E.M, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work*, 1957 (New York: Penguin, 1998)

