

## OBSERVATION

by Hilla Patell

*In order to achieve the goal of observation, preparation of the adult, the observer, is necessary. This preparation, says Hilla Patell, requires us to "have an appreciation of the significance of the child's spontaneous activities and a more thorough understanding of the child's needs." She discusses the growth of both the desire to observe through a profound respect for our work and the ability to observe through practical knowledge. She outlines the attributes needed to become an effective observer and addresses the steps to be observed in the child as he progresses toward inner discipline. She finally helps us consider how to find time for observation in a busy day.*

If we wish to succeed in our work, we need to have a sound knowledge of both Montessori theory and practice. We also need to have an innate capacity to love children and the ability to relate to children. However, no matter how deep our feelings for the children, no matter how strong our intellectual grasp of the principles and a knowledge of the material, it is not sufficient if we ignore another important aspect of our work, which is the necessity to *observe* the child.

A competent directress/director will usually keep records of the presentations and activities that have been introduced to the children each week, and keep a monthly or six-week diary on each child's social development. She might also write up brief general notes on

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*Hilla Patell is a board member and Montessori pedagogue at the Maria Montessori Institute. Patell is an AMI examiner and has traveled extensively conducting oral examinations at AMI affiliated training centers on all four continents where AMI is active. The holder of an AMI 3-6 diploma and the AMI primary trainers certificate, Patell joined the training staff of the Maria Montessori Training Organization in London in 1962 and codirected the course with Muriel Dwyer and later accepted the appointment as director of training, which she held until 1989. She has been a board member of the World Education Fellowship and the International Women's Council. This article has been revised at the request and approval of the author from its original form, which was printed in AMI Communications 4 (1992): 11-17. Copyright 1992 by Hilla Patell.*

each individual at the end of every term. Amongst Montessorians, keeping records is frequently thought to be synonymous with *observation*. After all, one has to observe the child to know what he has been doing and how he has been developing. This is true, but the question still remains, "Why did Dr. Montessori lay such great emphasis on observation?"

This word *observation* has varying implications for people from different disciplines. Those whose discipline at university is psychology are required to make their observations in quite a different way from the techniques used by the education faculty. Those working with children with special needs or specific learning disabilities have to use their powers of observation from a completely different point of view.

Usually, observations are carried out for a particular purpose and within a given time frame, but Dr. Montessori considered observation to be an integral and continuous part of the adult's work. From the Montessori point of view, observation could be thought of as the "cornerstone" of our work. It is the indispensable part which makes our work come alive and become meaningful. It is the tool which enables us to follow the child's spontaneous manifestations, not with the aim of studying the psychology of the child but in order to refine our own thinking and understanding so as to be able to give to the life of the child the help that it has the right to receive.

Throughout her life, Maria Montessori sought to comprehend the phenomenon of human life unfolding. She used observation as a tool to understand the forces that direct human development from within. She emphasized that the child possesses within himself the pattern for his own development. It is this inner guide (inner teacher) that must be allowed to *direct* the child's growth.

The "inner life" of the child is *always* present but not easily perceived. Frequently it is overshadowed by the obstacles that the child meets within his environment. His reactions to those obstacles may lead to an entirely false assumption on the part of the adult about the true nature of the child. For example, most of us have had the experience of having to deal with a child crying inconsolably. When all adult efforts to distract and pacify the child have

failed and there is no apparent reason for the child to be crying, do we simply dismiss the crying as fretfulness/naughtiness *or* can we look deeper to try to find what might be the real cause? Could there have been some order lacking in the child's life just at a time when he is highly susceptible to order? Could it have been that when he was bursting to express himself, nobody was listening or paying attention to what he was saying? Could there have been some other cause, such as a frustrated sensitive period, which was at the root of the child's distress?

We do not always think to ask ourselves whether the child's "inner life" is being violated in some way. The goal of observation, therefore, is twofold: to comprehend the needs of the children and respond to them; and to endeavour to remove the obstacles that children face in their growth and development. This requires a fundamental change of outlook on the part of the adult. We must have an appreciation of the significance of the child's spontaneous activities, and a more thorough understanding of the child's needs. Thus, prior preparation will be required if we are to become competent observers.



Cornerstone Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota

In a lecture on observation Dr. Montessori says, "Observation is one of those many things of which we frequently speak and of which we form an inexact or false idea. Perhaps the scarcity of observation made upon children is due to the *lack of preparation* for such observations."<sup>1</sup> And again, in speaking about the qualities of the teacher, she states "The fundamental quality is the capacity for observation. Possession of the senses and of knowledge is not sufficient to enable a person to observe, the adult must develop the desire and ability to observe."<sup>2</sup>

#### THE DESIRE AND THE ABILITY TO OBSERVE

The desire to observe is fostered as we grow to more fully appreciate the wider significance of our work. As Montessorians working with very young children, we make a contribution to the challenging and complex times in which we live, since in serving the child we serve the future generations of humanity. It is this perspective that gives our work a wider significance. The desire to observe will grow when we remember that each child is an individual—each a unique person in his/her own right. The desire to observe is fueled when we continue to have faith that the child's true nature will reveal itself when the conditions are right.

The ability to observe develops through the acquisition of appropriate techniques. Dr. Montessori's mode of observation was that of the natural scientist. Her approach was to gather data, patiently and objectively, to then reflect on the information gathered, and finally to arrive at a conclusion and take the appropriate steps. Responding to situations which arise in the classroom should not be a matter of *reacting* to situations as they occur but of *acting* in response to what the child reveals about himself.

Let us consider some of the attributes that are necessary in order to become an effective observer. First, while observing a particular child, it is also necessary that we continue to be aware of the needs of the rest of the group. Observation has to be done on the job.

An effective observer also has to learn to be patient—we have to be prepared to observe phenomena which are not obviously inter-

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1. 1921 London Course, Lecture 3

2. 1921 London Course, Lecture 3

esting over a period of time before something interesting actually occurs. Montessori says “be patient with nonessentials”. She also points out that “It is not always imperative to see big things but it is of paramount importance to see the beginnings of things. At their origins there are little glimmers that can be recognized as soon as something new is developing. ...”<sup>3</sup>

Be objective. Ideally one should be able to look at what is happening without prejudging the situation (observation should be non-judgmental, yet we all know from our own experience that passing a mental judgement can often occur before we actually become aware of it). In order to be objective, we should not allow our perception to become clouded by personal preferences or prejudices nor by personal experiences. It is a real struggle when one is trying to be objective not to allow past experiences to overshadow the observation of the moment.

Observation is an ability which consists of blending the technical skill of observing with a greater appreciation of the nature of our work with children—a capacity that everyone can acquire through practice.

The art of observation, therefore, is an attitude which eventually becomes a way of life in our continuing relationship with the child.

The future success of the relationship between teachers and children in Montessori classes will depend on the teachers’ ability to choose new challenges wisely. They must use their powers of observation, their knowledge of sensitive periods, and their understanding of the Montessori material. They must direct the children on the basis of their own observations of the children’s needs. In this sense, it is the children who must direct the adults. It is not, therefore, a case of the director and the directed. The adults and the children work together to further the children’s development. Thus, both are directors and both are directed.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1972, p. 101.

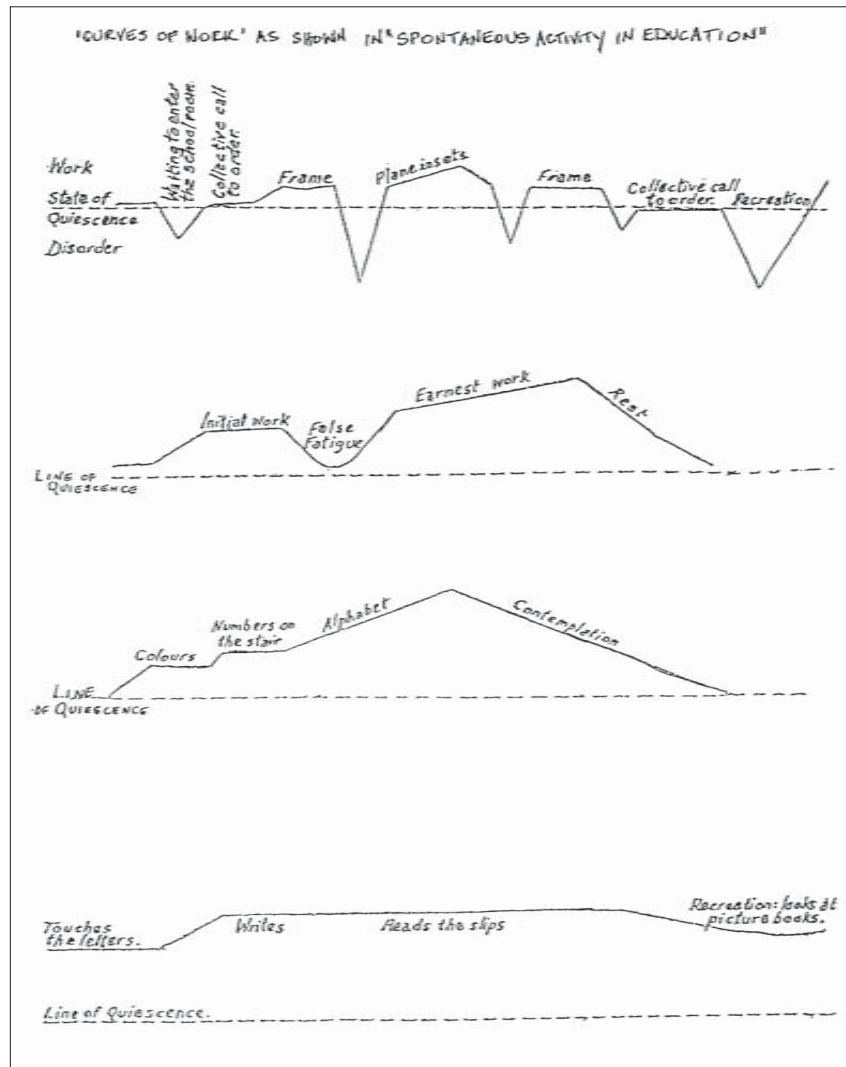
4. Montessori, Mario. *Education for Human Development*, Schocken Books, New York, 1977, p. 116.

We are given a very clear guidance for observation in Chapter 3 of *Spontaneous Activity in Education* where Dr. Montessori has clearly pin-pointed the manifestations that can be observed as the child progresses along the path towards inner discipline. There are four clear steps evident:

1. The child is not able to concentrate or work at any activity for any length of time. The child's conduct at this stage can also be disorderly.
2. The child begins to get involved with various activities, is able to focus his attention on the work. At this stage the average pattern of work shows the child doing some preliminary work followed by a period of restlessness (this restlessness can manifest itself in different ways—walking around, trying out different activities, watching others, etc.). This is followed by yet another work period. It is frequently the work into which the child puts his earnest effort. This main work is followed by a state of repose, a state of rest.
3. The next stage of inner development that can be observed follows on from the previous stage. The child is able to concentrate for longer periods. Slowly the period of restlessness begins to disappear. The child goes more directly and easily to choose his activities. There is another feature which can be observed sometimes. The main activity of the day is brought to a close in contemplation.
4. Then comes the stage that Montessori described as "a general elevation." The main characteristics of a child at this stage are perseverance, calmness, inner discipline.

These "averages" of inner development act as a guide to enable us to study the individual variations. Also included in this chapter are diagrams or "Curves of Work" representing the child's activ-

ity for a day. It is a classically simple yet extremely effective idea because it provides a concise method of recording the activities carried out by the child during the day in an objective and precise manner. This is an excellent, practical approach which we can follow in our classes today.





Cornerstone Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota

#### COMBINING ONGOING SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATIONS INTO DAILY WORK

There is a delicate balance which she needs to maintain between her work of being a link between the child and the environment and her role as an observer. She must observe so that she can determine when she has to withdraw from being an active influence in the child's life and take on a more passive role. On these two points Montessori is quite clear: "The adult must give and do what is necessary for the child to act for himself, if she does less than is necessary, the child cannot act meaningfully."<sup>5</sup> The implication of this is self-evident. While responding to the needs of the whole group, the adult must also ensure that individual children are being put in direct contact with the environment through individual presentations of the material, showing its exact use in a precise manner. Similarly, the point at which the adult should begin to take on a more passive role is also made very clear.

Before everything, the directress must know how to recognize the phenomenon of the polarization of attention. When the child

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5. Montessori, Maria. *The Child in the Family*, Pan Books, 1970, London, p. 154



is totally involved in his work she must respect the fact and not disturb him. The respect for the child's activity, which we call non-intervention, is justifiable only when something substantial has already intervened in his life—that is, when he has acquired the ability to direct all his attention on some activity and dedicate himself to it, when he has revealed all his interest (not just curiosity). The respect is not justified when the child's order and disorder, the successes he attains, depend often on one's ability to observe the least particulars.<sup>6</sup>

Now we begin to see what that well-worn Montessori phrase "follow the child" can come to mean. Through our observations we can become aware of the way in which different children reveal their interests and inclinations and if we respond to what the child is showing us, then, in due course and at the appropriate time, we begin to see the phenomenon of attention as Dr. Montessori terms it "the polarization of attention." This is the deep involvement with a meaningful activity over a long period of time which will eventually lead to the transformation of the personality. This is seen in the child's calmer, more orderly behavior, his greater interest in constructive activities, and in his kindness. It is also seen in his co-operation and affection and, eventually, a greater social awareness.

Systematic observation reveals many interesting facets about the child's nature, and the adult is helped to discern the needs of the child and respond to them to better serve the child.

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6. Ibid, pp. 140-142.

