

LECTURE 3

SOME SUGGESTIONS AND REMARKS UPON OBSERVING CHILDREN

by Maria Montessori

These next two lectures succinctly discuss the necessary preparation and methods for observation. Using the naturalist Fabre as an example of scientific training of the faculties for sharp observation, Montessori compares the observer to a researcher and gives many suggestions for conducting thorough yet unobtrusive observation. Self-awareness of the observer is essential for controlling distractions and maintaining the natural urge to assist (disturb), so that the natural behaviors of the child can be seen. Through practice, patience, and mastering one's own will, an observer will become "serene but strong, a person who knows how to dominate by her observation everything that occurs."

Through a properly prepared environment and precise use of materials, concentrated attention and repeated movements that are driven by the inner impulses of the child will be produced and observed. Exact use of materials, including the Pink Tower and Cylinder Block, is discussed in relation to producing inner organization and voluntary movements, which are important in the observation of precision. Lecture 11 discusses how the careful preparation of the observer, control of conditions, and precise use of materials will allow the child to "be free to manifest the phenomena which we wish to observe."

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THE "PREPARATION OF THE EYE"

It would seem as though to know how to observe was very simple and did not need any explanation. Perhaps you think it will be sufficient to be in a classroom in a school and to look and see what happens! But to observe is not as simple as that.

Any methodical observation which one wishes to make requires preparation. Observation is one of those many things of which we

frequently speak, and of which we form an inexact or false idea. It should be sufficient to consider what occurs in all the sciences that depend upon observation. The observers in the various sciences must have a special preparation. For instance, one who looks through a microscope does not see what exists there unless his eye is prepared. It is not sufficient to have the instrument and to know how to focus it. It is also necessary to have the eye prepared to recognize the objects. Thus we might say in this case that a sensorial preparation

is necessary. When Fabre describes his observations of insects, he really gives us a description of his long and patient preparation for observation. He also describes the virtues and attributes necessary to acquire in order to be able to observe. He must forget himself, and he must be at the service of the insects. He must rise in the morning at the hour when the insects begin to move. He tells us that he was very fond of smoking. Yet he puts away his pipe, for fear that the smell of the smoke might affect their manifestations.

We are so convinced that our actions are always useful to others. We are so certain that we can do well that which others do badly; so sure that we can perfect that which is imperfect. Because in this world these impulses are considered good impulses, we have never performed exercises in order to control them.

Then, should there not also be a preparation in order to observe the child? Perhaps the scarcity of observations made upon children is due to the lack of preparation for such observations.

For this reason, I should like, before you begin your observation, to give you some of the principal and fundamental points that illustrate what I have just said.

These points, with which I begin, are not in relation to that which you have to observe, but in relation to the observer himself. Obviously, those who observe children must not disturb them; because the purpose of the observation is to see what the children are doing independent of our presence. The observer should remain absolutely silent and motionless. You will say that this is extremely easy to accomplish and that everyone knows how to do that, but that is not the case. Many times you will be tempted to show your

admiration or your annoyance. You will be tempted to communicate your impressions to your neighbour. Thus we find ourselves faced by a real exercise, an exercise which we may call an exercise of conscious immobility, directed by our will-power. This will also be one of the most valuable exercises to prepare students as educators in this method; because the first thing the teacher has to learn is to master herself and to remain motionless beside the child.

“OBSERVE YOURSELF AS AN OBSERVER”

While you are observing the children, try to imagine that you are in the position of the teacher who is directing the class, and try to examine yourself introspectively. Try to think how many times, under certain conditions, you would have been tempted to go to the assistance of a child, or would have stepped forward to prevent something happening, which to you appeared harmful. How often you would think, “Oh, the teacher has not noticed that.” How many impulses would you have to step forward, were you free? Also, try to notice how many times you would have the impulse to tell your neighbour to notice something which seems interesting to you. You might try to count all those inner impulses. Thus you will be able to measure the distance which lies between you as you are now and the time when you will be a perfect observer. This quiescence is something which is extremely difficult for some people and much easier for others. It is so difficult for some people that we have to allow for some preparatory exercises to induce immobility. Even these exercises are not always sufficient. We suggested to some teachers that they should tie themselves with a cord to a stationary article of furniture!

We are so accustomed to abandoning ourselves to our own impulses. We are so convinced that our actions are always useful to others. We are so certain that we can do well that which others do badly; so sure that we can perfect that which is imperfect. Because in this world these impulses are considered good impulses, we have never performed exercises in order to control them.

No doubt, from one point of view, these feelings are good, because they show a desire to help others. But on the other hand, they also spring from pride. In relation to the child, they are feelings which

come from the difference which exists between the child's development and our own. That which we see the child doing with great effort, we can do easily. Therefore, we have the impulse to do the thing ourselves instead of letting the child do it. We do it so much more quickly and efficiently. When we see the child struggling so hard to do a thing which is so difficult for him and would be so easy for us, we have the impulse to help him.

Consider what would have happened had Fabre felt these good impulses toward the insects. Let us imagine Fabre watching an insect carrying a large ball that it had made, to the summit of a little mount. The insect allows the ball to roll down and is obliged to begin its journey all over again. What would have been the result had Fabre tried to solve this difficulty by picking up the ball and helping the insect? It is true he would have removed the effort from the insect, but he would have destroyed a science.



An English Montessori classroom, circa 1929

If we wish to observe the child, we must observe. If we see that he is working with great effort and difficulty, and if we see that it takes him a long time to do what we could do very easily; then we are observing. That is the observation. If there is a difficulty which is perfectly apparent to us, but which the child does not see, we leave him thus. That is our observation.

I suggested to some teachers that they should wear a belt with beads attached. Then every time they have an impulse to interfere, they would draw a bead along. This is very useful, because when we have an impulse, we must act, and the re-action with the bead is a help. From day to day, one would make observations upon oneself in this way until one came to the point of not having to draw any more beads. We should then find that we had acquired a great calm and sense of repose. Perhaps we should have become transformed within. At any rate, we should have learnt the following: that almost all these impulses to action are unnecessary.

...We must prepare a person who will be calm, serene but strong, a person who knows how to dominate by her observation everything that occurs. This is observation. She must know how to look and how to master her own impulses. She must know how to wait. She must be a person having a high grade of virtue, e.g., patience.

We shall find that by means of effort, the child yet succeeds in the end although he takes a long time and does the thing with difficulty. He finally perceives the error which at first he did not see. If we had acted, we should not have been able to observe all this. It is evident that the child would have lacked the opportunity to accomplish that work by means of his own force.

Perhaps at first this will give you a feeling of discouragement. You may feel that if you do not conquer yourself, you will be useless and perhaps an obstacle in the way of the child. In this moment of discouragement it will be a great consolation to us to discover that the child has within himself far greater powers than we had imagined. Perhaps from that moment, an intense interest in the child will be born in us.

THE ERROR OF ASSISTANCE

A small and humble exercise of control may develop a great power of meditation, a meditation upon the misunderstanding that exists today between the child and the adult. The adult intends to help the child, but is, instead, a hindrance only placing obstacles in his way. He acts from love, but from error he is only harming the beloved. Thus we begin to have the first vision of this liberation of the soul of the child. This liberation can only be obtained by the adult being willing to pay the price, which is to refrain from substituting himself for the child.

There is another principle of observation which we may call physiological. That is, when you are observing one child, you must not cease from observing all the children. We know that the vision is exact and directed towards one point. At the same time we have a vast field of vision. It is not easy to bring our attention to all those things which we see indirectly. When one is looking at one person in a group, one must not let the whole consciousness become absorbed by that one person.

At the same time that all these things enter into our field of vision, they must be followed consciously by an act of will. This is an exercise of our will which must be repeated many times. You can imagine a teacher having to run from one child to the other, observing first one and then the next. Instead we must prepare a person who will be calm, serene but strong, a person who knows how to dominate by her observation everything that occurs. This is observation. She must know how to look and how to master her own impulses. She must know how to wait. She must be a person having a high grade of virtue, e.g., patience.

PATIENCE & SCIENCE

All great observers are fundamentally people having great patience. Here, as in all other cases where observation is necessary, if this does not exist very strongly and if we are not prepared, the phenomenon for which we wait will not take place. If we were prepared in early childhood for something which developed this attribute, we should naturally be patient and have control of ourselves. We should be stronger than we are now. We should not suffer from that

which is so noticeable today, boredom or tiredness of observing. As you know, boredom is a form of fatigue. The person who observes patiently, without feeling bored, has acquired an inner strength which must have been acquired through exercise. Thus one of the first exercises will be to attend a class of children, to be silent and motionless, to try not to let yourself be carried away by the actions of one child, and to try to see the whole class. Naturally, in order to observe, we must have something which is worth observing. We must know what it is that has value as an object of observation. You must also realize that something which is obviously interesting does not need a great deal of preparation in order to observe it. We have to be prepared to observe phenomena which are not obviously interesting. Otherwise what would happen to those observers who are waiting, let us say, for an egg to hatch? Or who wait for a physiological phenomenon, not knowing exactly when it will take place? We are entering into a noble field, because we are following in the first steps of the path which leads to science and is the beginning of that which will make us scientists.

