



eARTICLE

OBSERVATION AS A KEY TO DEVELOPMENT

by Louise Livingston, AMI Teacher Trainer

In the last eArticle, Louise Livingston looked at how to prepare an environment so that we can observe the spontaneous activity of children. Here she talks about the kind of observation notes we should make and how we can respond to them so that observation can be a key to development. The article is published courtesy of Montessori Society AMI UK 'Direction' magazine.

When considering what we record when observing children, it is important to make a distinction between observation notes and record keeping. Record keeping is simply a record of the activities children have been shown and in which they have participated. This is a helpful record because it gives an indication of the level a particular child has reached in each of the areas of the Montessori curriculum. On the other hand, observation notes focus on what a particular child is interested in and how he carries out his activities, and this can guide us to know what to offer next. It is observation notes that we must use to inform our planning for each child. When we use record-keeping notes, what we offer the children just becomes a matter of what is next on their record card. When we take this route we can easily find ourselves in the situation where the child's development is being directed by us rather than by his own developmental drive. On the other hand, allowing our observation notes to direct what we offer the children, support us to do what Dr Montessori suggested, that is, to 'follow the child'. The boxes still get ticked on our child development profiles but the profiles are populated in the order that nature dictates for each particular child. As we know, development is not linear, the child does not achieve one goal and then the next and the next in a nice neat line. Sometimes he progresses more in one area than another and development slows in one area and races along in another.

When considering the observation notes, the first things we need to pay attention to are those things that a particular child **chooses for himself** because these can be clues to what his 'inner teacher' is urging him to do. Another clue that children offer us are those things that they become focussed on and seem to concentrate on doing because concentration is an indicator that something developmental is going on. It is important then, to make a note when we see children giving their **attention to something voluntarily**. We also need to make a note of those activities that they choose **to repeat again and again**. This may be on the same day or another day.

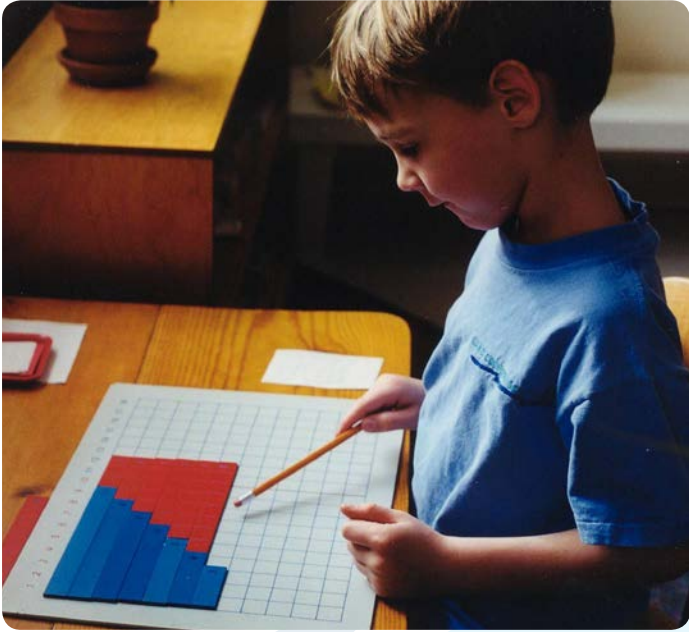


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We may see them repeating the whole activity or just a part of it. Finally, it is important to observe how they are doing things. We need to think about whether it seems easy for them or whether they can do it perfectly or not. We need to look for the things that are challenging them or preventing them from being successful.

We also need to observe each child for a whole week at a time if we want our observations to help us to build up a whole picture of that child. When we observe for just an hour at a time or a morning our knowledge is limited to that particular moment in time. Maybe the child had a bad morning, tired or over excited for some reason or sickening for something. But when we observe over a whole week we can start to see patterns emerge and then we can separate things that are really being driven from within the child, from circumstantial things that may be affecting him but don't have real relevance to his development.

Making observations like this help us to be objective. It is a scientific approach, like collecting data. We can reflect on our findings and decide how to respond. It is the response that is so important. When we take lots of notes and use them simply as a way of informing our record keeping we are missing that vital response which is the key to following the child. Our observations must always inform what we offer next.

How something is chosen is a key

When recording the choices that children make we need to think about whether they chose it by themselves or whether it was something suggested to them. It may have been that the choice came about because of a new challenge offered by the teacher and it is important to note how children respond

to challenges given to them. Sometimes the choice may have been influenced by another child's choice. We have all seen the child who chooses a Puzzle Map because his friend is doing one or the child who chooses to do some washing up because it is next to the washing hands and he wants to chat to his friend who is doing that. Since we know that freely chosen activities are the ones that tell us most about a child's interest then it is important for us to be able to differentiate these from those that are subject to other influences.

Time spent with an activity may not always be the best indicator

We should also note the length of time that a child spends doing something, because this can also be an indicator of his real interest in it. But we must always interpret this kind of data thoughtfully. Taking something out for a few minutes and then putting it away does not necessarily mean that he is not interested in it. He may have taken it and then realised he did not know what to do or it was too challenging for him. Someone or something may have distracted him from what he intended to do. Conversely, having an activity out for a long period of time does not necessarily mean that a child is engaged so it is always important to observe how a child is doing something. He may have been sitting passively with it and not really doing anything at all or he may have been focused on solving a challenge. Our observations will give us this information.

We can use codes to help us to record our observations and this makes it possible to make notes quickly and efficiently whilst still going about our work of being with the children, giving presentations, running groups and directing the class. At the end of the week we can look at our notes and highlight those things that a child chose **independently**, those things that were repeated and those things that he **gave his attention to**, as these are the clues that tell us that something developmental is going on.

From these pointers we can start to build a picture of the kind of things a particular child is interested in and this will guide us to decide what to show him next. His pattern of work can tell

us things like whether he likes to do something challenging as soon as he comes into school or whether he prefers to do a few easy things and then choose a challenge a bit later in the morning. It can also help us to identify the child who likes a slow start to the week, increasing the challenges he is prepared to take on as he goes through the week. Each child has his own particular pattern and observing for a whole week can help us to start to identify this.

This kind of information can help us to know when it is the right moment to offer a new challenge or a new presentation. It can also help us to trust each child's capacity to find his own way. If we know that a child likes to start his day with a few easy

things but will always find the right moment to choose his own challenge then we don't need to worry that he is only passing time with the pouring or in the book corner because we can feel confident that he will come to his 'great work' when he is ready. Information like this truly allows us to 'follow the child' rather than our record cards!

When we observe we can discover what particular children are really interested in and offer other activities related to these interests so that they might find further things that interest them. We can also offer challenges related to these activities so that they might become more and more focussed as they strive to overcome the challenges and perfect what they are doing. It is a vital part of our work with children, that we guide them to concentrate because as we know through concentration on work 'freely chosen' comes inner development. As Dr Montessori says:

'This is the pivotal point of the whole method: namely, to offer the child work, not just any kind, but that work which at that particular moment is the one thing necessary for the development of the inner self'.¹

"Each time we see what is grasping a child's attention we get a further clue to what we might offer next."

We must remember, however, that when we observe what children do and reflect on what this might be telling us we may not always be right. Our training will help us to make some educated guesses of course but it is also important to keep an open mind and accept that often we may have to offer many presentations before we hit upon what the child was trying to tell us through his actions.

The observations give us clues, which suggest what we might show next but the observations of the response to what we have shown give us further clues. Each time we see what is grasping a child's attention we get a further clue to what we might offer next. We must also remember that just because a child's attention is not grasped the first time we show something this does not necessarily mean he is not interested. We have to show things time and time again sometimes, finding a different angle to entice the child each time. As Dr Montessori says, we need to be **'like the flame which heartens all by its warmth, enlivens and invites'.²**

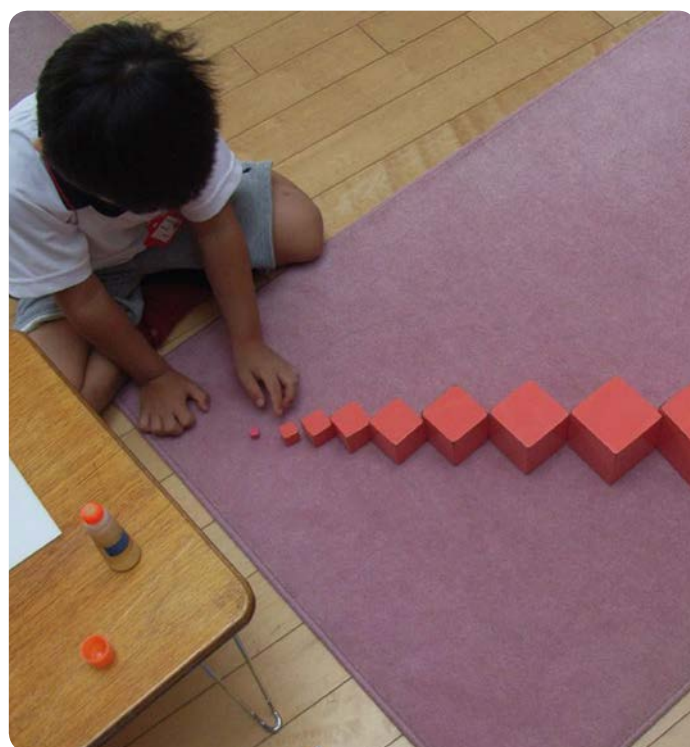
To reiterate, then, we must observe what children do and how they choose it. We must look for independent choices, repetition and concentration so that we can follow each child's interests and give presentations that respond to these. We must observe what children are capable of so that we can offer them activities that set the challenge that they are ready for because this is what they are thirsting for. This is what keeps them growing and developing. As Dr Montessori says;

'This is our mission – to keep alive this fire in the child who has been given into our care ... We may put it out without knowing through negligence, by not offering a material when the child is ready. Thus by our negligence to give food to this flame within the child, the child's interest dies, and the fire goes out'.³

However, our work with a particular child does not stop when he is making independent choices. If we see a child who is choosing independently yet only working superficially we need to ask ourselves how we can help him to become more focussed. Sometimes his choice may mean that he is interested in what he has taken off the shelf but that he doesn't really know how to spend more time on it. In this situation he needs a representation that will help him to perfect what he is doing. Alternatively, it might be that the activity offers too much challenge and then we need to think how we can break down the challenges within the activity so that he can overcome them one at a time.

Sometimes observations may show us that a particular child is not choosing anything at all by himself. He may be doing things that are suggested to him but he never actually chooses anything without a prompt from the teacher. There may be any number of reasons why this is happening but often it is because he has not found anything that interests him. This is our job, to find something that interests him by offering him as many presentations as possible.

We need to offer a range of different activities that are age appropriate but things that appeal to different sensitive periods. Some activities for language, some for fine movement, some for gross movement or something about shapes, colours or textures. We may not always be lucky enough to hit the nail on the head straight away. We need to observe his activity with them and see which he chooses again. We need to note whether he chooses any of them to work with for a little longer than usual. We need to be patient, keep offering and as Dr Montessori says, look for those 'glimmerings' that are the beginning of things and build on these.



'It is not always imperative to see big things but it is of paramount importance to see the beginnings of things. At their origins they are little glimmerings that can be recognised as soon as something new is developing.'⁴

When we see those 'glimmerings', that tiny flicker of interest, we need to fan it and protect it by making sure that no one interferes with it, not even just to say 'well done' because the beginnings of concentration may be **'so fragile, so delicate, that a touch can make it vanish again, like a soap bubble, and with it goes all the beauty of the moment.'**⁵

We need to observe, reflect and respond and then observe again. If we follow this cycle of activity with each child we will see him start to develop and move through different stages in his development.

In the first stage, we see a child who is not able to concentrate or work at any activity for any length of time. He flits about the environment picking up what ever attracts him and at times he can be disruptive and unable to control himself. He may be choosing to do things but his choices are mainly impulsive at this stage. They are not real choices being driven by developmental need and it is important to recognise this. Observation of such activity does not give us any real clues. As Montessori says:

'If the teacher cannot recognise the difference between pure impulse, and the spontaneous energies which spring to life in a tranquilised spirit then her action will bear no fruit. The true foundation of the teacher's efficiency consists in being able to distinguish between two kinds of activities, each of which has the appearance of spontaneity, because the child in both acts on his own free will, but which in fact are directly opposed.'⁶

In the second stage we see a child who begins to make some real choices and is able to focus his attention on the activities he chooses. At this stage his day may start with a period of 'work' and then he may be restless for a while, wondering around, watching others or having a snack perhaps. This is then followed by another period of work, perhaps a more focussed effort or something a bit more challenging and this may be followed by something easy to finish the day. Without detailed observation it is quite possible that we might think that a child in this stage is spending a lot of time doing nothing since he might have up to an hour mid morning when he is not engaged in anything in particular. However, when we observe and reflect on his pattern it gives us another impression of him. He has a definite work pattern so we can trust him to find his way back to a focussed piece of work every day. This gives us the confidence to allow him to take his own path rather than constantly encouraging him to 'find some work'. We can trust he will find it by himself. He may only be 3 but we can trust him and his own inner teacher.

"This is our job, to find something that interests him by offering many presentations."

In the third stage the period of restlessness begins to disappear and the time that the child is able to focus on something increases in length. He chooses his activities easily usually arriving at school with an idea of what he wants to do. The main activity of the day often ends with a period of contemplation where he may simply sit with his work or do some tidying or helping others.

In the final stage we see a child who works for the whole morning on the same task. At this stage he may even work for days on the same task. We can say that **'work has become his habitual attitude, the child can no longer bear to be idle.'**⁷

But none of this will happen unless we make observation an integral part of the way in which we guide and help each child's development so that we can make sure that he finds the work that he needs each day because as Montessori says

'to ensure the development of the personality it is essential that some real task should be performed each day; for it is from the completed cycle of an activity, from methodical concentration, that the child develops equilibrium, elasticity, adaptability, and the resulting power to perform the higher actions, such as those which are termed acts of obedience.'⁷

Dr Montessori's whole approach is based on her own observations of children. Observation pervades all of her writings. It is the tool that she gave us to 'follow the child'. It must therefore be the main focus of our work. We need to train ourselves to use it so that it becomes an integral part of our practice because as Paula Polk Lillard says:

'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, but 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.'⁸

1. Lecture VI from the First International Montessori Training Course, Rome 1913
2. Montessori, Maria Absorbent Mind 1988 p253
3. Montessori, Maria Creative Development in the Child Vol 1 1998 p309
4. Montessori, Maria Education and Peace 1992 p85
5. Montessori, Maria The Absorbent Mind 1988 p255
6. Montessori, Maria The Absorbent Mind 1988 p241
7. Montessori, Maria Advanced Montessori Method Vol 1 1991 p82
8. Paula Polk Lillard Forward to Education for Human Development