



The Montessori OBSERVER

Control of Error

Published by the International Montessori Society • 912 Thayer Ave. • Silver Spring, Md. 20910 • Phone (301) 589-1127

Coalition Meets for Choice in Education

The Americans for Choice in Education (ACE) met in Washington, D.C. on July 26, 1989 to continue its planning for efforts to encourage educational freedom in the United States. Active in the Coalition since its founding in 1988, the International Montessori Society was represented by Lee Havis who specifically emphasized the need for reducing the "unnecessary and excessive government control of private education."

The ACE Coalition reaffirmed at the recent Washington, D.C. meeting their support for parents to choose the kind of education which they deem best for their children and to focus particular immediate attention for this purpose on those key states where the maximum opportunity for success appears to exist. After hearing from multiple speakers, the meeting chose the states of Delaware, Kentucky and Louisiana for concentrated action at the present time.

Cont'd on Page 3, Col. 1



Proceedings of the Society's "Creating the New Education" conference held in Columbia, South Carolina—August 12-13, 1989.

Montessori Conference in South Carolina

On August 12-13, 1989, the Society conducted its "Creating the New Education" conference in Columbia, South Carolina. This third such South Carolina conference included the participation of persons from the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky and Texas.

Led by Lee Havis, Society executive director, the conference discussion considered many specific examples of how to apply Montessori principles with children to "control the environment, not the child." Particular attention was focussed on the question of "good manners"; i.e., acquiring habits of social grace, courtesy and politeness with one another.

Havis stated that "'good manners' is primarily a matter of habit which children

naturally acquire by following the example of other children and the supervising adults. To the extent that these adults try to force compliance with insincere forms of superficial politeness, children will likewise tend to reflect a similar form of rude and disrespectful behavior with others."

Havis also pointed out that the conference experience among adults is an excellent opportunity to practice "good manners" in the social setting. He stated that "the habits of respect for each other we learn to practice in the conference can begin to develop similar habits of 'good manners' in one's own daily routine with children at home and school."

Before and after the conference, Havis visited the *College of Early Learning*, a Montessori school in Columbia, South Carolina, to consult with their staff who attended the conference. He worked directly with the staff on various aspects of their practical classroom application of Montessori principles.

Conference Held in Meriden, Connecticut

The Society's first Connecticut Montessori conference was held in Meriden, Connecticut on June 3-4, 1989. Attending were Montessori teachers and school administrators from the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Lee Havis directed the conference discussion in an examination of various problems of



Lunch break discussion at Society's Montessori conference in Meriden, Connecticut on June 3-4, 1989. Pictured in foreground are (left to right): Lisa Smith-Horn, Paul Posillo and Lynn Philip.

Reflections . . .

by Paul Posillo
(Ashaway, Rhode Island)

Observation . . . A Little Study

I have tried in my reflections to come up with a single word or group of words that would capture the essence of the principle of *observation* . . . In these past few weeks, my understanding of true observation has broadened, indeed.

Observation is both very old from the point of view of religion and culture and very new as a defined aspect of scientific method. It seems to me that its rootedness in nature is easily attested to by its continuous presence and its evolutionary unfolding throughout the history of the human race. *Roget's Thesaurus* lists the synonyms for 'observe' into four separate categories, each group being bonded together by a common link:

1. see, notice, watch, study, survey, scrutinize, examine, perceive, look, view, espy, attend to, discern.
2. conform to, abide by, submit to, heed, obey, follow, acknowledge, respect, keep.

Cont'd. on Page 4, Col. 1

Cont'd. on Page 4, Col. 3



Control of Error

by Lee Havis

"We come to a scientific principle which is also a path to perfection. We call it 'control of error' . . . If this particular principle is realized . . . then it does not matter whether teachers and mothers are perfect or not."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 247-248

Montessori teaching requires a continual control of error for one's being to consistently assure the emergence of true normal development in children. To correct the many hidden mistakes and limitations which arise in this distinctive way of being, a most reliable control of error is available within oneself by focusing attention on three specific principles of nature; i.e., (1) "Observation"; (2) "Individual Liberty"; and (3) "Preparation of the Environment". These three Montessori principles provide the vital inner indicators which guide one's being in the delicate and intangible process of creating a true "normalizing" environment for children.

Indicators

"'control of error' is any kind of indicator which tells us whether we are going towards our goal, or away from it."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.248

By calling to mind a principle such as "Observation," the Montessori teacher is reminded to stand and watch rather than to actively "teach". The child may then more nearly follow its own inborn instincts towards perfection rather than the prejudicial direction and control of the supervising adult. Following such inner instincts, the child is effectively guided to achieve the maximum possible degree of exactitude and progress in self-directed activity which arises in accordance with its own spontaneous interest.

Child's Interest

"The child's interest in doing better, and his own constant checking and testing, are so important to him that his progress is assured. His very nature tends towards exactitude and the ways of obtaining it appeal to him."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.250

The child's natural interest for progress and exactitude is expressed in outer form through a wide diversity of experiences and exploration in the environment. This natural self-instructional activity is necessarily opposed by the customary adult "teaching" which imposes on children its own schedule of predetermined curriculum and group-oriented instruction. Within such a structure of traditional education, the child is subjected to an external adult control of error which inherently represses its own individual path of normal development.

Traditional Education

" . . . a typical attitude of the adult is to be always looking for vice in order to suppress it. But the correction of errors is often humiliating and discouraging . . . and since (traditional) education rests on this basis, there follows a lowering in the general quality of social life."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 240

Traditional education generally consists of checking, testing, and control of the child's learning activity according to the pervasive authority of adult "teaching"—to constantly distract the child from its own efforts for independent self-education. This traditional adult control of error opposes the normal standards of human development whereby children would otherwise instinctively seek to check and correct their own errors through free activity and discovery in the environment.

Normal Standards

" . . . teachers do not believe that children are active learners. They drive and encourage, or give punishments and rewards, to stimulate work . . . Normal standards are debased by a rule arbitrarily imposed."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.240

The ordinary standards of classroom rules and learning procedures in traditional education are created by adults, who also interpret and enforce their practical application. By contrast, Montessori education follows the guidance of normal standards given by three infinite and eternal laws of nature—standards that rely not on adult-controlled classroom "rules" but rather on the child's own inner control of error to guide its learning process within the conditions of a basic nothingness.

A Basic Nothingness

"Poverty and ignorance, and lack of teachers, syllabus and rules furnished a basic nothingness, and because of this nothingness, the soul was able to expand."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Ed. for New World*, p. 70

The basic nothingness of Montessori teaching allows the child's own instinctive interests for normal self-development to fully emerge through free activity in a supportive well-organized environment. Guided by such principles as "Preparation of the Environment", the Montessori teacher is directed to provide the children with an indirect means for their own independent control or error through the use of well-ordered, specially designed learning materials.

Designed Materials

"Our apparatus is always designed to have this property of offering visible and tangible checks."

Dr. Maria Montessori
from *Absorbent Mind*, p.249

The Montessori "prepared" environment offers to children a well-ordered arrangement of precisely designed materials. The very nature and presentation of these materials allows the children themselves to constantly check their own progress and ability—without the ordinary "teaching" involvement of the adult. Such a self-directed control of error through the materials is particularly vital for the young child under the age of six whose "absorbent mind" is forming a life-long stability of mental order and character through an intimate sensorial experience with physical objects. Young children thereby acquire their essential intellectual skills and basic mental order by a concentrated and exacting use of the specially designed materials in the Montessori environment.

Cont'd. on Page 3, Col. 2

Look for the
November Observer
featuring
Lesson Presentation

The Montessori Observer

ISSN 0889-5643

published by
INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY
912 Thayer Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(301) 589-1127

Lee Havis, Executive Director

The *Montessori Observer* is mailed six times each year to Society members throughout the world. The *Observer* is sent during the months of January, March, May, September, October and November. The purpose of this publication is to provide news and information about the development of Montessori education to extend awareness of Montessori principles and to promote harmony within the Montessori community.

INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI SOCIETY

The International Montessori Society is sponsored by Educational Services, Inc., a non-profit corporation organized in Maryland, U.S.A. The Society's purpose is to support the effective application of Montessori principles throughout the world.

IMS ADVISORY BOARD

Elizabeth Hainstock, Educator, Author
Romalda Spalding, Reading Specialist
Dr. R. Orin Cornett, Professor Emeritus

SUBSCRIPTION

Subscription to this *Observer* publication may be obtained by requesting Society membership which is open to all individuals for a \$20 annual fee. Society members also receive a subscription to the *Montessori News*. Send request for membership benefits.

ADVERTISING

Advertising space is available for services and products relating to Montessori education. Marketplace ads are \$7/line. Position and Placement ads are \$10 each and will be set and edited by the Society to conform to space requirements. Write for the Society's advertising outline as to rates and other information about design advertising.

©1989

Moment of Peril

Multiple "Fantasy" Scenarios

from *Observer*, September 1989

by Lee Havis

When many familiar "fantasy" scenarios are present in a group situation at the same time (see *Observer*, September 1989), there may be no single scenario which compels one's primary or immediate attention. Since there is no serious threat of (1) physical harm to the children or (2) physical harm to objects, all scenarios have a relatively low priority for the teacher's particular attention.

In such a situation, the teacher's active movement to physically or verbally intervene in any single situation would tend to deter her ability to visually scan the entire environment; thereby perhaps missing some important "eye contact" lesson that would spring up spontaneously from the interest of a child. By standing still and relatively detached from involvement in any particular scenario, the teacher can visually scan the total environment with a "light touch" to be more available to engage individual children with "eye contact" whenever such important opportunities arise.

As these "eye contact" lessons are offered over time, various "fantasy" situations tend to dissolve by themselves as the children instinctively return to their own normal state of work and attachment to reality. Any remaining stubborn "fantasy" scenario may then be engaged by the adult's more direct form of focused attention and verbal questioning; e.g., "what are you doing?"

Controlling other Adults

The teacher's assistant violates Montessori principles at times by allowing her "personality" to become detrimentally present with children through such means as power struggles, dependency and manipulation. When questioned, the assistant justifies picking up after some children because she claims they are "too young" to handle some situations and the environment must be "prepared" and "orderly" for the other children. The assistant claims her actions are "pragmatic" and necessary in particular circumstances where she must exercise her own best judgment in the "moment of peril." What to do?

Answer in *Observer*, November 1989

Coalition Meets

Cont'd. from Page 1, Col. 1

Following the meeting, Havis prepared and submitted several documents for consideration by the Coalition; a "Summary of Strategy for Choice in Education," and a position paper on "Tuition Tax Credits." The "Summary Strategy" document includes certain critical proposals for model legislation which may be useful in drafting specific laws to implement educational choice. Interested persons may contact the Society to obtain a copy of these documents.

Control of Error

Cont'd. from Page 2, Col. 3

Use of Materials

"The control of error through the materials makes a child use his reason, critical faculty, and his ever-increasing capacity for drawing distinctions."

Dr. Maria Montessori

from *Discovery of the Child*, p. 103

The young child uses a variety of well-ordered materials in the Montessori environment to absorb within itself the basic order of nature which gradually becomes an essential aspect of its entire "personality". Built-in control of error in these self-instructional materials, such as color-coding, isolation of difficulty, order, sequence and consistent placement, provide the child with vital opportunities for independent experimentation and exploration which require little, if any, adult direction. The adult in the Montessori environment may then serve less as a "teacher" and more as a quiet spectator of the children's spontaneous activity.

A Quiet Spectator

"... it is the environment itself which helps to make the children continuously better... the teacher... can remain a quiet spectator of all the little mistakes that occur around her."

Dr. Maria Montessori

from *The Child*, p. 12-13

As a quiet spectator, the Montessori teacher carefully observes how the children interact with each other and with the various materials provided for their normal development. Even when the children make mistakes or directly ask the teacher for "help" in the use of materials, the adult must find a means of returning the problem to the child itself without leaving the child "abandoned" in the process. Such a delicate "observation" requires the teacher's continuing inner self-development through the process of expanding awareness of the three Montessori principles—to view one's various errors in applying such principles as sufficiently impersonal to allow for their effective communication and successful resolution.

Impersonal Errors

"Errors divide men, but their correction is a means of union... The error becomes impersonal and is then amenable to control"

Dr. Maria Montessori

from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 250-251

Hidden by repressed feelings and well-entrenched prejudicial beliefs, inner errors in being a true Montessori teacher are not readily controlled or corrected without their objective impersonal examination. As one's being as "commitment to Montessori principles" is recognized as distinct from that of "personality", even the most sensitive personal inner errors may become eventually subject to a careful process of objective study and analysis with others. This type of cooperative control of error in supportive communication with others

gradually leads to a more open and friendly disposition towards the whole subject of error and mistakes.

Friendly Errors

"... cultivate a friendly feeling towards error, to treat it as a companion inseparable from our lives, as something having a purpose, which it truly has."

Dr. Maria Montessori

from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 246

Viewed from the perspective of being as "commitment to Montessori principles", errors of "personality" are gradually seen as "friendly" reminders and useful lessons in the process of overcoming the many problems and difficulties that arise with children. The ultimate visible evidence of this committed way of correcting errors is the emergence of the "normalized" child in complete harmony with its environment. Such an expansive way of being with children is therefore a long-term process of considerable exercise and experience in actually applying the three Montessori principles in many diverse problem situations.

Exercise and Experience

"Only exercise and experience can correct a disability, and it takes long practice to acquire the various kinds of skills that are needed. The undisciplined child enters into discipline by working in the company of others, not by being told that he is naughty."

Dr. Maria Montessori

from *Absorbent Mind*, p. 245-246

Adults like children gradually correct their mistakes of disharmony, inattention and disorder through a continuing exercise and experience with others. "Good advice" or mere "teaching" for this purpose is never enough by itself. At any level or stage of development, learning and education must attend primarily to solving the small immediate problems which arise on a daily basis in one's own particular social situation. Solving such problems that arise in creating a "normalizing" environment for children is assured in time as one's being is guided from within by a constant growing awareness of the three Montessori principles—a most effective inner "control of error".



Anita Bresler (left) and Ted DiRenzo (right) in discussion during break at Society's conference in Reading, Pennsylvania—May 20-21, 1989.

Address correction requested

912 Thayer Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910

OBSERVER
The Montessori



Non-Profit Org
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 3875
Silver Spring, MD

Reflections

Cont'd. from Page 1, Col. 1

3. celebrate, solemnize, commemorate, remember, sanctify, honor, keep.
4. say, mention, comment, opine, state, declare, exclaim, remark.

I believe that every one of these words listed above can be found in Montessori's writings or something similar thereto regarding the correct adult attitude toward the child. Montessori also seemed to emphasize each slightly different characteristic of observation at different times.

I did not begin to grasp half so clearly the depth and breadth of what Montessori meant when she said to 'observe the child' until I made this little study. When she exclaimed, 'Look at the child!' she was telling us to observe.

It seems that too much observation of the child is limited to looking, watching, studying, examining, etc. Montessori went deeper by demanding that, to observe, one must conform to, follow, respect, abide by, submit to, and obey the natural laws governing the life of a child. But she is not content with that; she tells us to celebrate childhood and to consecrate ourselves to the emergence of the normalized child. If that is not enough, she tells us to 'speak out' on behalf of the child. To observe does not merely mean to 'watch' or even deeper still 'to fathom'; true observation finds its completion in 'speaking out', in declaring and exclaiming what one has perceived.

Observation is not the narrow scrutiny so often associated with keeping control, over-concern about physical wellbeing, and presenting 'valuable' lessons at the 'appropriate times'. Observation as a Montessori principle means to look, to listen, to watch, to study, to perceive and to discern; it further means to conform to, to obey, to follow, to submit to, and to respect. And then one must celebrate and dedicate one's life to that which is observed and declare it to the world unceasingly until justice is done.



Participants in discussion during lunch break at the Society's "Creating the New Education" conference for the Washington, D.C. area held on May 6-7, 1989 in Alexandria, Virginia.

Yet with all that said, nothing can compare with the actual experience of observation that has taken place deep down in my soul recently. I have experienced the joy and the energy that seeing, perceiving, conforming to, celebrating, dedicating, and even at times declaring can give as aspects of true observation as a fundamental principle of nature. As with most things, words pale in the presence of experience.

I can speak all the right words about observation and feel them set me on fire and yet still fail to observe. Being a commitment to observation as a fundamental principle of nature is for me just that, a commitment. For me it is not yet a part of my nature; i.e., something that is with me always and makes me act accordingly without conscious effort on my part (like a heart beat or breathing). It is not involuntary, but voluntary. It is not yet rooted in my unconscious, but must still be invoked consciously.

To the normalized child I must consecrate myself and declare his value in my everyday life. I must put all else on hold while I attend to the emergence of the normalized child and my being as a commitment to Montessori principles.

Conference in Connecticut

Cont'd. from Page 1, Col. 3

Montessori teaching such as "managing misbehavior." Specifically, the conference discussion considered how adult scheduling procedures and time restraints can deter one's being as "commitment to Montessori principles."

The discussion of "schedules" revealed how adult impatience with time-tables and various school procedures are closely associated with a lack of faith in the "normalized" child. Havis stated that "since the 'normalized' child instinctively seeks to conform to reasonable social routines and schedules, lack of cooperation from children is more a matter of one's own impatience and unreasonable expectations. Any forcing of a single child for a particular social need will ultimately deter the complete normalization of all the children in the group. One must either completely follow the path of faith in the 'normalized' child with all the children, or else face the consequences of placing more value in various countervailing adult prejudices and limitations relating to such matters as schedules, routines and procedures."