

# CLASSROOM OBSERVATION: PRE-READING

We look forward to your visit to our MAP classroom! The parent observation is an opportunity for you to get a glimpse of what life is like in a Montessori adolescent classroom. This may be your first exposure to the Montessori experience, your first time in an adolescent program, or you may be here to find out more about what your child's day is (or will be) like. In order to give you as clear a picture as possible, we ask that you observe the following procedure. We also offer hints for observing and interpreting what you see.

## A guide to observation in the Classroom

When you enter the classroom, please make contact with guide/leader present. They will help you find a chair for observation. Please be seated. If your adolescent has come with you, they are welcome to join the class if they feel comfortable. Otherwise, they should also sit with you. If a guide is available they may also sit with you.

Don't be surprised if your child doesn't respond to having you there in the way that you might expect. Young adolescents often respond very differently to having their parents in a classroom than they do in the normal course of the school day or at home.

The regular guide will not always be able to take time from their classroom duties to converse with you during, or immediately after, your observation. However, there may be a leader, assistant or another adult who can. This really depends on the day. If questions occur to you while you are watching, and there is no one to answer them directly, please write them down on the paper provided. We will be glad to answer these questions by email, phone or in person at a later date. Please call or email to arrange a mutually agreeable time.

If you are undertaking an observation with another person please refrain from chatting together if the guide is giving a direct lesson to the whole group, or if the room is at quiet work. Observing a Montessori classroom is often a quiet, contemplative experience and you will be able to speak together about it when you have left the environment. If the work of the students is social and collaborative, it may be okay to chat together, you will need to exercise your own discretion. You are also more than welcome to talk to adolescents and get involved if the situation seems appropriate too! Please check with the guide first.

Observations are usually undertaken for an hour, however, you may be able to make arrangements to stay longer prior to your visit. When you have finished your observation please exit the classroom quietly and leave your question sheet on your chair. At a minimum, make eye contact with the guide before leaving. It may be possible to say quick and quiet goodbye – again, use your discretion. It is important not to interrupt the flow of a class.

## Some hints on observing

Many parents, upon first entering the Montessori environment are amazed by the diverse activities that are going on. The level and type of activity varies widely by subject, time, topic etc. You may observe a hive of active work, you may observe a more sedentary, direct instruction whole or small lesson. The suggestions below are intended to be a focus point for your attention.

**Visual Perspective:** There is more to the Montessori classroom than the activities of one particular student. First time observers may be attracted to one student or a group of the oldest or youngest children. Try to take it all in; view both the entire classroom, and then focus on a particular student. Switch your focus regularly.

**Auditory Perspective:** Listen to the noise level as it rises and falls. Try to see which groups or individual students are generating the sound. You may hear students being challenged by the content of a lesson – what does that sound like? You will hear the normal hum of students working together, the quiet of concentration and at times there may be a special peak of excitement of discovery. See if you can differentiate.

**Learning:** Notice that adolescents access learning in different ways. With some types of activities or materials you will see groups working cooperatively, and with others you will find an individual working alone intensely. Still other children are walking through the classroom seemingly not engaged in any direct activity. Very often, this last type of adolescent is engaged in actively absorbing information through observation of the other students or mulling over a concept that has just been presented. It will help if you alternate your focus on these three learning patterns. Note the ease and joy with which the adolescents work. At times you may even observe the intense self-gratification and independence that the learning process affords.

**Peer Interaction:** Listen to the way that adolescents talk to each other. Listen for the level of respect as well as for the normal pushes and pulls of adolescence.

Transitions between activities are interesting challenges in a classroom. They can certainly feel like a period of unsettled chaos. However, they don't last long and are often an important part of breaking up the work (chunking) for adolescents. After a transition you will see students settle to the next activity and develop a deep concentration with their work or in their group.

Very often observers new to Montessori are surprised that some students will zealously guard their work or sense of peace and tell another classmate that they are disturbing this work. As a result of this verbal communication, the other student should leave.

Other new observers may find it interesting to see the way the students provide help and support to each other – a very important part of social learning for adolescents.

**Guide-student interaction:** Watch the way guides interact with adolescents and compare it with the traditional classroom mode (by which many parents were probably educated). Notice the way in which a guide corrects a student, and look at the instances in which they do not. Is there a difference in the language used?

Listen to the guide's tone of voice with students. The guide is a facilitator of the autonomous learning process. They usually facilitate and offer choice rather than insist. There can be instances where it is important to encourage inclusion of all students. Choice is usually offered. The guide prepares the environment, gives the student the tools to access the lesson or materials (this can look like a traditional lesson, but will typically be much shorter in duration or it could be a lengthy full group discussion) and then does whatever else is necessary to help the students work without assistance. Sometimes this involves direct encouragement, at other times indirect appreciation, and even judicious absence.

There is a fundamental respect for each individual's learning preferences in the Montessori classroom. See if you can pick this up. It may be that you need to observe different subjects to see this too.

**Sociability:** Watch the ways in which the children offer assistance to one another - with the work and with everyday tasks - and the ways that they are directly sociable with one another. Adolescents can have a language all their own, so don't be alarmed by boisterous interactions and "stirring" at times – this is very normal for this age. It must, however, not cross the boundaries of respect. Body language is the best indication of how interactions are perceived.

The Montessori classroom contains a wide range of both ages of students and materials or choices that are appropriate to the different developmental levels. The guide, in an adolescent environment, is also a well-prepared "material". This is an age where learning for a range of role models and experts becomes key developmentally.

Note how the work is available at the appropriate developmental level of each student through the offering of choice. Note the level of discussion between the students. Discussion is a valuable mode of learning for adolescents in particular. Note also how the younger students can absorb the older student's work simply by being near them or part of the discussion, and how, conversely, the older students may assist the younger ones with work or concepts that they have already mastered. The level of work may be set at the highest level, but this interaction helps less experienced students access the content and through repeated exposure they are able to synthesise this. Note where the work is real – directly developing skills for beyond school.

There are always pockets of social activity occurring in any Montessori classroom, this is an important part of their work. The natural desire to form relationships and be part of an ongoing community is ever present, especially for the socially driven adolescent.

Observe the independence of the students as they do for themselves in the classroom environment. The generation of autonomy is a function of the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom. What this means is that students will typically have available all needed materials, in good working order, to complete a task that has usually been self chosen.

The structure of Montessori provides students with as much time as they need to complete the task to their satisfaction, and personal or collaborative success are the primary rewards. This helps students develop intrinsic motivation and self-discipline. If the work doesn't have a natural deadline (eg the completion of a project for a specific purpose and date) then deadlines will be set - as this is also preparation for life. Deadlines can be negotiated on an individual basis where needed.

As you look around the classroom notice the materials, how practical or attractive they are in placement, color, cleanliness, quality, etc. The students are attracted to learn by this environment. It is set up to facilitate discussion areas, collaborative work, building/making and to provide quiet break-out spaces (like the mezzanine) too. Everything they need is close at hand. This includes access to a "maker space" where they can go to use basic tools and materials to construct and create.

We understand that you will not be able to sort out and see all the dimensions of the classroom that are outlined above in the time you have with us. Please don't be disappointed when you discover that all aspects of the classroom have either not been present during your observation or that you did not see it all. Use the *In-Class Observation Checklist* when you are observing to help guide you. We know that learning how to "read" the Montessori classroom is difficult at first, but we know that with each successive observation your skills will become increasingly honed. We look forward to your next visit to the classroom, and are eager to share with you the excitement that we feel in being a part of your child's adolescent years.

## Notes

What is being described is a "normalised classroom". Some notes about normalisation:

- For the adolescent, normalisation comes about by the process of valorisation.
- Classrooms will be more (normalised when the same guide has been with a class for several years.
- Classrooms will be more normalised at the end of the school year than at the beginning or middle (if you're observing at the beginning, expect to see a little more chaos!).
- If a classroom has had an influx of new, non-Montessori children, it will not be as normalised as if the classroom was filled with children who have been in a Montessori classroom for a while.

# IN-CLASS OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

*It is important to remember that these things below do not always happen simultaneously. If you're observing and you do not see all of these things happening, but you still see a lot of activity and learning going on, don't be put off. It could very well be that on this day and time you are observing, none of the students have chosen learn in any of these ways. If you are unsure, try to observe again at a different time/subject.*

## WHAT YOU SHOULD SEE...

### The Environment

- An orderly, pleasant environment, with materials that are complete and well-cared for. Adolescents are responsible for cleaning and maintaining this entire environment – there are no cleaners and the adults do not do it for them. Community work in the space is an important part of Preparation for Life.
- Typical Montessori materials present in the classroom. In adolescence, the ability to abstract increases so many of the materials from the primary years are not necessary. The trained guides are also considered a “material”.
- A limited amount of communal workbooks, text books, or worksheets. Real work, with building and gardening materials, books, and computers should be the norm. A balance between heads and hands should be evident.
- Systems of organisation that help the adolescent understand what work they should be undertaking and helping them keep a track of it. Eg. Timetable, tracking maps, work plans.
- The overall impression should be one of a happy, busy, harmonious community.

### The Students

- Students helping one another in a natural way (without looking for praise from adults).
- Students working in pairs and small groups, using materials or doing self-directed research.
- Older children giving lessons or advice to the younger ones.
- Students usually solving their own disputes without adult intervention. We use a restorative practice framework to assist with this. *(If the adult does step in, how does the adult handle the situation? The guide should be helping the students learn how to develop the resolution skills, not just offering a quick or punitive solution and moving on.)*
- Students moving about and talking to one another freely when appropriate, but still respecting each other's space.
- There should usually be a pretty lively "buzz" of discussion, and many discussions between and among students regarding the work, fairness, community expectations, with only occasional adult participation (for guidance when they are not able to reach a reasonable consensus or compromise amongst themselves).

### The Guide(s)

- Guides who speak with the students and engage them in respectful conversation as opposed to "talking at them" or "barking orders".
- Guides giving whole class presentations/workshops, individual or small group lessons.
- Guides should also be able to have time to simply observe the classroom in action, without taking an active role themselves. *(This may vary on the day you're watching as well. Guides will have days where students were doing things that required them to do a lot of small group instruction. On these days they will hardly have the time to observe.)*
- Guides/leaders should be able to explain the curriculum, how it integrates and develops over time. There will be links between many of the subject/content areas, each supporting learning in the other.