



A GUIDE TO PARENT OBSERVATION IN THE PRIMARY CLASS

Judy Shepps Battle

Ms. Battle's insight into the parent's point of view allows her to provide practical guidelines as to how a parent should approach observation and to find the positive attributes of a Montessori primary class.

We welcome your visit to your child's Primary classroom and would like you to read and absorb the following guidelines for this observation so that your child's day can be interrupted as little as possible while, at the same time, you can learn the most about us.

Purpose

The parent observation is an opportunity for your child to share with you a dynamic picture of what life is like Montessori-style - friends, teachers learning materials, as well as the less tangible atmosphere that is "home" for the child for so much of his or her working day. We know from experience that what you will actually see is colored by the excitement that your child has at having you here. To minimize this excitement factor, both for your child and others in the class, we ask that you observe that following procedure. We also offer hints for observing and interpreting what you see.

Procedure

When you enter your child's classroom you will find two sets of adult-sized chairs. Choose a place and in fifteen minutes you may switch to another vantage point. This will enable you to get a chance to see the entire classroom area.

When you sit down children may come up to you - either your child or others. Please try not to engage the in conversation. A polite "hello" and a direct response as to who you are is fine - and then quietly ask the child to return to work. The children have been told before you come that your work is to watch them working and they will understand your response to them in that context.

If your own child cries or clings or is silly or ignores you completely do not be surprised - we are not. Children respond differently to having their parents in the classroom than they do in the normal course of the school day or at home. It is the talent of the classroom teacher to deal with your child's response and it is fine for you and your child to spend the observation time watching the class together if he or she is not able to leave your lap.

It is very likely that your child will offer you a snack while you are visiting. Although the fare may be meager - crackers and juice sometimes - remember that he or she is very proud to be able to put together and serve this food to you so please do not refuse to partake of it even it means adding a few more calories to your diet for that day or if you are not excited by the choice of food. The joy that your child experiences in your eating the snack is a special delight to watch.

The teachers will not be able to take time from their classroom duties to converse with you either during or after your observation. If questions occur to you while you are watching, please write them down. Your child's teacher will be glad to answer these questions within our normal teacher-parent procedure, by telephone or in person.

The classroom teacher will come up to you and indicate when your observation period is over. It is best if your goodbye to your child is brief and positive. It is helpful if you prepare your child for the fact that your visit to the classroom is limited and that you will leave and then see him or her at the usual dismissal time. Some children will take you leaving in stride and others will cry and want to leave with you. Rest assured that even the most agitated child will calm down very shortly after you leave.

Hints on Observing

We have found it helpful to offer a guide to observing and interpreting the dynamics of the Montessori classroom. Many parents, upon first entering the environment when it is abuzz with children, feel overwhelmed by the diverse activities that are going on. The suggestions below are intended to be focus for your attention.

Visual Perspective

There is more to the Montessori classroom than the activities of your particular child. Naturally, the first tendency of parents is to focus and follow their own child's activities. Try to observe in a context - alternate between a wide-angle view of the entire classroom and then focus in on your child. This way there will be less self-consciousness and you will have a true context.

Audio Perspective

Listen to the noise level as it rises and falls and try to see which groups or individual children are generating the sound. You will hear the normal hub bub of children being together and the special pitch of the children excited about learning. At times there will be a special peak of excitement of discovery. See if you can differentiate.

Learning

Notice that children learn in different ways. With some types of materials you will see groups of children working cooperatively, and with others you will find an individual child working intensely. Still other children are walking through the classroom seemingly not engaged in any direct activity. Very often, this last type of child is engaged in actively absorbing the children and materials in the classroom through observation. It will help if you alternate your focus on these three learning patterns. Note also the ease and joy with which the children work. You will see the intense self-gratification that the learning process affords your child.

Child-Child Interaction

Listen to the way - the style and content - in which children talk to each other, Try to hear the level of respect as well as the normal pushes and pulls of childhood. Very often observers new to Montessori are surprised that a child will jealously guard his or her work and tell another classmate that they are disturbing this work, and that , as a result of this verbal communication, the other child will leave. Other new observers are bemused by the politeness with which one child will ask another if he or she would "care for a piece of apple" and the other will respond "yes please, thank you".

Teacher-Child Interaction

Watch the way teachers interact with children and compare it with the traditional classroom mode by which you were probably educated. Notice the way in which a teacher corrects a child and look at the instances in which she does not. Listen to the teacher's tone of voice with the child. Many parents have asked how one directress can "handle" a group of thirty children. The answer lies with this interaction process. The directress is a facilitator of the child's autonomous learning process. She guides - not directs. She prepares the environment, gives the child the tools to utilize the materials and then does whatever else is necessary to help the child to do it without assistance. Sometimes this "whatever else" involves direct encouragement and at other times indirect appreciation and at still other times judicious absence. There is basic respect for each individual child's particular style of learning in the Montessori classroom. See if you can pick this up.

Sociability

Watch the ways in which the children offer assistance to one another - with the materials and with everyday tasks - and the ways that they are directly sociable with one another, The snack table is a good area to keep an eye on to see this dynamic.

The Montessori classroom contains a wide range of both ages of children and of materials that are appropriate to the different developmental levels. Note how the children do to the material that is appropriate to their developmental level. Note also how the younger children absorb the older children's work simply by being near them and how, conversely, the older children will assist the younger ones with work that they have already mastered. These seeming "academic" activities have a strong social component to them - one that inculcates a sense of responsibility for and community with all those in the class.

There are always present in the classroom pockets of purely social activities. Children may be clustered around a table discussing the latest cartoon superhero or in-vogue doll, or they may be making plans to play at one another's houses that they have not yet told their parents about! Whenever a birthday nears a child's upcoming party is certain to be a major item of discussion.

Children are children in the Montessori classroom and the child's natural desire to form friends and be part of an ongoing community are ever present.

Autonomy

Absorb the independence of your child and other children as they do for themselves in their classroom environment. Watch even the youngest child take responsibility for his or her personal environment. Watch how, however precariously, a glass pitcher of water or a tray with fragile materials on it is carried. Watch as a child chooses a piece of work, takes it from the shelf, completes the work, and returns it so that the next child can use it.

The generation of this autonomy is a function of the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom. What this means is that the child will have available all needed materials, in good working order, to complete a task that has usually been chosen by that child. The structure of Montessori provides the child with as much time as he or she needs to complete this task and success is the primary reward. As you look around the classroom notice the materials, how attractive they are in placement, color, cleanliness. The child is attracted to learn by this environment.

We recognize that you will not be able to sort out and see all the dimensions of the classroom that are outlined above and hope that you are not disappointed in yourself or in us when you find that all aspects of the classroom have either not been present during your observation or that you did not see it all. We recognize that the process of 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 visit to your child's classroom and are eager to share with you the excitement that we feel in being a part of your child's growing years.

Judy Shepps Battle is a frequent contributor to the NAMTA Journal, and is a staff psychologist at Lakeside Montessori school in Princeton, New Jersey.

© Copyright 2011 J. Battle
writeaction@aol.com