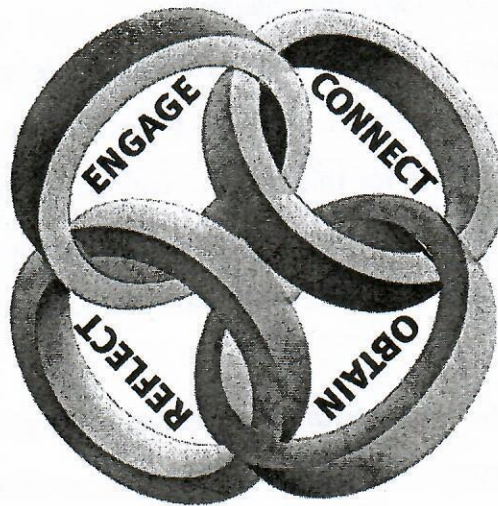


# An Observer's Notebook

Learning from Children with  
the Observation C.O.R.E.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

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2012



many Montessori teachers, however, they prepare their progress reports and conferences with a minimal amount of recorded information.

### COMMIT TO OBSERVATION

Finding time to observe is, admittedly, challenging. Nevertheless, Montessori teachers must make time for observation. Still, what if the issue of finding time is an issue about commitment? Not surprisingly, we somehow always manage to find time to pursue our commitments. As Montessori teachers we must commit to observation.

We may wish to rethink our classroom job description. What, in other words, are our current classroom commitments? What have we made more important than observation? We could observe ourselves, or invite colleagues to observe us, and document how we use our classroom time. *What if we were to discover that much of our daily activities occur as responses to the dependencies we have fostered with the children?*

In other words, have we really sponsored children's independence? As cited at the start of this chapter, Montessori defined our classroom roles in terms of the prepared environment and each child's liberty. She noted, "It was for this reason I created a school in which the children spontaneously developed their own activities while the teacher was relegated to the role of observer....The more the children progress, the more the teacher must be limited to observation."<sup>4</sup>

Nancy Rambusch, founder of the American Montessori Society, framed the necessity for teachers becoming skilled observers.

Since the teacher's task was to free each child to learn, and since each child, responding to the inner laws of his own organism, had different needs and a different developmental timetable, the teacher could not function effectively without an awareness of the infinity of variations in child behavior. Under the Montessori rubric, the teacher incapable of observation could not teach.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Montessori. *The child in the family*, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Rambusch. Introduction, p. 15.

### 3. THE SPIRITUAL PEDAGOGY

*What happened more than thirty years ago now will always remain a mystery to me. I have tried since then to understand what took place in those children. Certainly there was nothing of what is to be found now in any House of Children. There were only rough large tables.*

*What was the wonder due to? No one could state it clearly. But it conquered me forever, because it penetrated my heart as a new light. One day I looked at them with eyes which saw them differently and I asked myself: "Who are you, are you the same children you were before?" And I said within myself: "Perhaps you are those children of whom it was said that they would come to save humanity. If so, I shall follow you." Since then, I am she who tries to grasp their message and to follow them.*



*And in order to follow them, I changed my whole life. I was nearly 40. I had in front of me a doctor's career and a professorship at the University. But I left all, because I felt compelled to follow them, and to find others who could follow them, for I saw that in them lay the secret of the soul.<sup>1</sup>*

Montessori defined the classroom as a laboratory for the study of free children.<sup>2</sup> She taught teachers to become practicing scientists who would ask questions, investigate, and share their findings. And, in modeling scientific practice, Montessori knew her own work was necessarily incomplete. She both expected and welcomed our discoveries and collaborative innovations.

I must repeat that it is not that I first proposed these principles and then shaped my educational method around them. To the contrary, only the immediate observation of children revealed some of the laws of their inner being.<sup>3</sup>

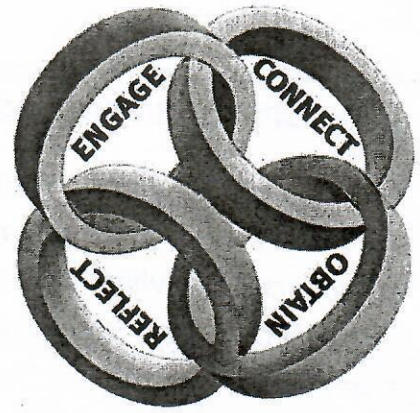
<sup>1</sup> Maria Montessori. *How it all happened.*

<sup>2</sup> Maria Montessori. *The advanced Montessori method-1*, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Montessori. *The child in the family*, p. 89.

#### 4. CONNECT: WHAT DO I WANT TO LEARN?

*[Try] to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.<sup>1</sup>*



When we want to learn from children, we can observe with the four C.O.R.E. process elements and ask connecting questions, obtain information, reflect to understand what we have obtained, and then use our new understandings to engage children's, and our own, growth. The connecting questions we ask provide much more than answers and information. The questions themselves guide how we will observe and influence what we may see. Connecting questions also open relationships; we relate all at once with the children we observe and with ourselves. It is a reciprocated relationship. While the observed influence the observer, so too does the observer influence the observed.

For too many decades, mainstream educators have observed to assess and evaluate teachers' and children's performance.<sup>2</sup> Our Montessori purposes differ. In keeping with Montessori philosophy and tradition, we ask questions to learn about humanity. There is so much to ask; there is still so much for us to learn.

- How do they create and assemble their lives?
- What is a personality?
- What is a way of being?
- What is an inner secret?
- If children are not concentrating, are they also not attending?
- How do children develop social awareness?
- How do they understand good/bad and right/wrong?
- How do they manifest courage and fear?
- When and how do they express joy, happiness, tenderness, love, frustration, and anger?

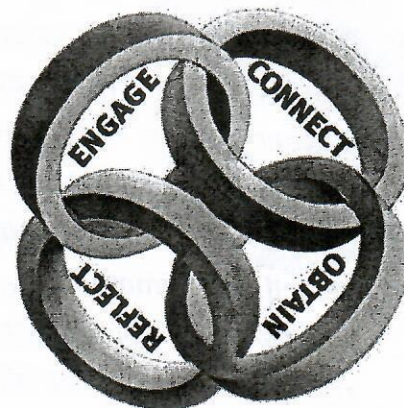
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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. Letters to a young poet.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Epstein. Testing the test.

## 5. OBTAIN: HOW WILL I RECORD?

*When you are in a Casa dei Bambini to observe the children, you are working and laboring to learn something which I do not give, which an assistant does not give, which no one else gives. If you do not possess this sensitivity which permits your learning the intimate facts which children reveal without warning anyone as to which is an important thing or which is worthy of claiming attention, then this sensitivity, this capacity of observation is the labor which you must accomplish in yourselves.<sup>1</sup>*



We observe naturally and uniquely, in our own way, and we each do it rather well. We are, in other words, designed to observe and learn. Without being aware, our brain and nervous systems continuously collect information about ourselves and the world. We coordinate sensory perception, attention, memory, and various cognitive functions.<sup>2</sup> All together, these components render what we perceive into meaningful observations. We can, for example, drive for two hours at eighty-five miles an hour and arrive safely at our destination. Remarkably, we made numerous decisions based on our observations even when we have no conscious memory of having done so.

Given these factors, we could consider our abilities to observe as a matter of genetic endowment. As with other capabilities, we could conclude some are better observers than others. Alternatively, we could also regard observation as an inherent skill which can be improved.<sup>3</sup> Montessori apparently thought so, and she asserted, "Now it is obvious that the possession of senses and of knowledge is not sufficient to enable a person to observe; it is a habit which must be developed by practice."<sup>4</sup> But what is the nature of this habit? Our abilities to observe consciously may be influenced by personal genetic and cultural factors such as our

<sup>1</sup> Maria Montessori. Montessori training course, January 15 – May 15, 1913, pp.28-29.

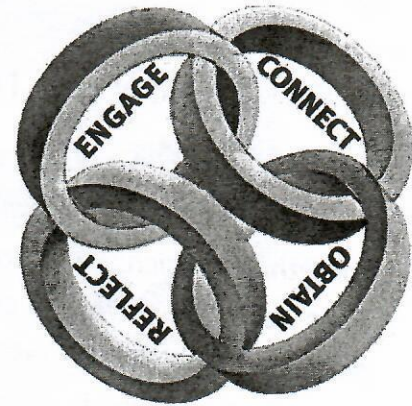
<sup>2</sup> Athanassios Raftopoulos. (2009). *Cognition and perception*.

<sup>3</sup> Edward de Bono. *de Bono's thinking course*, pp. 1-2. De Bono's analysis is applied here to observation.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Montessori. *The advanced Montessori method-1*, p. 102.

## 6. REFLECT: HOW WILL I UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE OBTAINED?

*The vision of the teacher should be at once precise like that of the scientist, and spiritual like that of the saint. The preparation for science and the preparation for sanctity should form a new soul, for the attitude of the teacher should be at once positive, scientific, and spiritual. Positive and scientific, because she has an exact task to perform, and it is necessary that she put herself into immediate relation with the truth, by means of rigorous observation, that she should strip off all illusions, all the idle creations of the fancy, that she should distinguish truth from falsehood unerringly....Spiritual, because it is to man that his powers of observation are to be applied, and because the characteristics of the creature who is to be his particular subject of observation are spiritual.<sup>1</sup>*



Reflection is a creative process. When we reflect, we draw upon what we already know to make sense of newly obtained information. Sometimes we react; we might reject and not see with the possibility of new understandings because it could alter what we knew previously. Sometimes we accept our findings; we willingly rethink what we knew in light of new understandings and then it is as if we see with different eyes. When we reflect, we can also appreciate ourselves and those who have taught us for what we have learned.

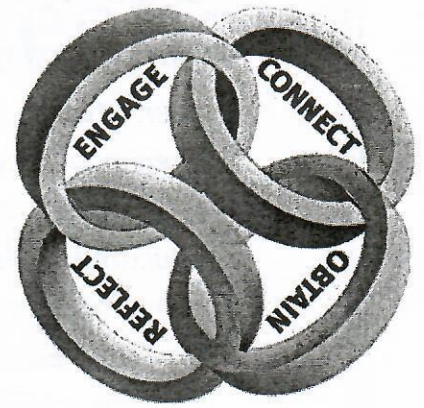
Creating understanding through reflection is not a linear process. The process is rather messy, and we cannot proceed through a fixed sequence of steps. All at once we reconsider initial connecting questions and obtained information. We read, reread, organize our recorded information, and formulate initial ideas and hunches about its meaning or meanings. We make comparisons, look for patterns, construct categories, and develop summary themes. We may decide next to ask new questions and obtain more information. Then we share our ideas with colleagues, observe some more, and ask more questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Montessori. *The advanced Montessori method-1*, pp. 107-108.

## 7. ENGAGE: WHAT WILL I DO WITH NEW UNDERSTANDINGS?

*Often inexperienced teachers place great importance on teaching and believe they have done everything necessary when they have demonstrated the use of the materials in a meaningful way. In reality, they are far from the truth because the job of the teacher is rather more important than that. To her falls the task of guiding the development of the child's spirit, and therefore her observations of the child are not limited solely to understanding him. All her observations must emerge at the end – and this is their only justification – in her ability to help the child.<sup>1</sup>*



When children first come to a classroom, they come in as many ways as each is special and unique. How do we help young children express and meet their needs as they transition into and accept Montessori school life? As with the other elements of the C.O.R.E. process, what we know and believe influences how we will engage children and ourselves. The Montessori legacy is very clear. We seek to engage children in concentration. To facilitate this, we understand and believe

that the children must be free to choose their own occupations just as they must never be interrupted in their spontaneous activities. No work may be imposed - no threats, no rewards, no punishments. The teacher must be quiet and passive, waiting patiently and almost withdrawing herself from the scene, so as to efface her own personality and this allow plenty of room for the child's spirit to expand<sup>2</sup>.

While our goal is clear, it happens that some children run and charge throughout the room. Others act as if they have always been with the class, and they just fit right in. Sometimes they are overwhelmed and frightened, and they want to be left alone. How do we help young children overcome their fears? Regardless of how they appear, first-time children have so much to learn and remember. They connect with questions that are sometimes unspoken: What can I

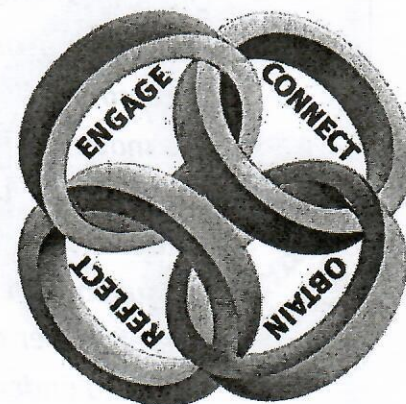
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<sup>1</sup> Maria Montessori. *The child in the family*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Montessori. *The absorbent mind*, p. 240.

## 8. EXTENSIONS: ACTION RESEARCH

*The needs of the child during his years of growth have been studied and the results of these studies have been published. Now, it is for society as a whole to take over conscientiously the responsibility of education, while education in its turn will liberally compensate society by the benefits resulting from its progress. Education, so conceived, no longer matters only to children and their parents. It become a stimulus to every part of the social body, a stimulus to the greatest of social improvements.<sup>1</sup>*



Unlike a library project or a discussion-based, problem solving session, “action research specifically refers to a disciplined inquiry conducted by a teacher [or teachers] with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future.”<sup>2</sup> Depending upon the level of interest, action research can take place in a classroom, among several classrooms, throughout the entire school, the school’s community, or possibly our entire profession. In each of these settings, action research involves examining current practice with the intent of implementing change. The four C.O.R.E. elements are used.

There are many examples of action research. You or a team may seek to enable concentration, design environments, adopt new curriculum, evaluate the effectiveness of professional development programs, determine to expand the school, or realign resources.

Action research begins by asking compelling connecting questions.

- How do I know if my approaches to teaching hand writing are effective?
- How do our parents regard the services we currently offer? Would they like us to modify what we provide?
- Should the school expand and add new programs; for example, infants, upper elementary, middle school, or high school?
- Should the school remodel the outdoor environments and develop natural playscapes?
- Is this the time to build an addition or should we consider a new facility elsewhere?
- What are children who do not concentrate trying to tell us?

<sup>1</sup> Maria Montessori. *The absorbent mind*, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Eileen Ferrance. *Action research*, p. 1.