

Observation – The Path to Documentation

by Beth MacDonald

The most challenging behavior change I had to face as a preschool Montessori teacher was to learn the art, spirit, and attitude of observation. The result of that moved me, contrary to my style of teaching, into a mode of listening to children.

My years as an elementary teacher developed my natural style of “night club act” or “on stage persona.” After completing my Montessori training I entered the classroom anew with the challenge of observing children involved in their own learning cycle in the classroom. Just sitting quietly and observing children in lieu of directing and teaching all activities was a huge shift. I know you are smiling and wondering when I found the luxury of quiet observation — it doesn’t exist much in the Infant, Toddler, and Preschool classrooms in any school. Our tasks as teachers pull us into the activity of care giving and the interactive relationships with the children in our care. Montessori talked about the “spirit of observation” which is a little closer to the reality of our lives as educators. Keeping your eyes and ears open to the children around you and maintaining an objective view of the learning while in the midst of the classroom is a more realistic approach.

Our shift to documentation began with the inspiration of the Reggio Emilia Schools in Italy and our consultation with Amelia Gambetti, U.S. Liaison from those schools. Conferences, visits from other U.S. educators inspired by this approach, and our own reading and researching lead us to the strong connection between Montessori’s emphasis on observation and Reggio Emilia’s emphasis on documentation. The marriage began . . . and a bumpy road it was, rewarding but challenging.

Maria Montessori felt strongly about observation being one of the primary focuses of a teacher or parent. She wrote, “ The adult must recognize that he must take second place, endeavor all he can to

understand the child and to support and help him in the development of his life . . . the adult with his stronger personality must hold himself in check, and, taking his lead from the child, feel proud if he can understand and follow the child.”

When we encountered the Reggio philosophy and its emphasis on documentation, we realized that observation does not limit itself to listening and recording the activities and learning of children, but expands to a broader concept of observing the space or environment you are in and evaluating how the environment supports and reflects the learning of children, parents, and teachers.

While visiting our school, one of the most important sentences Amelia Gambetti said to us was, “Your classrooms and your school should be personally reflective of the children, parents, and teachers who live and learn here.” It was a pivotal point of reference so we could begin observing every square inch of our environment and remove or redo everything that did not reflect this concept.

We removed decorations and all teacher or commercially-made displays and replaced them with photos, drawings, visual expressions, and conversations of children, parents, and teachers on the following:

- Cubbies, cots, group line, communication centers
- Staff panels, classroom pictures, family panels
- Birthday boards, classroom identity panels
- Maps of the school
- Daily Journal Boards in each classroom
- Parent Information Board/Entrance to the school
- History of our Journey with both philosophies
- Personal Journey/Portfolios for each child
- Panels of Experiences, Learning, Projects in each classroom

I love Loris Malaguzzi’s, the founder of the Reggio Schools, comments about documentation:

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Our school is beginning its 21st year in early childhood education and our 13th year in dialogue with the Reggio Emilia approach in collaboration with Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children Coordinator and Liaison for Consultancy in Schools. MacDonald Montessori School serves 180 children aged six weeks to ten years and has a fun, creative staff of 35 men and women.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TEACHERS OF MMS



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How much do we miss in our classrooms when we become engrossed in our teacher tasks and fail to observe what is under our noses? By moving to documentation with our observations we then can share the life of the classroom or school with the parents, teachers, and the children themselves.

One of our toddler teachers, Ellen Leja, always taught with her camera around her neck or close at hand. Experiences happen quickly and are over as quickly with infants or toddler children. She captured a wonderful moment on the playground. She snapped four photographs capturing an exploration and fascination with each other's bodies (belly buttons!). These photos have captured a moment in time and are used repeatedly as an example of the beauty of relationships between children.

Simple observations can lead to documentation. Adam was having a difficult transition into the toddler room.

He cried every day, leaving a favorite toy at school: a fire truck. Tracy observed this and suggested he bring the fire truck back and forth to school and sent home a disposable camera to capture his activities with the fire truck at home. Notes went back and forth between home and school. Adam stopped crying and entered and left school happy with his new friend (truck). All was gathered and a panel created to tell their story and share it with the other toddlers and parents.

We began to notice situational experiences within our school that we would have experienced but not documented previously, for example, the installation of all new windows in our 100-year-old building. The project took six weeks and Tony and Tim, the window installers, became objects of fascination. Whole classrooms of children sat on the stairs and watched them remove glass block cubes and reveal huge openings in our walls. The children drew windows and structures for weeks. Many conversations were

children and the lack of participation of the boys in the classroom, what messages our culture creates around weddings, and what expectations girls absorb as they grow up. This classroom experience is very close to my heart because it was one of our first attempts 11 years ago to listen, observe, collaborate, support, develop hypothesis, research, and document the curiosities of children.

The tools for observation and documentation are crucial because you will miss everything that is happening if you have to scramble to find what you need to record what is right in front of you. Being fully equipped was one of our first painful lessons.

Tools that should be at your fingertips at all times:

- pencil and paper, clipboards
- recorders with batteries (painful lesson)
- camera with film (another painful lesson) or digital camera with memory cards
- disposable cameras
- video camera
- computer or laptop (laptops are better for Infant and Toddler rooms)

Adult roles needed:

- parents to help with documentation or typing
- co-teachers to trade off observing when you are involved in an experience or activity with the children
- co-teachers or colleagues to collaborate together about the conversations, experiences, photographs, videos, and visual expressions you have collected

Approaches we wish we would have discovered early on:

- viewing documentation panels as “in process” by displaying the thinking and creativity of children as it happens and not seeing panels as finished products
- capturing the big idea observed and sharing our thinking in the documentation
- not being just narrative or descriptive in our written commentary of the photos
- not using every child’s visual expressions or photos but choosing a sampling of the experience and helping parents to see that their child would be reflected in other panels in the classroom

Seeing and seizing these opportunities of observation and documentation and changing our behavior as teachers is our current and greatest challenge. As a result, we have learned from the educators in Reggio along with the inspiration from Maria Montessori’s words, “Follow the child.” I believe we are now better able to interpret and make visible what we observe. The children usually show us the way.

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References

- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1998). *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Lillard, P. (1972). *Montessori: A Modern Approach*. New York: Schocken Books.

What’s the reflection?: Observe “every square inch” of your school’s environment for reflections of “the children, parents, and teachers who live and learn” there. Are the reflections you see compatible with your program’s values, philosophy, and approach?

What elephants?: “There are elephants walking across your classrooms every day and you are focusing on the ants” (Amelia Gambetti). This powerful provocation is worth considering. MacDonald reports that moving from observation to documentation illuminates things that might be otherwise missed. Try it out and see where it leads.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht