

Observations across the Globe: London, England

—Susan Mayclin Stephenson, 1987

*What is the greatest sign of success for a teacher...?
It is to be able to say,
“The children are now working as if I did not exist.”*

—*The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Maria Montessori, p285

One of Maria Montessori’s wonderful contributions to our world was her discovery that mankind has a Divine Urge, an Inner Guide which, if protected and nurtured in the child, can lead to the development of each person’s full potential, the evolution of our species and peace on Earth.

She gives us a practical method of providing such a prepared and nurturing environment and setting the child free to flower within it. A child who is in touch with this Inner Guide, a “normalized child” knows how and when and for how long to sleep, eat, move, talk, work, or think quietly. This child is always enthusiastic, always happy.

To watch a prepared environment filled with 30-40 children functioning on this level, a “normalized class”, is one of the most thrilling experiences in life. I would like to share with you, as much as is possible through the written word, a personal experience of such a class in February 1987. I had returned to the Maria Montessori Training Organization in London, England – where my daughter, Narda, was working for her diploma, and where I had received mine fifteen years earlier. I returned with wonderful memories of classes of up to 40 children of ages 2-7, where one could sit down in the middle of the morning and have tea with the directress while the class went on, a beehive of happy, calm, quiet activity – one non-teaching assistant dusting a shelf while the children helped and taught each other and accomplished an amazing amount of joyful work, uninterrupted by adult intervention. I was made welcome and invited, even though this was the last day before vacation to observe the children’s class at the training center. The following are notes from this observation on February 19, 1987:

Class Composition:

Thirty children age 2 to 7 with one directress and an assistant. In this case, since it is at the training center, the assistant is also a trained Montessori Directress.

Physical Environment:

A small room adjoins the main room. This is the “reception class” for under-two’s, led by a Montessori Directress for two hours each afternoon, until they feel ready to join completely the



main group. This is a gradual process determined by the needs of each child. The main room is made of two rooms, one a few steps higher than the other, made into one large room in the ground floor of the training center. The upper part opens into the garden. In warm weather the class is both inside and out. Today it is snowing! The floor is of polished wood, the only carpeted area being the small reading corner which also contains a rocking chair and a few pillows. The lower area, next to the reception class, contains fifteen tables, a nature corner, book corner, practical life tables and shelves, math language, drying rack for paintings, physic experiments and a shelf of toys similar to those in the reception class.

The higher room contains a snack table, piano, sensorial material, geography, history, music, globe and maps, a stack of floor mats and a box of rolled larger floor mats.

A corner shelf holds the record keeping charts readily available throughout the day.

There is no directress’ table or desk.

An ‘ellipse’ for walking-on-the-line is in the higher room. It is used throughout the day for walking and balancing objects, just as any other child-chosen activity. As there are no compulsory large groups, it is not used for sitting upon, musical movement, or anything else but walking.

The Schedule:

8:30

Directresses arrive and prepare the environment

8:45

Children begin arriving, one adult keeping an eye on the coatroom (entrance hall) as children change from coats and outdoor shoes to indoor shoes (adults wear indoor shoes too) which are kept in colorful cloth bags hung on each child’s coat hook. Children enter the classroom, greet their teachers, shake hands, and start the day as they wish, working or helping prepare the environment.

9:10

Door locked. Late arrivals ring the bell and wait for the door to be opened.



9:30

Activities in progress: mirror polishing, braiding, four cylinder blocks done blindfolded, silver polishing, number rods, drawing, puzzle map of Africa, classified picture naming (two groups containing two or three children, each led by a child), identical picture matching, decimal system introduction, pegboard (from toy, link-with-the-home materials shelf), binomial cube, pouring rice, metal insets (three children), and geometric cabinet with third set of cards.

10:10

“False Fatigue,” a common occurrence in a normalized class, occurs right on time. After about an hour of relatively simple work, the class is experiencing a period of restlessness as the children look about for the “great work of the morning” after which most children will settle down to concentrate quite well for an hour or more, emerging quite refreshed. Rather than interfering, the directress steps back to wait for the class to settle back down. Today the children have divided themselves into two groups, the younger children working in the lower room and the older in the upper room. “False Fatigue” is occurring only in the upper room. The momentary noise attracts the attention of the younger children. Several look up from their work for a moment then go back to work.

10:50

The assistant is leading a charming game of singing, choosing partners, dancing and bowing. Other children are continuing their work, unaffected by this circle game. A few children are helping the directress set up three tables, which will hold the hot lunch, which is being prepared in the kitchen. In England the noon meal is the main meal of the day, even at home, and the children eat together.

Lunch Preparation:

Two colorful, quilted placemats are placed on each table, with a large spoon for soup. One child wheels the food in on a cart from the kitchen, then two other children who have offered to help set out stacks of soup bowls, a large tureen of soup, stacks of lunch plates, a plate of buttered bread, a plate of cheese slices, and a bowl of greens.

The directress and another child are checking the order and cleanliness of the environment. It has been kept very ordered and clean throughout the morning by the children, a quick task.

11:55

The assistant is asking a small group of children if they would like to hear a story or a tape – the rest of the class is still working. They vote and listen to a tape. A few children are signing a birthday card with the directress (for the cook). There is, as always, a feeling of a home, a “children’s house” rather than a school where children wait for an adult to tell them what to do next. The self-respect of the children is noticeable on their faces and in every action.

Lunch:

12:00

The children have quietly been invited or have come on their own and are seated at tables. The directress stands and

they all say a prayer together. I am struck by the fact (as I write this later) that: This is the only time during the whole day that the children have acted collectively – everyone doing the same thing at the same time with an adult leading.

To begin lunch, the directress quietly calls three or four children at a time to begin serving themselves. The two teachers then sit down at one of the tables and eat with the children. For the next hour the serving, eating, talking, cleaning up, serving dessert, cleaning and dressing to go home (for those few children who go home after lunch) is carried out solely by the children, while the directresses eat and talk together with the children sitting nearest.

It is obvious that every detail has been thought out, every “point of consciousness” taught with practical life lessons. There is no feeling of confusion, tension, control by adults and the children exhibit, even during lunch, the traits of normalized children – joy, dignity, independence, unselfishness, initiative, self-discipline, love of order, work, the environment, and each other. Some of the practical life activities that are noticeable are: walking without bumping anything, tucking in chairs, holding chairs for another child, carrying a bowl of soup down two steps, offering the last piece of food to another, checking to see if the bowls are empty before stacking them, looking in a mirror to see if one’s face is clean, and not interrupting someone else who is talking.

During lunch the children are free to get up and down from the table, get more food, offer food to others, go to the bathroom, take as much food as they like (as at the snack table during the day). Again the feeling of home.

After the main course, each child has cleared his place leaving the placemat. A child pushes the cart back to the kitchen and the dessert is brought out. Again the children set out stacks of small bowls and spoons and two large bowls of pudding and berries. The rest of the class is talking among themselves at their tables. Again the directress calls a few children to begin the serving, then sits down to chat while the children eat, converse, and clean up.

12:40

As they finish, those children who are going home (5-6 children) take a chair to a spot near the dressing area. Then each gets his or her outside shoes, boots, etc., dresses, and sits on his chair to talk to friends. The parents wait till the door is opened by the directress at 1:00. The children shake hands, say good-bye, and go home.

The rest of the class is still cleaning up, washing tables, putting chairs on tables for sweeping the floor, returned to their work, or are sitting and talking.

1:00

Except for rainy days, the children who want to, go outside and play. The others stay inside and work.

1:30

Back inside, work which is on-going is being continued by children (work can also be left out overnight in some cases – there is a wide range of work going on, some of which takes hours or days). There is no feeling that the afternoon is any different than the morning. The children seem to need no special

projects or adult-centered activities – even though this is the last day before vacation! Child-chosen work, by oneself or with one’s friends, seems to be the most favorite activity of the children. The directress could easily say, “The children are now working as if I did not exist.”

2:00

The children are well into their work, with classical music playing softly in the background. The class seems the same size even though some have gone home because the infants are now in the class and some are working in this room. Activities which I can see in progress right now are: square of Pythagoras (a 3 year old doing it very well), binomial cube, Africa puzzle map, thermal bottles, one child walking on the line, sandpaper letters and numbers, movable alphabet, polishing a classroom window, and table washing.

There is no difference in the kind of work done in the morning, a child is always able to rest or sleep if he wants to. The directress tells me that children over 1 ½ seldom nap in England (except for the convenience of the adult of course) but tend to go to sleep earlier than American children. The children are allowed to find their own balance between activity and rest.

The directress is working with a group of children on a decimal system game. The assistant is going over the work records. As in the morning children are free to work alone or in groups of their choosing. There is the rule “One can only work with a piece of material whose purpose she understands” but the “understanding” can come in different ways. She might have had a presentation one-to-one by the directress, by another child, or perhaps by watching another child’s lesson or work. So the directress keeps track not just of the presentations she has made, but of all activities the child masters.

2:50

The directress leaves the room for a parent conference. The assistant is working on records. The children are working. As one child begins to walk on the line, the assistant has just put on soft music and withdrawn to her work. Two other children join and walk on the line, balance objects in their hands while they walk and return to their work.

3:10

The assistant sits down with a book near the door. This seems to be a signal to the children that the day is coming to an end. The children, for the most part, do not seem in a hurry to stop working. Over the next fifteen minutes they finish their work, put it away, go into the hall and dress for going home, by themselves and helping each other. As they are ready they come and sit with the assistant and listen to her read.

3:30

The outside door is opened. The children shake hands with the directress, say good-bye, and go home.

Errors and Their Corrections:

This is a normalized class, but I do not mean to give the impression that every action and intent was perfect! There were errors to be corrected. The beautiful thing is the method of their correction. I watched the directresses carefully watching a child in each case to judge the intention. Then, unless it was something that needed to be interrupted at once (I saw this happen only once), a mental or written note was made so that the error could be corrected by teaching the correct activity later at a neutral moment, rather than risk invalidating or embarrassing the child by correcting. “Teach by teaching not by correcting”.

Record Keeping:

Several experienced Montessori directresses have told me that they reached a point in their careers where they thought they could “do it on automatic.” Then they realized that their classes were no longer normalized and teaching a lot more work! One of the important tools seems to be record keeping. The directresses of this class keep the following records:

1. A daily record of the presentations and work of each child, transferred to charts or “folded cards” for each area of work.

2. A running history of each child, general adjustment and progress, about twice a term (four times a year) or whenever anything significant occurs. This is very subjective so it is important that the various adults who deal with the child take turns making these notes. They are valuable for written reports and conferences.

3. Concentrations Graphs or Work Curves (see “3-Hour Work Period,” The Michael Olaf Company, below) for at least a couple of the children each week. “We receive enormous help from the resulting graphs and follow up.” —Directress

4. Forecasts for each term, including a number of topics from each of the cultural areas relevant to the time of year, interests of the children, and so forth.

5. Parallel summaries for the same areas, to compare the forecasts with what was actually done.

6. Weekly plan—based on what is or is not happening in the class in these areas. The areas are: Math, Language, Sensorial, Basic Training, Practical Life, small group lessons, songs, games, finger plays, and all cultural areas (art, music, history, geography, physics, botany, and zoology). This is laid out in such a way as to allow a space for comments at the end of the week next to each item. “A valuable tool for self-evaluation.” —Directress

NOTE: This observation was done in the children’s class of the AMI Montessori training center in London, England in 1987: MMI, The Maria Montessori Institute. Susan received her primary diploma here in 1971 and her daughter, Narda Sherman, was studying for her diploma when Susan visited.

This article was published in The National Montessori Reporter in 1987 and a reprint is available as part of *The 3-Hour Work Period; Observation of a 3-6 Class* available from the Michael Olaf Company in Arcata, California. www.michaelolaf.net

3-Hour Work Period and Observation packet: GB850 \$10.00

Also available: *Record Keeping in the Montessori Class*, GB288 \$12.00