



Introduction to Evaluation in the Montessori Classroom

When looking at a child in the classroom and observing their skills, motives, behaviours, and progress, we try to adopt a neutral, non-judgemental view. Where the child is at the moment is 'perfect', providing they receive the lessons they should and providing all is going well in their environment. The most important thing we need to remember is that this program is a 3-year program. We cannot truly see the picture of what is possible to accomplish, if the child is only finishing their first year at age 3.5 - 4. The child is developing continuously. Everything they learn in year one ties to year two and three. Everything comes together in year three, and usually at the very end, as we see with our graduating children. We do not know when it is a 'spring' time for the child, which is essentially the time the child blossoms. But what does it mean to blossom? Is it only when they read, or is it when they remembered their first three sounds? The child is constantly blossoming, as every few days there are new milestones, new skills acquired, new vocabulary learnt, and with this new awareness comes. Some start certain skills early on (e.g., ability to grasp sounds in language, or grasp math skills). Some do this much later on, we do not have an agenda for the children. The lessons are presented as we see their interest and ability. It is not our call to force educational agenda, (e.g., "now we think you have to acquire language and read by December, and now it's time for arithmetic") this is not how Montessori works.

Another aspect is that children must feel a physical readiness for certain skills, even for colouring, such as holding a pencil, as simple as adults think it is - it is not. Some cannot still hold a pencil at the age of four properly, and their muscles do not cooperate in writing. Furthermore, children do not think about reading and writing the way we do. Some simply do not care to read or write, because they are children, preschool children at that. They want to socialize, eat, play, and not focus on neat writing or learning the alphabet. And, speaking of 'academics', this is typically a big concern and interest for adults. Those are some questions Montessori directresses are asked: "Is my preschool child reading? When will they write? Did they start on arithmetic? How come they cannot write their name yet, my cousins' child is writing, why not my child, is there something wrong?" Comparing children to relatives and to our own expectations can be a dangerous thing, children feel it, they hear

it, and they internalize it. They recognize the frustration in the parent's voice or even the comment ("why can't you write your name properly?"), and there is nothing more devastating than disappointing the parent (Sidenote: we are not insinuating you do this. We are writing in general terms. However, many parents confessed they do this, just not realizing, because that is how it was for them).

From our 15 years of working in this field, and with our own children, we always come back to the same conclusion, and that is that the child forms themselves step by step. Nothing happens by force, if the child is only able to read phonetically by grade one and is still working on phonograms and puzzle words - this is where they are, and it has to be accepted. At the end of the three years in this program, children start to grasp concepts and are able to work with advanced math and language. They jump to addition, subtraction, multiplication and even division, they work with four-digit numbers, they are getting it and they love it. They can only love it, if they are grasping it easily, if there is no frustration, if there is joy and ease and only some challenge. There are some children who can get to such advanced works earlier, but there is no expectation, they will do it if the ability is there and if the awareness is there. Some children we are seeing can grasp the sounds of letters easily, however joining letters together to read a word is hard and may take several months to be able to do so. For some, writing comes easy and effortlessly, and for others it takes months of diligent repetition. Sometimes, the child does not seem to be able to do any academic skills and only do many other works in the classroom, but they are silently absorbing through observing others, and suddenly they explode into an unbelievable learning curve and they cannot get enough.

We have to consider everything, be patient and continue giving the best learning environment, observe and let go. For us educators in Montessori, joy, happiness and social abilities are even more important than so-called academic skills. (It is when the child is happy, content and secure in the classroom, able to choose tasks themselves, able to work by themselves as well as being able to form friendships.) Another aspect we cannot forget is that children learn invaluable skills, which lead to academic abilities, through work that is the most fun for them, which includes being outside with friends, making nature games, gardening, taking care of the environment, cooking, and all the practical life skills and sensorial education that Montessori education provides.

In conclusion, the child is in the right place at any given time. If there is an obstacle standing in the way, we need good observations skills to recognize that, such as the child is left handed or switching from one hand to another, or the school, parents and grandparents are all implementing opposing ways of learning (e.g. we sound letters, mom/dad grandparents spell and put emphasis on memorizations), or the child is anxious about making mistakes, or the child only wants to observe and not try yet, and it is not recognized, or the hand is not ready, yet the child is made to write. There are many things that sometimes stop the child from going full steam ahead, but even if that is the case, we still work with what the child is showing and approach them with that knowledge.