

MARIA MONTESSORI'S LEGACY: TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PEACE EDUCATION

Author:

Jillian Manzo

Faculty Sponsor:

Blythe Hinitz

Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education

ABSTRACT

During the turmoil of the first half of the 20th Century, Maria Montessori saw the impact this unrest had on children, and responded by incorporating peace education into her method. The Montessori Method continues to be used in the 21st century, in times no more peaceful than when Montessori was alive. Drawing from archival evidence and a series of interviews, this study looks at how Montessori's legacy of peace education is continued today. From my research I conclude that Montessori's peace education philosophies are the basis of peace lessons and activities in Montessori classrooms today as present Montessori educators adapt and add to Montessori's peace curriculum, continuing Montessori's goal of developing peaceful individuals for a peaceful world.

INTRODUCTION

The Montessori Method, first developed by its founder Maria Montessori in the early 20th century, is practiced throughout the world today. However, few are aware of how Maria Montessori's background and the historical events of her time influenced the development of her teaching method. During the first half of the 20th Century, filled with chaos, catastrophe, and two major world wars, Maria Montessori, a physician and educator, saw the impact this unrest had on individuals, particularly children, who could do nothing about the conditions they faced. In response to these years of conflict, Maria Montessori took a preventative approach, beginning her reform with children, seeking to develop peaceful individuals through her education method. Montessori, using "positive peace," called on society to study peace and use this knowledge to reform the structure of society, by making children its most important concern and to seek common goals in the interest of peace.¹

This paper first examines how the historical events of the time influenced the emphasis of her method to focus on developing peaceful individuals. The paper then looks at Montessori's beliefs and peace philosophy and how these beliefs impacted her method and resulted in her desire to reform society through education. After establishing this background, the focus of this paper shifts to research that seeks to answer how Montessori's legacy of peace education continues in the 21st century.

To answer how Maria Montessori's legacy of peace education continues in Montessori classrooms in the 21st century, archival and observational research methods were used. Data sources for archival research included journal articles, formal peace curricula used in Montessori classrooms, and the writings of Maria Montessori. Observational research involved interviews with Montessori Educators in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, with peace scholars, with past Montessori students, and observations in Montessori classrooms. These observations did not require IRB approval because the physical environment of the classroom, not the children, was being observed.

The core of the Montessori Method is peace education. Three main areas of focus in determining how Montessori's legacy of peace education is continued were: the environment, the materials, and the activities used by Montessori educators. As a result of my research, I conclude that the traditional peace curriculum developed by Maria Montessori acts as a base for 21st century Montessori educators, who then adapt and add to that curriculum to make the lessons and skills relevant to the lives of today's children. Thus, Montessori peace education philosophies are the basis of peace and sustainability lessons and activities in Montessori classrooms in the United States today. As Montessori educators add to and adapt

the Montessori peace curriculum, they continue Maria Montessori's legacy of developing peaceful individuals for a peaceful world through education.

MONTESSORI'S BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What is noteworthy about the Montessori Method is that it was developed over a hundred years ago in a small city in Italy during a time of global turmoil, by Maria Montessori, a medical doctor. Dr. Montessori graduated from the University of Rome's Medical School in 1896, as one of Italy's first female doctors.² After graduating from medical school, Montessori worked at the Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Rome. She visited asylums for the insane throughout Rome to select individuals to attend the psychiatric clinic.³ This job opened Montessori's eyes to the conditions these "idiot children" lived in and led her to view the mental deficiency in these children as pedagogical rather than medical.⁴ The realization she made, as well as her scientific background, and work in psychiatry, provided a "back door" for Montessori to enter the field of education.⁵

Montessori developed a method that is based on scientific observations and the psychology of the child. In 1907, Montessori was given the opportunity to try her method on "normal children" in a low-income district in San Lorenzo, Rome where she opened the *Casa dei Bambini*. This was the first step in what would become the worldwide phenomenon, the Montessori Method.

Montessori continued to develop her method even after her first school was opened. Events of the first half of the 20th century influenced the Method as it continued to develop. In 1914, World War I broke out as the Montessori Method was spreading and gaining support throughout the world. During the chaos and unrest of World War I and the Interwar Period, Montessori traveled the world lecturing on her method and opening schools. During her travels Montessori, observed the impact war and violence had on individuals, particularly children, inspiring her to add peace education to her method.

In France and Italy, Montessori came into contact with orphans of war and victims of the Italian Earthquake.⁶ She noticed that schools had closed, families were broken up, children were undernourished, and that organizations devoted to war relief focused mostly on the physical impact of war.⁷ Montessori was concerned with the impact war had on children's minds stating, "there is found, in these refugee children, a special form of mental disturbance, which constitutes a real mental wound- a lesion that is as serious, if not more serious than wounds in the physical body."⁸ Montessori believed that the mental effects of war on children are more serious than physical wounds because these "mental wounds" are not like a cut that can be healed with a bandage, they influence the child's emotional state and, create more of a disturbance. Montessori was deeply concerned with the effect of war on children because she believed it affected not only the individual, but humanity as well, believing "these degenerative tendencies are passed on to succeeding generations."⁹ The turmoil of the early 20th century had severe consequences for the minds of children. Montessori felt these mental effects were not being properly addressed and they needed to be, in order for society to achieve peace.

Thus, Montessori's own education background and the turmoil of the first half of the 20th century influenced her life, her method, and her desire to foster peace and peaceful individuals through education. The next section of this paper will focus on the philosophy of peace she developed during these conflict-ridden years and how this philosophy became such an important part of her method.

MONTESSORI AND POSITIVE PEACE

Montessori's philosophy, writings, and speeches about peace, as well as her education method embody what is defined by scholars as "positive peace." Positive peace includes peace education, international cooperation, conflict management, and improved human understanding through communication and takes a preventative rather than passive approach.¹⁰ In contrast to this definition of peace, most individuals understand peace as "an absence of violence," defined as negative peace.¹¹ In Montessori's opinion, "this negative concept is not an adequate description of peace," because continuing to look at peace simply as an absence of violence will not help society achieve peace.¹²

To support this claim that peace should not be defined negatively, Montessori compares war to the burning of a palace filled with art and treasures. In this comparison Montessori states that, when the palace becomes a "heap of smoldering ashes and suffocating smoke," there is no more physical disaster.¹³ However, "the smoke that prevents people from breathing can be compared to peace as the world

ordinarily understands it."¹⁴ When war stops, humanity continues to be harmed. Thus, the stopping of violence, or negative peace, is not true peace, and society should instead look to prevent violence, rather than live in the smoke that plagues humanity following war.

One of the first occasions on which Montessori began to speak about peace was in 1917, when she gave a training course on her method in San Diego, California. At this training course Montessori gave four lectures that collectively form her argument that her approach to education "could form a person capable of living peacefully" and that the child, "by establishing meaningful and respectful relations with the people around him," would transform humanity and bring peace.¹⁵ Montessori believed that focusing on developing people's moral self, and beginning this development with children, would result in a peaceful society.

Montessori's first 1917 lecture is particularly important for understanding how Montessori's actions and philosophy align with positive peace. During this lecture, Montessori discussed the approach to fighting and the solution to famine and pestilence to demonstrate how the same strategies should be used to achieve peace. Montessori terms these three problems that plague humanity, famine, pestilence, and war as the "three scourges of life."¹⁶ Montessori discusses how the other two scourges, famine and pestilence, were eliminated by identifying their causes, followed by preventative measures as examples of how society should approach eliminating the third scourge, war.

Maria Montessori, was one of the first advocates for children. She looked at how they are viewed, treated, and educated in our society. One of the ways in which Montessori advocated for children began at her 1917 lecture where she introduced the idea of the *Croce Bianca*, The White Cross, an organization committed to helping child victims of war. This organization was unique because it focused on addressing the mental effects of war on children, unlike other organizations, that mostly focused on physical wounds.¹⁷ The White Cross proves significant in Montessori's approach to peace education because she envisioned the White Cross as a way to prevent war, rather than as a remedy to treats its symptoms.

Aligned with Montessori's philosophy and the mission of the White Cross is the importance of the individual in achieving peace. Montessori believed that "the first line of defense against war is man himself."¹⁸ Unfortunately however, in Montessori's opinion, the many advancements and material achievements of society resulted in the lack of inward development of individuals. Montessori believed that the development of new technologies to make life "easier" for people, and a focus on becoming rich, resulted in the wrong priorities. Montessori believed that society has the potential to devote the same level of effort used for outward progress to improve individuals and that once society is filled with peaceful individuals that are at peace with themselves, society can achieve peace.

Montessori's observations of the wrongdoing toward children led her to conclude that a reform of humanity was needed with the child as the "point of departure."¹⁹ Montessori believed that "it is time now to correct these errors, to bring about a great reform, to offer young people the means necessary for their development and the enhancement of their personalities."²⁰ Two things needed for this reform are developing a new individual in an environment that supports this development. Montessori sought to reform these injustices toward the child through her method of education because she believed "this great task must be the work of education, for this is the only way to build a new world and to bring peace."²¹ How the Montessori Method develops individuals and promotes peace will be the focus of the next section.

NEW MAN AND NEW ENVIRONMENT

From all of her observations and studies Montessori concluded that what is needed for peace is a "new man" and "an environment that henceforth will set no limits on man's boundless aspirations."²² In Montessori's opinion the best way to do this is through education because "education is the best weapon for peace."²³ In contrast to traditional education, the driving force of the Montessori Method is the psychology of the child where the child is "the pivot of his own education," rather than the adult as the provider of knowledge.²⁴ Montessori's method does not set limits, it promotes children's independence, and places children in a social environment, leading to the development of peaceful individuals.

An important facet of the Montessori Method is its promotion of individuality. Montessori believed that "education must concern itself with the development of individuality and allow the child to

remain independent."²⁵ Montessori infused this belief in her method, by allowing children to choose their work and to work for uninterrupted blocks of time, which fosters "a sense of independence and a sense of initiative."²⁶ Children are not passive receivers of information. The adult demonstrates how to use objects and then the child repeats the adult's actions methodically. However, after this, the adult "observ[es] the children instead of trying to be an authority in charge of the children."²⁷ Due to children's ability to choose their own work, because of the opportunity to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, and because adults are more of a facilitator than an "authority," Montessori's method promotes individuality and initiative, traits that result in peaceful adults.

The development of individuality is also promoted through children's participation in a social environment. It is important that the classroom provides a social environment because "most of our actions would have no reason for being if there were no other people around us" and it allows children to act and gain experiences.²⁸ When the child is able to develop in a social environment, harmony is established between the child and the environment and the child and the adult.²⁹ Thus, being surrounded by a social environment plays an important role in the development of peaceful individuals.

In addition to promoting independence and providing a social environment, the physical environment is also valued because of Montessori's belief that "the environment is the best teacher."³⁰ Due to the importance of the environment in development, Montessori classrooms are bright, colorful, aesthetically pleasing, and include nature and animals. Along with the way the environment looks, the objects in the environment are equally important. It was Montessori's belief that "the child cannot develop if he does not have objects around him permitting him to act."³¹ Therefore, Montessori developed materials that are "attractive, self-correcting, and sequential, with basic concepts isolated for ease of understanding."³² Montessori designed materials to help children master a specific skill independently, using the material and their own mind as a guide.

The Montessori environment also promotes peaceful individuals because it is developmentally appropriate and does not create stress for children.³³ It is developmentally appropriate because of Montessori's belief in Sensitive Periods. Sensitive Periods are times that children pass through when they are easily able to learn a specific skill.³⁴ However, once the Sensitive Period is over, it becomes increasingly difficult for the child to learn the skill. When a child is kept from practicing this skill it results in "tantrums" as "external manifestations of an unsatisfied need."³⁵ Thus, traditional education that keeps children from practicing skills to meet their developmental needs results in destructive behavior, rather than well behaved and hard-working children who are able to concentrate and control their body's movements.

Montessori's background and education led to her desire to correct injustices she witnessed through an education method that focused on developing the individual in a suitable environment. The Montessori Method, is still used today, in many different cultures, providing children with an education that is centered around respect, and promotes the development of individuality. How current Montessori educators utilize Montessori's peace philosophy in the 21st century is the focus of the final section of this paper.

MONTESSORI'S LEGACY: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PEACE EDUCATION

The world we live in today is no more peaceful than the time period when Montessori developed her method. Just as historical events influenced Montessori's method, current events influence the way Montessori educators teach today. To understand how Montessori's legacy of peace education is continued today I observed at three Montessori schools, interviewed Montessori educators, past and present students, and peace educators and scholars. The three main areas of focus were the environment of the classroom, the materials, and the activities used. How these three areas are influenced by current events and to how they continue Montessori's legacy of peace education were studied.

Montessori believed in the importance of an aesthetically pleasing environment that is colorful, organized and filled with elements of nature. Montessori educators continue this tradition as the classrooms are filled with colors, natural light, animals, plants and with meticulously arranged materials. This helps to promote peace as children understand and like this organization.³⁶ Also adding to the ascetically pleasing environment while at the same time promoting peace are peaceful images displayed

throughout the room. These images, such as a waterfall, a dove, or a peace sign add to the beauty of the room while providing gentle reminders about peace.

A Montessori classroom also promotes peaceful individuals because everything in the environment is child sized and developmentally appropriate. Children feel comfortable and are able to express themselves because the environment suits their developmental needs. Contributing to children's comfort is the respect experienced between children and their peers and children and adults. Children place their work on mats to distinguish what is their space and their work. This helps children learn how to better understand and respect other people's space.

In addition, the Montessori environment forms a classroom community helping children to feel comfortable so they are able to express themselves. The involvement of children in the control of the classroom contributes to the classroom community. Children have jobs such as ringing a bell or turning a sand shaker to signal when it is time to clean up or to remind children to keep their voices down.³⁷ In addition, children give lessons to their classmates and children have the opportunity to be the Peace Helper, where they have a role in the peace lesson or peace circle for the day.³⁸ When children are involved in the classroom in this way it makes children feel both valued and important, and helps them feel a sense of responsibility as they contribute to the community. Throughout work time, a Montessori educator may remind students to put their work away when they are finished in case one of their classmates wants to use the materials. This also promotes children's responsibilities to others and responsibility for themselves and what they do.³⁹ Thus, by being developmentally appropriate and forming a classroom community, the Montessori environment promotes peaceful individuals.

The materials in the Montessori classroom also promote peace. The traditional materials designed by Montessori herself promote peace because they allow children to work independently to learn and accomplish challenging tasks on their own. In addition to traditional Montessori materials, current Montessori educators also place specific materials related to peace in their classroom. These materials promote peace because they help make the abstract concept of peace more concrete for children. Most Montessori classrooms today have a peace shelf or a peace corner. In this peace area there may be books about peace, materials for children to write/draw about peace, peaceful images, peace rocks, peace fountain, a candle, and other objects that add beauty to the room while also symbolizing peace. Another symbol of peace a school may have is a peace pole that says "may peace prevail on earth" in different languages.⁴⁰ This pole, usually displayed in the front yard of a school, acts as a symbol to visitors that the school is a peaceful environment and that it values promoting peace.⁴¹

Another material Montessori classrooms may have is a peace wreath that is a wire circle with different colored ribbons on it. Ribbons are added to the wreath throughout the year when a child does something kind without being prompted or encouraged. The teacher tells the child that the ribbon adds beauty to the classroom the same way the child's kind actions did.⁴² This wreath adds both beauty and color to the environment, but also makes peace concrete by helping children to recognize when their actions are peaceful.

Another object in current Montessori classrooms that help to generate peaceful individuals and a peaceful classroom is a peace rose or a peace bear. This peace rose/bear is used to help children with conflict resolution. The use of this peace object is demonstrated first by adults and then used by children throughout the year when solving conflicts. The children pass the objects back and forth to express their feelings and the individual holding the peace rose/bear is the one who gets to speak. This peace rose/bear provides children with tools to help work out conflicts in a way that each individual feels heard and respected that they can then take into their adult lives.

Twenty-first-century Montessori educators have also developed specific activities to help promote peaceful individuals and a peaceful classroom environment. Children may participate in yoga, writing and drawing about peace, making origami, making peace doves, and making a personal flag of themselves that becomes part of the class flag. These activities contribute to the idea that "you do peace you don't say it."⁴³ Describing and defining peace is difficult for adults to do and even more difficult for children. However, participating in peaceful activities that help children to practice and gain control of their body such as yoga, or creating images and objects that symbolize peace, help children to better understand what peace means and how they can be peaceful themselves.

Another important peace activity that also aids in creating a classroom community is circle time or a peace circle each day. Some Montessori classrooms do this in the morning. It involves singing songs that welcome children to the classroom that may include saying hello in different languages or singing about peace in general.⁴⁴ These songs help welcome children into the classroom and the use of different languages reminds them that they are part of a global community. Also during peace circle there may be a class discussion about peace or a specific peace lesson. Peace circle is a time when the class meets as a community and more formally discuss peace.

Many Montessori schools use the peace curriculum developed by Sonnie McFarland found in the book titled, *Honoring the Light of the Child* during circle time. This is a 22-lesson curriculum that teaches specific lessons on love, kindness, compassion, and tolerance. McFarland's lessons align with Montessori's method where children repeat activities because children gradually master skills "by returning to the same piece of equipment or parallel lesson each day."⁴⁵ Central to this book is the idea of a love light in everyone that is a concrete symbol, usually a small circle of yellow felt, that expresses who children are, filled with love and light.⁴⁶ The activities utilize silence, songs, symbols, and other materials to instill peaceful thoughts and actions in children and is described by its founder as "a way of educating children that keeps them alive."⁴⁷

During my visit to The Albrook School in Basking Ridge, New Jersey I observed Activity 1, *See My Love* from *Honoring the Light of the Child*. In this lesson, the teacher introduces the concept of the love light, that it is the love that lives in everyone, and made this concept concrete for students using a template of a person and a flashlight to represent the love light. The teacher then placed a filter over the flashlight to dim the light, representing how people's love lights' dim when they feel sad, mad, or afraid. During this lesson when the teacher asked for examples of how one's love light can dim, one child said the classes pet rabbit's love light gets dim when children chase it around the room.⁴⁸ The comment of this child is significant because it shows the child understands Montessori's belief in promoting a connection between all living creatures and McFarland's teaching that everything has a love light. This lesson also helps promote peaceful individuals and a peaceful classroom because it gives children the tools and language to express their feelings. Instead of just getting angry and retaliating with hurtful words, a child can instead say "you just dimmed my love light" to better express their feelings using established common classroom language.⁴⁹

Particularly with primary aged children, peace activities are centered around respect and providing language for children to learn how to solve conflicts.⁵⁰ This focus on promoting respect can be seen in the grace and courtesy lessons which are an important part of the modern Montessori classroom. Montessori educators use these lessons more in the beginning of the year to setup their classrooms and they are then used on an "as needed" basis throughout the year. These lessons model ways to resolve conflicts, how to ask to use materials, how to walk around a rug, and model how to use a peace rose.⁵¹ At peace circle at The Albrook School I observed two teachers do one of these lessons, modeling using the peace rose when someone tells them they are not their friend and when children touch their classmates' work.⁵²

In some upper elementary Montessori classroom these grace and courtesy lessons take a different form as children, age nine to twelve, act out different conflict situations that arise in their classroom at drama class. Examples of these skits include when a peer feels left out of a friend group or respecting their classmates' different interest and backgrounds. While acting out these situations children practice passive, assertive and aggressive roles.⁵³ These lessons are important because the children are able to remove themselves from the situation while working through problems from their everyday lives.⁵⁴

Important to the grace and courtesy lessons and acting out conflicts in drama class is the fact that they are driven by real problems and conflicts that face the children each day. This is one way 21st century Montessori educators adapt Montessori's peace curriculum. They consider issues and conflicts that current children face, making the peace curriculum relevant to their lives. Montessori educators often have ideas for a peace curriculum at the beginning of the year, but, after interacting with their students for a few weeks they let issues pertinent to the children drive the peace curriculum.⁵⁵

For upper elementary children peace is more internal so they do not need a concrete peace corner or shelf. However, upper elementary students also participate in other peaceful activities such as practicing taking deep breaths when frustrated with work or classmates or during transitions when they

get too rowdy. Elementary classrooms may also have a feelings box which the children can write in throughout the day their thoughts or feelings about situations that arise in the classroom or personal feelings they have. There is a code that signifies whether the child wants to share their feelings with the class before lunch, with just the teacher, or if they just needed to write down their feelings to get them out.⁵⁶ This box helps children to be reflective of their own thoughts and feelings, and is a developmentally appropriate activity that helps to promote peaceful individuals.

Whole school activities are also used by 21st century Montessori educators to promote peace. Schools may have a multicultural festival where children research different cultures and dress up, cook food, and share their knowledge about different cultures of the world.⁵⁷ This helps to promote peace because the children learn respect and appreciation for cultural diversity and are reminded that they are part of a global community. Other group activities may include children participating in a whole class research project researching peaceful individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr.⁵⁸ Schools may also play peaceful music during dismissal.⁵⁹ This helps children leave the school and go out into the world peacefully.

These whole school and classroom activities help to create a “culture of peace” within Montessori schools. A culture of peace is defined as “a society based on respect for peace at all levels, human rights, and democratic principles.”⁶⁰ Creating a culture of peace is something many Montessori schools seek to establish. In order for this to happen children’s basic needs must be met and the staff must encourage social and emotional development.⁶¹ In addition, teachers must provide children with the tools to interact from a position of respect, understanding, and cooperation, so that the children are able to interact with their environment peacefully. It requires Montessori educators and every staff member at the school to be intentional, consistent, committed, and believe in the culture of peace.⁶²

As these examples demonstrate, the environment, materials, and activities used by Montessori educators continue to promote peace today. The traditional Montessori peace curriculum acts as a base for 21st century Montessori educators who then adapt and add to the Montessori peace curriculum to make the lessons and skills relevant to children’s lives. With these adaptations and additions to the Montessori peace curriculum, Montessori educators are continuing Maria Montessori’s legacy of developing peaceful individuals for a peaceful world through education.

CONCLUSION

What is noteworthy about Maria Montessori and her method of education is that she developed it over a hundred years ago in a small city in Italy. Yet her method has been able to cross cultural boundaries and is still a relevant and effective method of education over a century later. The success of the Montessori Method as a curriculum model has allowed peace education to continue uninterrupted in Montessori classrooms for over a hundred years.

Maria Montessori, the individual, is also important because she was one of the first advocates for the way children are viewed, treated, and educated in our society. Since Montessori’s death, others have rallied behind the cause of the child, and advocated for them demonstrated by the First World Conference for Early Child Education in 1948, by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations declaration of 2001-2011 as the *Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World*.

The impact of Montessori and the success of her method across the world over a century later is important because unfortunately, society has not achieved the lasting, positive peace. Therefore, it is more important than ever to continue the work Maria Montessori started, beginning peace with the child, because “within the child lies the fate of the future.”⁶³

ENDNOTES

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58. Observation Notes from observations conducted at The Albrook School on March 31, 2015 in Basking Ridge, NJ.
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60. McFarland, *Honoring the Light of the Child*, 1.
61. Notes from "The Missing Peace Workshop" on March 13, 2015 at American Montessori Society 2015 Conference.
62. Notes from "The Missing Peace Workshop" on March 13, 2015 at American Montessori Society 2015 Conference.
63. Montessori, "Preface," xv.

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INTERVIEW AND OBSERVATION ADDENDUM

Angela Murray and Phyllis Povell, "Graduate Research in Montessori Education" (Workshop, American Montessori Society 2015 Conference, Philadelphia, PA, March 13, 2015.)

Debra Gorman Cagle, "What's on Your Peace Shelf?" (Workshop, American Montessori Society 2015 Conference, Philadelphia, PA, March 13, 2015.)

Interview conducted with Amanda Fink on April 16, 2015 in Mendham, NJ.

Interview conducted with Dr. Luke Butler on March 27, 2015 in Ewing, NJ.

Interview conducted with Kim Koch on April 16, 2015 in Mendham, NJ.

Interview conducted with Michelle Hartye Director of Penn State Altoona Child Development Center on March 30, 2015 via telephone.

Interview conducted with Sonnie McFarland on March 13, 2015 in Philadelphia, PA.

Interview conducted with Stephanie H. on March 2, 2015 at Howley School in Trenton, NJ.

Observation Notes from observations conducted at The Albrook School on March 31, 2015 in Basking Ridge, NJ.

Observation Notes from observation conducted at Princeton Montessori School on April 15, 2015 in Princeton, NJ

Observation Notes from observations conducted at Westmont Montessori School on April 16, 2015 in Mendham, NJ.