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Helping novice teachers notice

The DERS observation tool helps teachers see what really matters

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As a novice teacher in a Montessori environment, the sheer quantity of things that demand attention can be overwhelming on the best days.

One child might be deeply concentrating on a problem with the pegboard while another drifts among the language shelves, unsure of what work to choose. The number of lessons you planned is far greater than the number of lessons you've actually been able to execute. Some children are repeating work many times, while others do it once, return it to the shelves and consider it done. Some children work quietly on their own, while in another part of the classroom a conflict is brewing regarding who had planned to work with whom that day.

In an environment where freedom of choice is a key aspect of children's day, everything is happening at once, and it's not obvious where a novice teacher's eye should even land first.

This is where the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS), a classroom observation and quality assessment tool from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, can offer great leverage.

So often novice teachers view observation tools as a measure of their preparation and work: Are they doing Montessori right? Have they executed their most recent lesson with perfection or did they forget a step, or the placement of a piece of the work? Is the classroom aesthetically appealing and worthy of a Montessori magazine cover?

Child focused

The DERS deliberately works around these questions to turn the focus of the observation away from the adult as the only factor in the environment and back toward what's actually happening for children. The question is not "is this teacher manifesting a perfectly peaceful Montessori classroom," but rather "are children in this environment showing signs that they are developing executive functioning skills, deepening their literacy foundations, and socially and emotionally at ease?"

This shift matters for all teachers, and especially novice teachers, because it turns the observation from a test of their newly developing competence into a tool for noticing trends, anomalies, breakthroughs, or breakdowns.

Novice teachers often have great instincts but can't always put into words what they're sensing in their environment. They know when something feels off during the work period without being able to name it. The shared language of the DERS provides concrete, observable indicators to attach to these instincts and gut feelings.

Items and indicators

The DERS comprises 60 distinct items, across Child Behavior, Adult Behavior, and Environmental Characteristics, each shown by research to be associated with executive function development, linguistic and cultural fluency, and social-emotional flexibility.

By narrowing the focus with specific indicators (indicated in italics below), the tool reveals whether children are purposefully engaged in their work, if the environment is supportive of deep concentration and focus, and whether social dynamics are flowing easily.

In a primary classroom, a child who spends an extended period of time with one work, repeating it with care and precision, is *Engaging with Purpose*.

In an elementary classroom, that same instinct toward sustained focus shows up as *Maximum Effort*, deep engagement in project-based "big work" like ongoing research or planning a presentation.

Protecting that kind of focus, at either level, shows up in an adult item like *Interrupting Concentrating Children*, which tracks whether adults are breaking a child's concentration rather than letting it run its course. Growing independence shows up socially, as well, when children assist a friend with cleaning a spill or ask if they need help, both examples of *Offering or Accepting Help from Peers*. Once a teacher has the vocabulary, it becomes something that they can use with a mentor, coach, or colleague to home in on problems that are rippling through the classroom, rather than just a looming sense that something isn't right or things aren't going the way they hoped while in their training.

Concrete indicators

Concrete items and indicators allow any teacher, novice or experienced, to view their classroom through a precise lens. Instead of trying to process everything going on all at once, a teacher can learn to check for specific things.

Is a child engaged in complex work *(Persisting in the Face of Challenge)* or

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quietly disengaging, or worse experiencing *Frustration?* Are children moving from one activity to the next without any record or intention, or are they using *Planning and Reflection* tools such as a work journal to think about their activities?

Teachers can turn their eyes on their own behavior just as concretely: *Focus on Monitoring* asks whether an adult is spending their time circulating and checking on work completion rather than observing with purpose, a habit that is both easy to fall into and easy to miss without a name for it. Noticing these items does not require taking in the whole room at once. Each item in the DERS becomes a single question with a clear answer that a teacher can learn to ask, one at a time, until noticing these behaviors and attributes becomes automatic.

Supporting coaches

A novice teacher isn't the only one who can feel overwhelmed with where to begin—the same is often true for coaches and mentors. A coach walking into a novice teacher's classroom might be equally uncertain about the best starting point. Where does a teacher's shaky lesson delivery rank when it comes to a cluttered classroom, or a teacher who is monitoring and correcting instead of observing with a friendliness toward errors?

The *Fundamental Needs of the Montessori Teacher* chart (see page 16) elucidates just how much a teacher is holding at once: material needs like environment setup, lesson rhythm, and classroom management systems, alongside spiritual needs like perspective, affirmation, and belonging. A coach trying to support all of that simultaneously, with no way to categorize and prioritize, can become as overwhelmed as the novice teacher they're trying to help.

DERS gives the coach the same specific, concrete lens it gives the teacher, and a way to connect what they're observing back to those fundamental needs. A pattern of *Focus on Monitoring and Warning or Correcting Errors* in the adult inventory doesn't just flag a behavior to adjust; it points a coach toward a teacher who may be missing *Perspective* and the vision of normalization that lets an adult trust a process rather than control it. A classroom showing *Clutter* or few *Materials Ready for Use* may say less about a teacher's effort and more about an unmet material need in *Environment* or *Planning & Record Keeping*.

Instead of a coach trying to address everything at once, they can use DERS indicators to give them a starting point that builds on shared language, while the *Fundamental Needs of the Montessori Teacher* gives them language for what kind of support is called for. Together, the two tools make coaching a conversation about what this particular teacher needs most right now, rather than a list of corrections.

Meeting needs

During the 2026 NCMPS Conference we convened a group of coaches and colleagues supporting novice teachers to practice and discuss these tools. Working through scenarios that paired a variety of unmet needs of the teacher with DERS items reflecting both strengths in the classroom and areas where growth could occur, coaches collaborated on the best approach for each teacher.

Fundamental Needs of the Montessori Teacher

MATERIAL NEEDS

ENVIRONMENT:
- Set up
- Design
- Safety

LESSONS:
- Rhythm
- Sequence

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT:
- Systems
- Grace and Courtesy

MONTESSORI MATERIALS:
- Teaching
- Modeling

PLANNING AND RECORD KEEPING:
- Lesson plans
- Follow-up work
- Observation notes
- Student portfolios
- Parent conferences

STUDENT SUPPORT:
- Approaches for struggling students
- Knowledge of child development

SPIRITUAL NEEDS

PERSPECTIVE:
- View of the big picture
- Vision of normalization
- Clarity of thinking

AFFIRMATION:
- Encouragement
- Empowerment

REFLECTION:
- Time and space to review choices and reflect on outcomes
- Opportunity to revise decisions or beliefs

OPTIMISM:
- Surrounded by positive attitude
- Upbeat

FAITH, TRUST, AND BELONGING:
- Feeling of security and belonging
- Feeling a part of the whole
- Willing to use voice to speak up with trust they will be heard

INSPIRATION:
- Energy to keep working toward the goal
- View of the direct aim

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For one scenario, a teacher midway through her first year of teaching, the conversation focused on how this teacher delivers strong, engaging lessons and has built real warmth in her classroom. Despite this, her ability to care for the environment and stick with procedures is a struggle: scattered and incomplete materials, dusty shelves, and a work-journal system that's gone by the wayside. When asked about individual children, she offers warmth without specifics and has no clear detail on recent work or patterns, the kind of information that would usually be seen if *Observation* were a regular part of her daily routine.

In their discussions coaches noticed that this new teacher was happy to give lessons, enjoyed the children, but was overwhelmed by everything else she needed to do. The unmet material need of *Planning and Record Keeping* seemed to be a problem and coaches discussed how they could prioritize the DERS items that were less prevalent in the classroom *(Materials Ready for Use, Planning and Reflecting, Observation)* and which one would start a trickle down that would make addressing others easier. The decision was that helping to rebuild the children's use of work journals and focusing on the *Planning and Reflecting* DERS item would both help the children organize their work, and help this novice teacher prepare for conversations with parents.

Coaches also noted that there may be a spiritual need going unmet for this teacher: *Reflection*. Without time and the intention to review choices and reconsider what's working, this teacher is not only struggling to develop a system, they're also missing the time to pause, observe, and remember what the system is supposed to be addressing. If spending time developing a system for the children produces more work for the teacher and they have not yet protected the time to reflect on what the children's work journals are telling her, the system will likely be quickly abandoned.

Most coaches felt that *Reflection* was the foundational need this teacher needed most. Without finding time to reflect first, any organizational fixes risk becoming yet another task on the list that the teacher cannot keep up with. A few coaches still believed that starting with a concrete task like getting a system in place for work journals might be a win that provides this new teacher with a boost of confidence. The group didn't fully decide which need to name first, and stopped there, a reminder that identifying two real needs is useful information, not necessarily a problem to solve before the coaching conversation can happen.

Together these two tools—the DERS and the *Fundamental Needs of the Montessori Teacher*—can help create a map for teachers and coaches to focus their observations, guide conversations, and build confidence.

Will every coaching conversation get it right immediately or result in a big breakthrough? Unlikely. But will coaches and teachers have shared language and a lens with which to view the classroom, the adult, and the development of the whole child? Absolutely.

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