



The silence in the classroom was remarkable. Half the children of 3Wpm were up in the gym. The rest of the children sat quietly in the classroom, intensely focused on a reproduction of “Bathing at Asnières” by Georges Seurat. Their teacher, Melanie Hernandez, smiled, watching their eyes move over the picture, seeing them concentrate. After a long minute she asked, “What do you see in this picture?”

Using Art to Learn to Think: The 2011-12 Visiting Scholar Program

The children began to respond enthusiastically. Melanie acknowledged each response by paraphrasing the answer, “You saw a mother and her baby,” while pointing to the woman and child in the picture, and then probing a little more in a non-specific way: “What do you see that makes you say that?” Again the children pondered this silently, gazing intently at the picture and giving the student the opportunity to think independently about his answer.

As the discussion continued, Melanie made sure to acknowledge the input from every child, using open-ended questions and asking for the reasoning behind the responses. Some children sat quietly, observing the discussion but rarely contributing, while others excitedly waited their turns to comment.

Amy and Jasie conducted a workshop for WSMS faculty in the fall, and have visited several times since to observe in classrooms and provide feedback. The WSMS teachers adapted to the program easily: “As Dr. Montessori observed more than a century ago, children show us what they need. Our task as educators (teachers as well as parents) is to observe carefully, provide support in the form of appropriate environments in which to explore, experiment, and refine ever-developing skills and understandings.”*

This approach helps children hone their critical thinking skills. According to WSMS teacher Margot Mack, “Children are keen observers of their world. Just as the Montessori approach involves breaking a task into pieces, VTS requires them to do this and to provide evidence for what they see and think.”



Children are keen observers of their world.

At the end of the session, Melanie summarized the discussion. The artwork remained prominently displayed in the classroom, so the children had a chance to think about it some more, to talk about it, to write or draw. As fellow teacher Liz Lowy points out, “This is not just a visual exercise. It’s multi-sensory: auditory, touch, memory are also involved.”

This approach will sound very “Montessori” to our knowledgeable readers, but in fact this is a program used in dozens of museums, schools and colleges across the country and in Europe. It has been introduced at WSMS by this year’s visiting scholars, Amy Gulden, Jasie Britton, and Jackie Cossentino of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an organization established to help children develop their thinking skills by discussing works of art.

The goal is to hold VTS sessions every two weeks. In fact the teachers also find ways to use VTS language in other ways during the day, and Liz Lowy has suggested that parents can do this too: “Instead of asking your child ‘why?,’ ask her ‘what do you see?,’ and then allow for silence after the question while she takes another look.”

*Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline Cossentino, *Montessori International*, April-June 2011

Abigail Housen, VTS Founder, WSMS Grandmother



When Mimi attended that initial workshop on VTS last year, the name Abigail Housen struck a chord. Imagine her surprise when Abigail Housen turned out to be the grandmother of WSMS alum Noa Karchmer and current student Isaac Karchmer!

The origins of VTS lie in a collaboration beginning in 1988 between Abigail, a psychologist in Boston whose seminal research explored how viewers, experienced and novice, think when looking at art objects, and Philip Yenawine, then Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Philip realized that museum-goers rarely retained much understanding of the art that they saw and reached out to Abigail to evaluate his programs. Together they developed a program that would focus on the developmental needs and interests of students, rather than the particular concepts of the artwork.

help children develop their abilities to perceive and understand three-dimensional objects, to concentrate and to organize. As children mature, the sensorial skills provide the basis for analytical and creative thinking.

A work of art is the perfect basis for developing these skills, because there is no right answer. As Abigail says, “the more you look, the more you see; the more you see, the more you look.” Children can and do have different points of view, and the VTS approach allows them to reconsider their opinion when hearing someone else’s and to change their minds—or not.

Abigail described “children thinking at deeper and deeper levels. You can show the same image over time, and they will see different things. This is the richness of the program. ... They learn to have a conversation about their disagreements, and can discuss different points of view.”

The long-range importance of developing these skills in children cannot be overstated. As Philip asserts, “To build a society that is innovative, prosperous, and truly democratic we need to teach next generations not just facts and skills, but how to learn, how to communicate, and how to think creatively, critically, independently.”

Abigail is delighted to see her three-year-old grandson enjoying the fruits of her efforts. She described a recent visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston: gazing at a painting, Isaac was talking about the work in great detail and at great



From birth children use their eyes to understand the world, and long before they begin to read and write they describe to us what they see. In the Montessori classroom, the sensorial materials

length. Before long the family noticed a cadre of adults standing behind them, enthralled by his lecture!



visiting SCHOLAR PROGRAM

AMONG THE GOALS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN APPROVED BY THE BOARD IN 2011 IS THE ENHANCEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUR CHILDREN, AND OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUR FACULTY. THE VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM MEETS BOTH THOSE OBLIGATIONS BY BRINGING TO THE SCHOOL EXPERTS WHO EXPAND THE HORIZONS OF ALL CONSTITUENCIES.

IN FEBRUARY 2011 MIMI BASSO, HEAD OF SCHOOL, AND FACULTY MEMBERS INCLUDING CAROL ROEHR AND MARGOT MACK ATTENDED A WORKSHOP GIVEN BY VTS, AND WERE IMMEDIATELY TAKEN BY ITS POTENTIAL. THE VTS MATERIALS WERE ORIENTED TOWARD OLDER CHILDREN, BUT AMY GULDEN, REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF VTS, IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZED THAT A MONTESSORI CLASSROOM WAS THE PERFECT PLACE TO EXPLORE ITS APPLICATION TO A YOUNGER AUDIENCE.

AS MARGOT MACK COMMENTED, "THE VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM IS A WONDERFUL GIFT TO OUR FACULTY. IT HELPS US BECOME BETTER EDUCATORS, AND KEEPS THINGS 'FRESH' FOR OUR TEACHERS."

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND A VIDEO OF VTS IN ACTION, SEE WWW.VTSHOME.ORG.