

Quelle: Maria Montessori Archives (c) Copyright

I would like to say a few words about something that has always been in my mind. However much I may have studied, however much also I may have had to struggle and to travel all over the world, in my soul there has always remained shining a light and a unique memory. At the basis of the whole of my work there is a point to which I always return. Without this memory it would be impossible for me to explain the essence of my work. This firm point, this memory which can never be cancelled I would like to evoke here in front of you all. It is a memory of a group of ~~miserable~~ little children whom it was my privilege to meet. The whole of my work, all I have done since, has its origin in this encounter. My mission began there.

There still is a general lack of understanding of the importance of my first experiment in the field of education. There were, and still are, many heated discussions about it. Therefore also I would like to return a while with you to this point. I would like to illustrate it a bit and to explain the phenomenon of those wonderful children of whom the whole world would talk, of the prodigies they showed, those poor, small little children whose parents were illiterate and lived in the greatest misery.

The prodigies they showed concerned their character and their mind. They were seen to change their character. They ~~not only~~ showed a marvellous discipline in their environment of great freedom, their orderly behaviour was exceptional. They were kind, they revealed a moving sense for beauty. They met everyone with great gentleness and good manners, though nobody had taught them anything. They were very obedient and their obedience was capable of great sacrifice, of great patience. It was full of zeal and interest.

I am aware that I am singing a hymn of praise of these children. But should we not also ask who educated them so that they might achieve all this? Certainly not their parents who themselves lacked all education. Not either those whom people might have called their teachers who were not teachers. Most certainly not I either. I would never have had the time to give such an extraordinary education. Besides, I was a doctor of medicine, not an educationist. Nobody had made up his mind to teach them anything of this kind. Nobody had thought either of teaching them for instance reading or writing, and yet they also started very soon to read and to write.

Who, then, was the worker of this miracle?

Unless this question be asked, it is impossible to explain the real value and the real importance of this work. But, in order that this genuine triumph may be explained and the principles that would evolve from it may be accepted, it is necessary that there be accepted the same

explanation as I accepted myself: "These children developed in that wonderful manner - in a manner we would never have been able to obtain - BY THEMSELVES, without any direct intervention on our part."

The spontaneous development of the personality of the child - which would become the object of my experiments - can, therefore, not be explained as a pedagogical problem, much less as a problem that concerns the school.

Who gave those children that impressive passion for even intellectual conquests? And at so early an age? Who was their inspiration? Who gave them the strength that made them so triumphant? Who or what urged them to reach a height and a depth and a breadth of life which had perhaps never been seen?

All those questions I have been asking myself again and again, with wonder in my heart and interest in my mind. Already at that early moment though, at the time, my heart and my mind were hardened by scientific studies.

How often did I not ask myself: "But, what have we done to obtain these results?" And then I had to reply that we had done very little indeed. I told myself that these things were not normal, that they had never been seen among men. But then what were they? It most certainly was not a victory of pedagogy. We could never have succeeded in arousing such enthusiasm with ordinary means. Was it really a miracle? It certainly seemed miraculous to observe these children at work. Those who had written contemplated their writing with joy and enthusiasm and if they had to leave their place, they asked a neighbour: "Please, watch that nobody spoil what I have done. I must go outside a moment." And their little friend would be very attentive and look at this work as its maker had done, I would like to say as one artist contemplates the work of another.

It was these things that aroused such enthusiasm also in the world. I must say "the world", because people really came from far and wide to observe these children. They came to Rome to see these children and they used to say: "Now Rome does not only have its ancient monuments, its works of arts, there are also these children!" But what did they also say? "A great educationist has come among us, a great method of education has been born." There the misunderstanding began. I remember professors of pedagogy who came all the way from the United States only to see these children. They would be deeply impressed and would then ask me to explain my wonderful method. I would be greatly embarrassed and would reply: "But, do you not understand that I could never have obtained these results even if I possessed all the qualifications that are available, even if I occupied all the chairs of pedagogy in the world? Do you not understand that it cannot possibly be a method that works these wonders?" They would not understand and turned away, some of them even hurt that I did not tell them my secret....

The explanation, however, is really quite simple. There exists something in the spirit of the child which is much higher than we know and

-3-

which only seldom we can perceive. There are great powers hidden in the soul of the child and it was my good fortune to help them come forth. People did not understand that at the time and I am afraid that even now after so many years they still do not understand this. People do not understand that there are in man great powers that have remained unknown for a long time and, therefore, neglected to our own great loss. Mankind has lost very much and been robbed of great wealth by this neglect and this ignorance. I said earlier that we do not stand here in front of a question of pedagogy or of schools. No, we stand in front of a problem concerning the human soul. It is a universal problem. In the child there lives great spiritual riches and we do not understand this. We repress and even kill great vital energies in the child and then he turns into a being with little courage, with a confused mind and above all without sufficient moral strength. He becomes an "anybody". The child feels within itself a great power that would urge it ever higher on, but if this power is stifled and not given an opportunity to develop, the child goes ever deeper down. Either there is progress or there is not. If a living being is not progressing when it should in accordance with a cycle of natural development, there is broken in it a vital balance and serious trouble and psychic malformations result.

We do not do enough for mankind precisely because we underestimate this problem. We do not face it squarely in an effort to solve it properly.

I was so deeply struck by these phenomena and these questions that I said to myself: "I want to know how all this came about. I want to know how these phenomena can be repeated, can be helped to take place all the time and everywhere. I want to find out how they can be used for a better and more scientific understanding of mankind and for the good of mankind." That also is why I never spoke of my method as of something that could work miracles. I do not want to claim merits I do not possess. At the heart of this great question and of all that happened in those early days and that has happened in so many places ever since neither I nor any method of mine can be found. I have been a person who was deeply interested in these hidden powers. I wanted to discover the truth they reveal. I understood that there was this great power which manifests itself in innumerable ways which cannot be limited and I tried to place this power at the service of mankind in its world without limits in which, yet, it lives so threatened and unhappy a life. Let me repeat once again that I have not obtained those wonderful results which made my work so famous. They are not of my making. Of course, I have done something. I prepared and developed an environment where they could show themselves. I worked out a certain amount of means of development for them. But they themselves belong to the child. I have given some help to that hidden life, that spiritual life which is given to man by the Creator. I have given help to that life by creating an environment favourable to it and to its full development.

And that all educators should try and do. The whole of education should try and give help to life. But this it cannot do if it is an

-4-

invention of ours, if it remains based on affection, on interest, if it is built on the sum total of the ideas of this or that educationist. Education must be made strictly dependent on human nature. This is the reality we have to study and which has not been studied enough. This kind of education must become the basis of life. Love, understanding the desire to serve the good of mankind must be the norm for our educational work. We must help life!

If education is called upon, and is itself only, when it helps life, then it does not concern childhood alone either. It will concern the whole of mankind. Human life, in fact, stretches out from before birth to death. Who is the newly-born child? He, too, is a human being. He is a man.

This we must remember, not only to help the progress of education in schools, but in order to educate man. We must learn to know man from before birth and in the first place until he reaches adulthood, how he is guided and urged to reach adulthood. We must not make the child do what we want, what we consider he should do or can do. We would then assume great guilt and our ignorance of what the child really is would not ^{excuse} justify this guilt. Our mission as educators is a responsibility towards mankind itself. Therefore, and specially in these times of ours, it is a moral question and becomes a case of conscience. Education in the family and in school must be conceived as a social duty. We must, all of us, help life and give it the freedom and the guidance it needs for its development. If we do so we shall reap fruits much more abundant than the seed we sow.

We must also learn and look beyond the relation between cause and effect which still holds far too strong and to limiting a grip on science. All living beings have an end to reach. Also in the psychic development of man there is an end to be reached. This end we must also study and how man comes closer to it through successive periods of growth. The most important of these periods is that which goes from birth to about two to two and a half years. Then development is most rapid and makes its most wonderful conquests. Then again the period from 2 or 2½ until about six years and so on. Yet those two early periods also need more help than any others. Then the child needs all our love, all our care and all our respect. If these are given to the child - and we have spent our life studying this great problem - man will also successfully go through the following periods and become healthy, sure of himself, balanced physically and psychically as he is meant to be.

MARIA MONTESSORI.
