Box 18, Folder 29 - "Precocity" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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THE SECRET OF THEIR INTEREST

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A GRADING DOWN OF THE MATERIALS

The little ones, having appropriated for themselves much of the material that was made for the older ones, as related above, Montessori now set about creating more advanced materials for the latter. She argued thus with herself : if the smaller children prefer unexpectedly difficult things, why shouldn't the same thing apply to the older ones. Acting on this supposition, she presented them with new and more advanced materials, and the results were equally remarkable. Some of these results I was able to witness with my own eyes. Here is an example. In the room where the older child-

ren were working I saw a boy (8½ years) down on his knees with a great quantity of different colored beanbags spread out on a rug on the floor. I asked the Directress what he was doing, and she replied, "He is working on positive and negative numbers, which form a preparation for algebra." Then she took a slip of paper and wrote on it the following numbers: 12, - 7, -4, 3, -5, -8, and gave it to the boy, who looked at for a few seconds and promptly gave the answer - 9. "Now you make one up, please," she said to him. The youngster thereupon wrote down a similar sum, and I noticed that he set himself a much harder one. It was as follows: - -38, -60, 10, -56, 39, - 76. While he was working it out in his head the teacher did so too. (Itried to also but mental arithmetic was never my strong point; I got muddled and gave it up!) The boy, without any visible working, simply wrote down - 105. The teacher, meanwhile, had produced a different answer; but, on doing again, she found the boy was right and she was wrong.

The Directress then went across the room, picked up a bit of chalk, and wrote on the blackboard:(7 plus 3 plus 5) ^{2}; and then went to another boy about the same age, and asked whether he would like to do it for her. He left his work and went straight to the board and wrote as follows: -

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"LIKE HUNGRY LIONS"

The convictions of those persons who have worked with children using the Montessori approach is not that the children are precocious, but that children of the same age - in most schools - are kept back through circumstances which could prevent their true capacities from revealing themselves. This judgment is similar to that made by Montessori herself half a century ago, when she was working with a group of backward children - "imbeciles" they had been called by the authorities. These latter responded so well to her method that they did in their examination tests as well as the normal children of the same age in the public elementary schools. "Whilst everybody," she said, "was astonished by the miracle of my children doing so well, I could not help think that there must be something very wrong with ourordinary methods of education which held back the more intelligent normal children to the liberal of my poor 'idiots.'"

This is exactly how Montessori teachers argue when people say the Montessori children are too precocious. They know it is not a question of precocity at all ; it is simply because the children of the same age groups of the kindergarten and earlier grades are so treated that they have no opportunity of revealing the more advanced possibilities that are within them.

I had a singularly vivid proof of this recently, actually since beginning to write this article. I am acquainted with a lady who teaches a first grade class in a public school in a large city. She is very keen on Montessori principles, and has introduced them - as far as she was able - with her class of 22 children. She had supplied them with a certain amount of teaching material for the 3 R's and had encouraged them to work individually and choose their occupations. The children responded with eagerness to this approach

but after six to eight months they had come to the end of the materials which she had prepared for them. Whilst things were at this stage, one day with the teacher's permission, I introduced a lot of Montessori materials for teaching the various operations of arithmetic, a little more advanced for the children. Though I had been acquainted and accustomed to seeing Montessori children for some 30 to 40 years I could not help being impressed with what happened. It made me think of a phrase used by Montessori herself when she described how her mentally-starved children, when given the right kind of didactic materials, fling themselves upon it like "hungry lions". This is exactly how these children behaved. Take one instance: the children as a whole in the class were unacquainted with the very idea of the multiplication table; I presented two boys with the material by which it was possible to work out a table for themselves. I started them working separately, both on the 2-times table. They grasped on to the idea and worked steadily through until they had come to the end of table when they showed me what they had done. Then I asked them if they would like to do the 3-times table in the same way, which they did willingly. After that they worked out the 4-times table, and then, straight-away, the 5-times table. At intervals I asked them if they were not tired and would like to stop the work now and finish on another day; but they both pushed on steadily without a break, until - after working continuously for 2½ hours - they had worked out for themselves all the multiplication tables from the 2-times to the 10-times table. Furthermore each of the boys recopied each of the tables as he did it onto a blank form of the well-known table of Pythagorus. Similarly I started another boy, somewhat yonger, on a material showing how to do short division, on the principle of sharing.

He too worked on steadily and avidly through all the sums which had been prepared for him and after that made up some of his own, and he too worked without a break with this subject of division for over two hours. *BY SALLY*

One girl, considered by the teacher as less mature than the other youngsters, was quite fascinated by the arithmetic materials and soon left her aimless play to join a group of youngsters who were busy working at addition problems which I first posed for them and then left them at to taking turns composing a page of sums for one another. She watched the activity for awhile, I offered to show her the use of the material and she eagerly accepted the invitation. Within a few moments she was busily engaged in the activity with the five or six other youngsters sharing a box of counting beads (yeat each working individually on his own problems.) When she completed a page she brought it to but me, not for praise, to share with me her accomplishment of the morning. "This is my first work period," she exclaimed.

The whole atmoshpere of the room seemed vibrant with the enthusiastic discovery of each child of the various pieces of material, and what he was able to do with it. Some worked for a less amount of time than others, but they all worked. I had the feeling that only extreme force could have kept them from it. And yet it was an experience of joyful concentration, not an assigned task that must be done to please this visitor. After my first introduction they actually were not noticably aware of my presence.

One little blond boy, just 6, spied the movable letters for the first time and promptly spelled out "y-a-l-o-j-a-k-e-t." It seems that he had had the misfortune to have been stung by one of these beasts the day before and was still suffering the consequences.

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