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Montessori & Mussolini

There is no living educationalist who has achieved a wider reputation than the great Italian lady-doctor, Maria Montessori.

Mr Percy Nunn - Prof. of Education in London University - wrote recently: "It argues no ingratitudes to the great name of Froebel & his thousands of ^{devoted} followers to connect the new impulse which is everywhere at work in our schools more directly with the doctrine & labours of Maria Montessori than with any other single source."

And what is true of this country is ^{applies to} true of most of the other civilized countries in the world.

Her career has displayed all the astonishing & meteoric characteristics that go with genius. From the start she looked at things at an original angle. Thus she was the first woman in Italy to go through the medical schools and qualify as a lady-doctor.

Like her great predecessor, Froebel, who invented the Kindergarten, she had no idea at the commencement of her career that Education was to be her true sphere; and like Froebel discovered it almost by accident.

It happened that - after qualifying in Medicine - she was placed in charge of certain hospitals for defective children. In the hope of devising some new and better means for

arousing the latent capacities of these unfortunate children she plunged into the study of psychology of the defective children.

The practical results of her researches - when applied to their education - were so successful that it was found that her defectives had reached almost the same level as the normal children from ordinary schools. "While everyone was admiring the progress of my " Defectives ", " says Dr. Montessori " I could not help thinking that something must be wrong with the ordinary methods of teaching - or such an anomalous state of things could not have happened."

These studies led in time to the formation of the first famous Casa dei Bambini or Children's House -for normal children - in Rome, where, during a number of years, she worked out her system as it is known all over the world today.

The story of this first Montessori School - which was a transformed " Slum tenement " - reads like a fairy tale. There is no more wonderful and fascinating chapter in the whole History of Education from the time of Plato's Republic. This " Children's Home " became a Mecca for educationalists literally, from every quarter of the world. And not only teachers, but scholars, scientists, University Professors, Statesmen and Ecclesiastics - in fact all who were interested in the right development of the human intelligence

came to verify for themselves the new capacities in childhood - revealed in these humble surroundings.

Amongst those who came to visit that school in the Via Gusti in those early days (over fifteen years ago) was a young man as yet unknown to fame - but one in whose heart burned the fire of patriotism with so ardent a flame that it was to re-enkindle a whole nation and be a beacon like to Europe. Like Dr. Montessori herself - he has now risen to a position of world wide renown as the Saviour of Modern Italy - Beneto Mussolini.

The " Duce " did not forget those impressions made by those tiny children - their spontaneous charm, their amazing concentration at their work (almost incredible in children of four and five years of age) and their " active discipline ". He realized, as many - including even some of Dr. Montessori's followers unfortunately do not realize - that the " freedom " allowed in such large measure to the tiny children in a Montessori School is a definitely conditioned freedom. Not to be confounded with license, it is " liberty Only to do what is right ". " Activities in the child which are not constructive, which lead no-where, or which are anti-social in their nature - these must be checked " says Dr. Montessori, " but all spontaneous activities of the child which are constructive, intelligent, leading to an inner growth and development - these must be encouraged. " It is not to be wondered at that he, who has done so much to encourage the inner growth

and development of Italy while firmly suppressing at the same time all anti-social activities, should find in the Montessori Principles something which strikes a sympathetic chord. Mussolini is in fact a keen supporter of the Montessori Method, and is himself the President of the Montessori Society in Italy, and has given and is still giving it state support - by arranging courses for special training of teachers and the establishment of new schools. He has - only this month - conferred the Order of the Commandant of Italy on Dr. Montessori's Honorary Secretary in England, C. Bang O.B.E. for the assistance which he has given his illustrious compatriot in organizing Training Courses in various Countries.

There are still some people who have the idea that Dr. Montessori is a faddist and that her Method consists in letting the Children do anything they like - even to sitting on each other in a heap in the middle of the room. But no one who has ever spoken to Dr. Montessori - or even seen her for a couple of ^{minutes} could ever continue to believe that such ideas would emanate from her.

She looks the last person in the world to countenance a lack of discipline. (Nor is it likely, by the way, that a man with such a passion for discipline as Mussolini would give support to a method that lacked it). There are, it is true, plenty of faddists in Education - who wear sackcloth and eat nuts - but Dr. Montessori is emphatically not amongst these.

She is, as she appears, a quiet, reserved, dignified lady, with kind motherly aspect, and a heart big enough to include all the Bambini in the world. (There do exist in fact Montessori Schools for Chinese Kiddies and for negro piccaninies). But in addition to her large-hearted affection for children, she is remarkable in being endowed with the brain of a scientist. She knows the scientist's patience, his long vigils, his humility, his capacity to bend to the persuasion of the smallest observed fact, however apparently insignificant. Instead of trying to fit the child into Educational theories, Dr. Montessori has followed the Biblical advice " put the child in the midst of her teachers and herself and learned from the child." Never probably has there been any one who has penetrated so profoundly into the inner and mysterious depths of the mind of the growing child with such a rare combination of intelligence and sympathy.

No one could blame Dr. Montessori after having accomplished so much if she were never to do another stroke of work. , but retired to a well earned rest but that is not her way. During the last year, alone, she has - at the invitation of their respective governments - paid visits to Germany, to the Argentine and Italy to lecture and give advice on educational matters. And at the present moment she is living in London, where she is giving a Course of Training to Teachers in her Method. It shows the universality

of the appeal of her system that at the Present Cause no less than eighteen different countries and nationalities are represented.

It is not possible for a mind like Dr. Montessori's to remain inactive. At present she is engaged on a work which may prove to be as interesting and fascinating as anything she has yet done - viz - the application of her Principles to the Religious Training of Children. The great Italian Dottressa is as one would naturally expect a Catholic, and her experiments and suggestions are along Catholic lines. Nevertheless they cannot fail to be of interest and valuable suggestions to all interested in the religious training of children of whatever denomination. She hopes to have the book ready by the end of the year and it will be published by Sands and Co.