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Box 10, Folder 06 - "Untitled" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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claim to a permanent place amongst the great educators of humanity lies in the fact that she has made a profound and important discovery with regard to the nature of the child. Briefly stated it amounts to this, that the child loves work as much as, and even more than he loves play. Such a doctrine is so contrary to our traditional ideas that most people do not believe it yet, nor can even imagine it to be true. They are more inclined to agree with Shakespeare's description of the schoolboy with his "satchel and shining morning face, creeping like a ^{snail} small unwillingly to school."

This statement, however, does not strike one as so revolutionary if one stops to consider carefully what takes place in the mental development of any normal child during the first four years of its life, before it comes to school. It is only custom which blinds us to an appreciation of the prodigious amount of hard mental labour which he accomplishes all by himself during that period. Every child is by nature an explorer. Unceasingly, untiringly and - though it sounds strange - one might add unconsciously, the infant is busy exploring his environment. Everything is grist to his mill. Watch any baby, even in the pram before he can walk or speak, and you will find him busy examining the nature and properties of every object which comes his way. The mysteries of form, shape, colour, weight, size, causation, space, time, language, the ego and the non-ego, are but some of the subjects which his unwearying intelligence is constantly endeavouring to sort out. And this with such success that by the age of four, he has managed to arrange the confusing elements

of this jig-saw puzzle of a universe into some sort of an orderly organised system. And all this by himself, mark you, no one teaching him! Regarded then from this angle we can see that the outstanding mental characteristic of the pre-school child is that he is a great "absorber." His mind is continually absorbing knowledge from his environment; and must do so by its very nature.

Now Montessori's great achievement, as far as practice is concerned lies in the fact that she has evolved a new kind of school which is based fairly and squarely on this remarkable capacity of the child spontaneously to absorb knowledge from his environment.

Consequently for her/^{the}art of education consists in:

(1) Preparing a Special Environment for the child which shall contain in it what we wish him to absorb.

(2) Placing the child in dynamic relations with that environment. This involves

cur (3) Giving him freedom "to live his own life in this environment free from adult interference, according to the laws of his own nature." *A trained Directress who is the "Dynamic Link between the child & the Prepared Env't."*

The Montessori Method may, therefore, be summed up as "freedom in a prepared environment."

This Prepared Environment contains a multitude of Occupations or Teaching Materials whose primary aim is to assist the child's physical, mental and spiritual development. At the same

time, however, they enable the child spontaneously to learn "the three R's" and other school subjects, - in short to acquire that form of culture which corresponds to the civilisation (east or west) to which he happens to belong. From this point then, one may say that here is a method which "combines the acquisition of culture with spontaneity."

It is important constantly to bear in mind that Montessori's method of education is not so much a practice based on a theory as a theory based on a practice, i.e. based on the observation of children acting freely without adult interference. Obviously it is impossible in a brief outline to do justice to the wonderful system of harmoniously inter-related principles which has been evolved during the past thirty years, as the fruit of her unceasing researches into the psychological mysteries of infantile growth. (See "The Secret of Childhood," Longmans). We can only touch on some of the more important aspects.

A fundamental, if not the fundamental, principle of Montessori's point of view is that we must always bear in mind what constitutes the chief difference between the child and the adult, to that "the child is in a constant state of transformation or 'metamorphosis' whereas the adult has reached the norm of the species." From this are derived other principles, one of the most original of which is her Doctrine of Sensitive Periods of Development.

During his development each child passes through various stages, called Sensitive Periods, in each of which he possesses a special but transient sensibility to certain aspects of his environment. Each of these Sensitive Periods may be compared to the beams of a searchlight coming from within and lighting up certain facts in the environment to the exclusion of others. A Sensitive Period is like a bright but transient flame "which burns without consuming;" because while it is in the ascendant it endows the child with burning interests and special potentialities. Such for example is the Sensitive Period for language, which enables a child to absorb a language from its environment in all its complexities of grammar, syntax and pronunciation "simply by living." Such again is the Sensitive Period for order, (see "Secret of Childhood, page) and there are many others.

It is our business as educators to place in the environment didactic occupations which correspond to these Sensitive Periods through which the child is passing. Sensitive Periods are phenomena of mental development; for each enables the child, as it passes through it, spontaneously to absorb certain elements from his environment, at the same time fixing a particular faculty or a skill with an ease and permanency which will never occur again.

Without going into details we may say in general of these Montessori occupations that each is designed with the purpose of assisting the child's development in a precise and particular way. Not only his mental development but that of his personality as a whole: for with Montessori body and mind are never separated, in theory or in practice.

Each of these occupations involves therefore a twofold activity, - material and mental, muscular and cerebral. It is always a question of "learning by doing." But it is not - emphatically not - a question of learning by doing just anything anyhow, anywhere. There is nothing vague about the Montessori Method - it has form, precision, purpose, interrelation, coherence, gradation all along the line. Since each occupation is designed with a precise aim it is necessary that the child should be initiated into that aim, or to put it another way, into the exact way in which the material is to be used. This is the teacher's job, and that is why Montessori describes her as the "dynamic link" between the child and the prepared environment. Incidentally Montessori prefers the word "Directress" to that of "Teacher" because her job is not so much to teach directly as to direct a mental energy, which already exists, in such a way that the child is enabled to make port under its own steam.

The child's activity with the material (after the teacher has gone away having completed her task of initiation into its use) is essentially an individual thing. It is self-activity, -

that Selbat Tatigkeit which Froebel was forever seeking and yet never successfully realised through his "gifts." Like Froebel's, these occupations could well be described as "gifts," for they bring to the child not only the gift of knowledge, but that most precious of all gifts, self-realisation, or what Montessori calls "valorisation of personality."

It is in these occupations that we find the secret of the Montessori child's intense mental concentration. For each occupation establishes a "point of contact" between the prepared environment and the soul of the child. This "point of contact" sets going a precise manipulative activity with material which is accompanied by a correspondingly precise activity of mind. This activity may, and often does, continue for long periods of time, far longer than the ordinary "period" of a Primary School. It goes on in fact until the "cycle of work" comes full circle and the child stops of his own accord. This concentrated activity with the material, involving both the "Centre and the Periphery" of the child's personality, is the means by which, at one and the same time he strengthens his mental powers and builds up a living system of knowledge. This long continued work with the materials often results in sudden and spontaneous leaps of the mind, (Montessori Explosions) or unexpected acquisitions of skill, such as the famous "explosions into writing" and "the discovery of reading" which astonished the world in Montessori's first schools in Rome.

For the younger children, beginning at the age of $3\frac{1}{2}$, these occupations have largely to do with the refinement of the senses, - hence the name Sensorial Materials. From these the child passes on to other occupations in which the sensorial element diminishes as the more intellectual aspect increases, until finally the Young Explorer finds himself travelling joyfully along certain "prepared paths" which lead to the acquisition of the "three R's" and all the other subjects found in the usual school curriculum. Except of course certain subjects which, by their nature are best taught collectively, such as dramatisation, the Silence Game and story telling. Each of these prepared paths consists of a series of carefully graded occupations, passing through which the child, by his own self-activity, or individual work, perfects himself stage by stage.

With regard to the form of Freedom given by Montessori to the child in the prepared environment much misapprehension prevails. The child is not, as many people think, allowed to do "anything he likes." First. It is true he is allowed to choose his own occupation; but he is only permitted to choose from amongst those materials of which he already knows the correct use. Secondly, having chosen, he is only allowed to work with any material so long as he uses it in the correct way. Thirdly, his freedom implies no permission to commit any anti-social acts. It is always a freedom to do right.

The Montessori system, as shown above, is based on the laws of development. That is why Montessori always insists that we should encourage the child towards independence. Independence and growth are intimately bound together, are in fact different aspects of the same process; for growth consists in the acquisition of ever new stages of independence. Such is the law of life. The act of birth is the first great step towards independence; for with it the child takes over from its Mother such functions as respiration, digestion, sensation, and others. Weaning, learning to talk, learning to walk are further steps towards independence, for in each the child takes over functions for which he had hitherto been dependent on others. Hence Montessori's famous slogan "Every useless aid arrests development."

The effect of the Montessori movement on modern education is beyond calculation. Its influence extends far beyond the limits of those schools which call themselves after her name. Dr. Ballard, for instance, says somewhere that influence of Montessori "revolutionised the Infant School in London within a dozen years." The Individual Work System so prevalent in Primary Schools to-day is - admittedly - largely the result of the spread of Montessori's doctrines while the Dalton System owes much of its value to the same source (Miss Parkhurst was a student under Dr. Montessori and worked with her for several years in America). Many other movements, such for instance as that of

the Creative Activity schools owe more than they realise to the liberating influence of Montessori's principles, though some of them would do well to study again, and more deeply, her notion of liberty. For hers is a human liberty, and not just freedom to run wild, which, as Montessori says, "is the form of liberty we give to cats and lizards!" Human liberty and true choice is based on knowledge and not on the instinct of curiosity - a point we have no space to develop here. Nor have we space to show how the Montessori system, which started with Infants of $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 6, has now developed to such a degree that in Great Britain there are officially "recognised" Montessori schools for children up to 12 years of age, while in some countries, notably in Holland, they exist up to University entrance standard.

This steady advance through the decades of the application of Montessori's principles to an ever-widening sphere of application, both as regards the age of the children, and the variety and depth of the subjects dealt with, illustrates well another quality of the Montessori Movement - its power of assimilation. By this we mean the power of absorbing into itself and making use of what it finds in the world about it - without losing in any way its own essential nature and form. This, says Newman, is one of the seven marks of a vital movement."

Another of these "seven essential characteristics of a vital movement is the power of recuperation." Nothing is more striking than the way in which the Montessori Movement has displayed again and again the capacity to rise again, as it were like the Phoenix from its ashes. To take an example. There was in the spirit of Montessori's ideas - especially the idea of independence and freedom - something inimical to the genius of Fascism and Nazi-ism alike. It is not surprising therefore that while these regimes were in the ascendant all Montessori schools and propaganda were suppressed both in Italy and Germany. Since the end of the war, however, Montessori activities have revived in both countries, and are now in fact more vigorous than ever before. In England, during the same period many Montessori schools were dissolved on account of special war circumstances (evacuation etc.) but at the termination of hostilities they all revived again since these words were written in 1956 (in Blackfriars) another very striking example of this power to recuperate after an apparent decay has come to light in the United States.

For almost a generation the Montessori Movement seemed almost at a stand still in that country, and now - with a surprising suddenness - it is experiencing a "Second Spring". This has been in a good measure due to the energy and enthusiasm of Mrs Nancy Rambusch of Greenwich, Connecticut. After making a special study of the Montessori Movement as it is in Europe she

started a school of her own. Articles describing the work that goes on at _____ School have appeared this year in two of the most widely circulated magazines in the States - TIME and the SATURDAY EVENING POST. But the Montessori renaissance in the States is much wider than this; and there is much evidence to show that American educationalists all over N. America are beginning to discover that the Montessori Method - which someone has described as the oldest of the new methods - is still the most vital; and contains in it the answer to many of the unsolved problems which are exercising the minds of American teachers and parents at the present time.

What of the future? One thing is certain, viz: that now - after it has been living and expanding for half a century - one can confidently affirm that the Montessori Method is not simply a passing fad, an evanescent experiment. It has come to stay. It remains truer than ever to-day what Professor Godefroy of the University of Amsterdam said twenty years ago - "Those who are not favourable to the Montessori Method ask sceptically what will become of it after a number of years, meaning to imply that before long a new system will have taken its place. It is not difficult to explain to such that the Montessori Method is founded on general characteristics of life proper to all organisms, and that it will last as long as life itself lasts. It is not possible to imagine that such a principle, having once been introduced into pedagogy could ever be abandoned."