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Box 10, Folder 07 - "A Visit to Lilliput or An American Montessori School in Action" (E.M.S.)

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VISIT TO LILLIPUT

OR

AN AMERICAN MONTESSORI SCHOOL IN ACTION

BY

E. MORTIMER STANDING

A VISIT TO LILLIPUT

OR

AN AMERICAN MONTESSORI SCHOOL IN ACTION

"An ounce of practice is worth a pound of theory", says the old proverb. Hundreds of educational theorists, many of them parents, all over the States are discussing the pros and cons of the Montessori Method of education; but comparatively few of them have actually had the opportunity of seeing this method in operation. This is because good Montessori schools are still far and few between in this country, though there are plenty in Europe, where the system started in Italy half a century ago.

I had the privilege, recently, of spending a morning at the Sophia Montessori School in Santa Monica, California; and in the article which follows I invite you to share that fascinating experience with me. The Sophia Montessori school was started about six years ago by a Mr. and Mrs. Laughlin, and is now a thriving concern with some two-hundred and fifty children in it; and there is also a Montessori Training College attached, which has received State recognition.

I arrived there at nine o'clock in the morning, just in time to see three large buses roll up and begin disgorging their tiny occupants. How small they looked, and how eagerly they greet the new day at school! Like Shakespeare's school-boy they have "shining morning faces", but there is no sign of their "creeping like snail unwillingly to school". As they passed me by I noticed one little girl of about six

years of age carrying a roll of paper almost as long as herself. I asked her what it was. "That's my Time-line" she answered comprehensively, and vanished up the steps.

I followed her into the building- very spic and span after a recent redecoration- and into the Headmistress' room. But Mrs. Laughlin was busy with a parent, so she introduced me to Terese, her charming seven year old daughter, who in her turn introduced me at once to her alligator. Yes! a real alligator- about twelve inches long, and her special friend. A mental picture automatically arose in my mind's eye of Terese in a few years time walking down the Santa Monica Boulevard with an alligator on a leash which was quickly resolved ~~with~~ ^{by} the arrival of Mr. Laughlin, who handed me over to a student from his training college ~~who had been asked~~ to take me under his wing and show me round. Without delay we entered a classroom which contained some twenty-five children, ages from two and one half to five years. That might surprise some people, but in a Montessori School there is no strict horizontal grading of ages, but usually an overlap of two or three years. This is done because the children work individually, and the more advanced ones are constantly helping those less experienced.

The first thing that struck me on entering was the quiet atmosphere of the room. Talking was going on, certainly, but in subdued tones. The teacher's voice was quiet too; in fact from where I sat ~~on the chair given to me~~ I could not hear her as she was speaking to a couple of children

in another part of the room. And the next thing that impressed me was that the children did not seem to notice the three or four visitors who were sitting like myself as observers.

The ~~children~~ were all busy working at different occupations, and they were working on their own. Most of them were seated at little tables, dotted about here and there like tables at a restaurant, but a number were also working on open spaces on the floor. One little creature, of about three and one half years of age, was occupying herself with ~~the cylinders~~, a series of small, graded cylinders, made of wood, that fitted into corresponding sockets in a wooden block. The game, if you may call it so, was to take these cylinders out, and mix them up, and then put each back in its own proper socket. I noticed that the child, in trying to do this, made several mistakes, but no one corrected her; and in due course she discovered her mistakes and put them right all by herself.

This is a good example of the Montessori slogan that the teacher should never do for a child what that child can do for himself;

for "For every useless aid arrests development". Another child, of about four years of age, was ^{placing small} ~~putting little~~ spindle-shaped sticks into what looked like a series of little, adjacent, miniature horse-boxes, each box having a number; and ~~the~~ ^{game, if you like to call it so,} was to put the right number of sticks into each box, including the box which had the number nought on it. This forms the child's first introduction to that mysterious cipher, which means nothing, and which at the same time so very much, in the Decimal system. Near to her was a little boy with a board about a foot square with

one-hundred blanks on it, and he was busy putting out the numbers one to one-hundred, each in its appropriate place in one of the blanks in the square. Another child in this room was concentrated on ~~an exercise which amounted to~~ a study of different colors. The ~~different~~ colors were painted on little wooden tablets all the same size, and this little fellow was engaged in picking out—from a miscellaneous group of such colors—two reds, two blues, two greens, etc., and arranging them in pairs. Another, and rather more difficult variant of this kind of color exercise, was one in which I saw a child grading a series of color of the same shade, from the darkest to the lightest. This he did with different series of such graded colors, some red, some green, some blue, and so on.

At my guide's suggestion we got up to pass on to another class, in which there were also children from ages three to five years, and about twenty to twenty-five in the room. The first thing that caught my eye was a little girl about four and one half carefully spreading out a small rug on the floor. This done, she went and got another and laid it out next to it. What next I wondered? The reader ~~might~~ wonder still more if I were to tell him that all this was a preparation for the study of Geometry. "What!", you exclaim. "Geometry at four years of age!" Yes, it was in fact real Geometry—"the study of the proportions and relations of magnitudes" (Oxford Dictionary). I watched her, fascinated as she went to a small wooden cabinet and produced one after the other trays containing various geometric forms—rectangles, circles, triangles,

regular polygons and what have you. These were all cut out in wood, and each geometric figure had a corresponding wooden inset into which it fitted exactly. One could describe this ~~as a sort of~~ as a sort of Sensorial Geometry, a matter of looking at and comparing geometric shapes, - not a question Q. E. D.; that is of arguing about their abstract properties.

In this same room there was another material which was composed of geometric forms; but these were cut out in metal, and the children were using them to draw round, and by combining them to make the different geometric patterns. This ~~is done~~ with sharply pointed coloured crayons (not the thick ones used in the public schools). They coloured them in with various colours. This work, which they enjoyed immensely, forms an indirect preparation for Writing; since it teaches the children, without their realising it, how to hold the writing instrument and also how to make guided lines with it, guided by that little hand which is soon to learn how to make the letters and write with them. This, by the way, is a good example of what in Montessori terms is described as an "indirect preparation".

All this time there was a considerable bustle going on on another part of the room, where other children were busy laying tables for their lunch. One child was putting out the knives, another the forks, another spoons and the fourth was putting out the glasses. This latter, in a moment repose from her work, discovered that if you hold the glass right up to your ear it makes a strange noise. This intrigued her for some minutes and she paused to point out her discovery to one of her

friends who was equally intrigued. But after a few minutes they returned from this scientific investigation to the world of practical life. A fifth child was putting out paper napkins, and looked the very picture of relaxation. I noticed that as she returned to provide herself with some more, instead of walking she proceeded in a series of dancing steps, which reminded me of that fellow in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night who was so full of joie de vivre that he went to church "in a gig and came back in a coranto".

Whilst all these things were going on, and a good many others, ~~I did not even notice properly~~ two little children- a boy and a girl- ~~who~~ arrived quite near us each carrying a tray. It occurred to me that ~~this~~ might have something to do with the lunch that was being got ready, but I was mistaken. If I were to give you one-hundred guesses I doubt very much if you would be able to tell me what those children were about to carry off on those trays, -so I will ~~tell~~ ^{inform} you. They were carrying numbers- units, tens, hundreds and thousands- all made of shining golden beads. The units were single beads; ~~the tens~~ ^{ten} ~~were~~ a bead-bar of ten units joined; the hundreds were squares, and the thousands huge imposing cubes about four inches each way and weighing at least $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces. Having procured these concrete numbers from a shelf nearby, the two small mathematicians, each about four or four and one half years of age, walked off together to another part of the room. There, in the company of a third child, they proceeded to carry out a mysterious operation, which amounted to nothing less than ~~what~~ ^{what}.

~~seemed to me~~ enormous addition sums which included hundreds and thousands, - enormous I mean for their age.

Before I could see the end of this operation we passed on to another room where the children were from five to six years of age. From the chair allotted to me (we were not allowed to wander round as there were several other visitors present) I could see a child spreading out long chains and squares of different coloured beads: What he was actually doing was making a study on the squares and cubes of the numbers one to ten. A number of children in this room were engaged in the study of words. If you were to ask them- as Laertes asked Hamlet- "What is the matter that you read my lord?"- they would, like the prince of Denmark, have replied "words, words, words". Each had a little booklet in which certain words had been written down. One such ~~booklet~~ contained a series of words like "match, patch, catch" etc., and ~~she~~ ^{the girl} was busy copying them into her own little writing book. Another was doing the same thing, copying out words from ~~another~~ ^a little booklet which ~~all~~ had the phonogram "ow" in ~~them~~ ^{the words} such as- down, crown, brown, towel and so on.

On the floor to my right were two boys working together with a large map of the U. S. It was a sort of jig-saw map, each part being a separate state. Each state had to be put down on a blank map in its proper position next to its right-ful neighbors. When that had been accomplished successfully, they began to insert little slips, on each one of which was the name of a state. Geography seemed to be a very popular subject ;

for in most of the rooms I saw children engaged in it in some form or another. Two other boys were doing the same sort of thing with a map of Africa. There were in connection with this material four series of little flags with names upon them; the green ones had the names of countries, the red ones their capitals; there were blue flags for lakes and rivers, and yellow ones with the names of the mountains on them. In each case there was a key map handy, which the boys kept consulting when there was any doubt as to where any particular flag should go. They also used this flag at the end to revise what they had done as a "Control of Error".

I would like to have stayed longer to watch this Geographical activity, but my guide whispered to me that if we wanted to see the other classes we should move on. Thereupon we descended some stairs, and came to a large room, later on in the day to be used as a dining hall. Here I recognised my young friend of the Time-Line whom I had spoken to as she came out of the bus. A number of tables had been placed together, end on end, to form a very long table, and upon this she had spread out her precious Time-Line. It was a broad strip of paper some fifteen feet long when extended. It was marked transversely with straight lines, thus dividing it into periods of time, which were I think each a century; and on looking at it more closely I saw it had to do with the History of France. I saw the name ~~of the~~ French Revolution, and later on that of Napoleon, and further on still Napoleon III. This young student of History had a huge book which turned out to be an illustrated history of France written in French. She was busy cutting out

some of the pages and pasting them down on her Time-Line at their appropriate dates ~~in it~~. One of the pictures I noticed was that of Napoleon on the deck of the Bellerophon on his way to Saint Helena. Whilst this was going on another girl, about the same age, came up to her and exclaimed with an expression of horror, "Are you cutting all those pictures out of this book?" The other replied in a defensive voice, "It's all right! My mummy gave me this book herself and told me that I could cut all the pictures out if I wanted to." So that was that.

Along another series of small tables put together a boy of about the same age was making a Pre-historical Time-Line. I knew that without being told, for he was putting out a series of the most terrifying-looking monsters, pterodactyls, dinosaurs, iguanodons, and ~~what have you~~. My guide, the student from the training college, informed me that there had been recently a great rage for Time-Lines. That was why, for the time being, they had been allowed to use that big room, where they could spread out their work without disturbing others. He told me that one of the boys had insisted on making a Time-Line of the life of General McArthur, whose death had occurred only a few weeks before. At one side of this room there was a curtain behind which was a stage; and I was told that the older children were getting up Macbeth all on their own to present to the parents and staff the following week.

Passing into another room (there are ten classes altogether at the Sophia school) we found, as in the previous rooms, a great variety of activities going on ~~at the same time~~. Some

of these included Spelling difficulties; this time I saw a little booklet in which were the words, "keep, sleep, steep, weep, etc." Several of the children were occupied with Grammar. This subject, as it is presented by the Montessori Method, is as attractive as it is ingenuous. ^{Some} ~~Several children~~ were ^{working at} ~~occupied~~ ⁱⁿ a form of Parsing. ^{It} was done in a most unusual way. Each part of speech has its own special symbol, e.g. the nouns with a black equilateral triangle, pronouns with a black isocetes triangle; verbs by large red discs, adverbs by smaller discs but with a different colour, and so on. The children did their "parsing"- not by writing it out- but by the simple device of putting down the proper grammar symbol over the corresponding part of speech in a sentence which had been previously written out. This is a much quicker and more interesting way of doing it, and at the end of it you have a pretty coloured pattern, visibly showing the grammatical structure of the sentence ^{on} which they have been working.

Two children, working together as they so often do, were occupied by composing words with "the movable alphabet", this ~~is~~ ^{is} a sort of box with all the letters of the alphabet arranged in compartments rather like a compositor's type box. The words they were composing corresponded to little objects, which they had taken out of another box, and put down on the rug on the floor, - sheep, girl, cow, man, horse, and so on. This activity of composing words with ~~this~~ ^{the} alphabet is not writing, nor is it reading, but a sort of half-way house towards them.

Along by the wall in the next room we visited, I heard music going on. It emanated from a series of what looked like

little golden mushrooms on wooden stalks, mounted on a small rectangular boards. Each such "mushroom", when struck with a little wooden hammer, emitted a particular note, "Do", or "Si", or "La", as the case might be. This child had arranged all the notes in their proper order to form a musical scale, thereby forming what was really a musical instrument. On this he now set to work playing a tune, reading the notes from a prepared notation board with five parallel straight lines on it, each note being written on a movable disc about the size of a twenty-five cent piece. Passing on to a more advanced class we found here also a group of children at work on Grammar, but with a difference. They were busy analysing the various parts of a complex sentence, breaking it up into principal and subordinate clauses and phrases. The material for this was of a different kind: it consisted of coloured discs and long strips of coloured cardboard. When the job was finished, the resulting pattern looked rather like a wheel with spokes radiating out from the center. The center was the principal clause, and the radiating spokes stood for various dependent clauses, - adjectival, adverbial, and so forth. It looked to me rather a complicated performance, but the children doing it certainly enjoyed it; they certainly were not like the blasé school boy who, when asked to analyze a sentence remarked (probably with his tongue in his cheek) "I see no object in it."

In this same more advanced room I saw a girl of about eight or nine putting different coloured pegs into three peg

boards, ranged side by side. On inquiring what she was doing I was informed that she was working out a Long Division sum. When you and I were at school we did the whole thing mechanically; we were told to "bring down the next figure" etc. and we obediently did so, without the slightest idea why; we simply went on in faith. But, after working with this material, this child could tell you the "why" and the "wherefore" of the various steps, in what seemed to us in our day an operation as mystifying as it was complicated. In another part of the room a boy was working at Long Multiplication. He also knew exactly what he was doing, because he was working with the aid of a special material, which looked rather like a sort of chequer board with large squares and colours arranged diagonally. It also looked pretty complicated, but actually when you once got the hang of it, it was surprising how clearly it showed certain important matters, as for instance the difference between multiplying a number by twenty-four or by two-hundred and forty.

The children in a Montessori school not only learn the usual "four operations" in arithmetic, but they are given all sorts of fascinating materials which lead them to what one might call a study of the "anatomy of numbers". As an example I saw a boy who was very concentrated on what amounted to a study of the relationship between the squares and cubes of the different numbers from one to ten. In another part of the room I saw a girl of about six years who had put out a long chain of six bead bars all linked together which represented the cube of six ($6 \times 6 \times 6$), and her friend nearby

the cube of six (6 x 6 x 6), but not actually in the form of a cube but spread out as a long line instead. Nearby, a friend of hers was doing the same thing for the number seven. Each having spread out the long chain which represented the numbers in each cube they now proceeded to put little labels out along the two chains. It was interesting to note how the two children tackled the same problem in different ways. One simply counted along the chain, adding on seven more and then looking for the corresponding label, a long and tedious business. The other, more intelligent, simply arranged the little labels in their order from the lowest to the highest, and then without counting put them out all along the line simply relying on the order, which was a less fatiguing and more intelligent solution. This example illustrated what a Montessori teacher once said to me, "We hardly need to have special intelligence tests for children in our schools; it is enough for us to watch the way in which each child reacts to the great number of problems which keep turning up all day long as they work freely with the various materials.

While I was watching this new form of "skip counting" a small boy came and sat down at a table just near me and began to write in **his** note book. I peeped over his shoulder, and read "Derek is also a good boy". Who Derek was, and who the other "good boy" was I shall never know, for at that moment my guide beckoned me to pass on into another room. As we went out the land turtle came in, not walking on his own legs but carried by one of the children. What the latter was going to

do with him I don't know, perhaps he was going to make a drawing of him, or time his rate of progress, as I once knew a child who brought a snail to school, and worked out how long it took ~~him or her~~ to walk five feet; and after that, he calculated the snails speed per hour.

In this last room the children were of an age which one might describe as Juniors, their ages being from nine to twelve years. I was at once struck with a most impressive silence—so striking that I asked if talking was forbidden; but the reply was in the negative. It just happens that way because these children had to a large extent got past that stage when they require bodily activity to accompany the working of their minds. As a consequence there was much less moving about in this room, ~~and~~ most of the children were sitting still at their tables reading or writing. Individual work was still the principle on which the classes worked. ~~It was~~ individual ~~work~~ and also, equally important, self-chosen work. Being the only visitor I was allowed to wander round, and in doing so took note of what the books were that were being read. There was variety enough: one was reading a Life of Abraham Lincoln, another Kipling's Jungle Book, a third a book on Natural History, while a fourth was deep in The Hooded Hawk Mystery! Two girls were busy consulting an Encyclopedia, and were reading up, one about water seals, and the other about sharks. Later on I noticed each had given up this work; one had changed it for an Algebra book, ~~and the other was reading~~ a Three Act Comedy.

As I had an appointment I was not able to stay as long as I would like to have done with these Juniors; but I think one would be safe in saying that their general attainment was about that equal to children from the ^{first} to the grades of an ordinary public school.

I saw many more interesting things, during my morning's visit, than I have been able to record; and- without doubt- there were many more equally interesting that I did not even notice. How could one person observe in that time what some two-hundred and fifty children were doing- all working individually, and changing their occupation at their own choice. Enough however has been indicated to convey some idea of the immense variety of occupations that are going on at the same time in a single Montessori Class; and much more in ten such classes. If "variety is the spice of life" then life must taste good to Montessori children- and in fact it does.

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If one tries to sum up the main impressions of such a visit to a Montessori School in action, an number of factors stand out.

First. Perhaps the thing that strikes one most vividly is the intense concentration of the children on their work- real mental labour. And this, not only for a brief time, but all through the morning- though of course not all the time at one occupation. Indeed it was not only in the morning; for as I made my way, at the end of my visit, towards the entrance hall, I peeped into the room where I had watched the preparations

going on for lunch. Lunch was over- and- would you believe it?- those same little creatures were settling down to more work- except the few who had preferred to take a siesta in a nearby room, where little low hammocks were waiting for such as felt so disposed.

Second. This amazing concentration is quite spontaneous.

There is a complete absence of "extrinsic enforcements to the learning process" (to use the current educational jargon). These children are neither forced nor cajoled into work; there are no rewards to be gained, no punishments to be avoided. Their behavior is indeed a living proof that the human intelligence is a spontaneous "faculty" (to use a word temporarily out of fashion), and works, just as the eyes and ears do, because it is made that way.

Third. No doubt this amazing concentration has something to do with the fact that the children are allowed to choose their work. No one tells Tommy that he must work with the colour tablets, nor insists that Mabel should build the Pink Tower. If Nicholas wants to work out the Five Times Table for himself, he simply goes to the cupboard and supplies himself with the appropriate materials, and sets to work without consulting anyone; and if Sylvia wants to do Grammar no one is going to stop her. They work on the principle enunciated by one of Shakespeare's characters, "There is no profit where no pleasure ^{is} taken; in brief sir, study what you most affect". The only limit put to this freedom of choice is that the children may only choose from those materials into the proper use of

which they have already been initiated by the teacher. And, further, once having chosen, they must use each of the materials for the purpose for which it has been created. This is really no more an infringement of their liberty than Hamlet's remark to Osric, "Put your bonnet to its right use. 'Tis for the head!". Once having set about a piece of work they are free to stick at it as long as they like- until, in fact, they have completed the "cycle of work", a rather mysterious phenomenon "which has its natural beginning and ending like a day".

Fourth. This long continued and extraordinary mental concentration on the part of the children is always accompanied by a bodily activity. It does not take place as it were in the vacuum of purely abstract ideas; it is always centered round, and sustained by, some form of teaching material which has to be manipulated. Sometime the child's whole body is involved, as when he spreads out the Long Rods to make a "stair", or when he ~~puts~~ ^{puts} out the Geometric insets on a rug on the floor. But whatever he does it always involves the use of his hands. Thus hand and brain work together, in a harmonious activity directed by the will- the whole personality operating as a functional unit.

Fifthly. It is important to realise that it is work that occupies these children- not play. Their concern is with real things- their shapes, colours, sounds, sizes, or with numbers, letters, words, and so on; and these things are taken for what they are, and not turned into imaginary make-belief activities.

The child lays a real table for a real lunch and not for a doll's party; he washes his hands or the table with real soap and water- and does not pretend he is doing so as in a game. For him a spade is a spade and to be used for real digging in the garden. Whether the psychologists approve of it or not, the main concern of these children is for reality not make-belief; real activities in a real (though specially prepared) environment.

Sixthly. These children are free to live their own life in the Prepared Environment but they are not abandoned. There is always a Montessori Directress in the room. She is not so much in evidence as an ordinary teacher, but she is always there- as a benignant presence. And this gives, what all children need, a sense of security.

She is called Directress rather than Teacher, because her main business is to "direct" the spontaneous energies of her small charges into self-creative channels. She does a minimum of collective teaching, and for the most part is occupied by being a "dynamic link" between the children (as individuals) and the Prepared Environment. This contains a great number of "motives of activity" in the form of an immense variety of Teaching materials. Observation is one of her strong suits; and she is always on the watch for the psychological moment to initiate a child, or a small group of children, into the use of a new material, one which will form the next step on one of "The Prepared Paths to Culture", which are waiting for each child in this wonderful Prepared Environment.

The Directress is also there as a "Control of Error", when such a rôle is required. It is she who will tell you, if you want to know, if your sums are done correctly; or correct the spelling mistakes and punctuation in your composition. But she does not intervene except when it is necessary. For instance she would intervene at once if she saw Tommy teasing Janet and pulling her hair; or if Katherine began to splash water about on all and sundry. She would interfere, in short, to put an end to any such anti-social activities- not by angry scolding or "slapping", but by tactfully diverting misdirected energies into more constructive channels.

The teacher-child relationship under the Montessori System is happy and natural. The rôle of the Directress might be described as a kind of combination between a Guardian Angel and an Information Bureau. She does not attempt to force her personality upon the children under her, but more resembles the sun, in whose genial light and warmth their little personalities grow and develop by the unfolding of talents latent within them.

"The New Children"

When children are treated in this way- when they are left free to act independently in the Prepared Environment under a competent Directress- then the great miracle happens, as anyone can verify for himself by visiting a good Montessori school,- as I did this morning. And what is this miracle? It is nothing less than the revelation of new and higher

qualities in children than those we have been accustomed to attributing to them. We now are confronted with children who love work better than play, and concentrate for long periods upon it; children who are calm and emotionally stable; children who love their environment but do not wish to possess the things in it; children who are attached to reality rather than make-belief; children who respect the rights and property of others; who are docile and obedient without loss of initiative; and most astonishing of all, children who display a marvellous self-discipline.

Fifty years ago, when journalists went, from all over the world, to Rome to write up the extraordinary happenings that were going on in Montessori's first "Casa dei Bambini" (Children's Houses- as they were called) they could hardly believe their eyes. "These are not ordinary children"- they said- "We have never seen anything like them", and they called them "The New Children". And even now, if anyone visits a Montessori class for the first time, the phrase that most aptly describes his experience is "The New Children".

But of course these Montessori children are not really "New", for children are the same all over the world, and have been all down through the ages. ^{the same as} ~~They are all~~ potentially the same as "the new children"; but it needed the inspired wisdom of a genius like Montessori to bring to the surface those higher and nobler characteristics which are usually hidden from our eyes under the masks of "deviations".

The word "Sophia" is the Greek for wisdom; and in congratulating Mr. and Mrs. Laughlin and their devoted staff on the great work they have done, and are doing, at the Sophia Montessori School, we can truly say- with the ~~ancient Hebrew~~ ^{Greek} writer- "Wisdom is justified in her children".

.....

E. M. ...