

The Advanced Montessori Method

The Preparation of the teacher

Since the need to observe the child in the classroom essentially 'transforms the *school itself in action* into a kind of scientific laboratory' (Montessori, 2008:126), the teacher needs to be trained appropriately, to be a master in the preparation of the environment for the unfolding of the child, which necessitates allowing him the freedom to develop. This idea of preparing the environment – as exemplified in scientific experiments that take serious care in the preparation of their environments for optimal results – requires that the training of the teacher 'be made *ex novo*' (ibid) – re-thought and started afresh to accommodate the new way of looking at children.

In addition,

a new type of mistress has been evolved; instead of facility in speech, she has to acquire the power of silence; instead of teaching, she has to observe; instead of the proud dignity of one who claims to be infallible, she assumes the vesture of humility (Montessori, 2008: 128)

Teachers must be trained observers to be able to improve on their work with children and this comes through a thorough education and practice otherwise if we are 'impatient we cannot appraise things properly' (Montessori, 2008: 132). Added to patience the teacher must show humility and 'consider nothing too small to absorb all his powers, to claim his entire attention, to occupy all his time' (ibid). Montessori also reckons that teachers needs to be spiritual because 'it is to man that his powers of observation are to be applied, and because the characteristics of the creature who is to be his particular subject of observation is spiritual' (ibid). Although it is clear in her writing that she refers to Christianity through the many references she uses, I suspect that other forms of spirituality – a deep sense of the human spirit or soul – would suffice in helping the teacher to look at a student holistically. More than anything else Montessori suggests the true

work of the teacher lies in the observation of the child within the environment to better serve him

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The scientific laboratory, the field of Nature where the teacher will be initiated into the observation of the phenomena of the inner life should be the school in which free children develop with the help of material designed to bring about development. When she feels herself, aflame with interest, seeing the spiritual phenomena of the child, and experiences a serene joy and an insatiable eagerness in observing them, then she will know that she is initiated...then she will begin to become a teacher (Montessori, 2008: 141)

The Environment

School environments must entail freedom of movement and hygiene. The furniture, which must be artistically beautiful in its simplicity, must also be scant – so that there is both room for movement and free air flow. The beauty must also be so designed as to ‘inspire’ learning creating an inviting space; ‘beauty both promotes concentration of thought and offers refreshment to the tired spirit’ (Montessori, 2008:146). The lightness of the furniture allows children to move it about carefully as to not knock other things down – teaching them to control their movements. Similarly, the use of ‘china plates and glass drinking-vessels (*instead of using non-breakable materials as in most traditional schools*) ... become the denouncers of rough, disorderly, and undisciplined movements’ (ibid).

On the freedom of movement, it has to have an ‘objective’; a child needs to have the freedom to move while being engaged in something that is of purpose. This is where the idea of practical life originates – the environment has be prepared appropriately such that

surrounding objects should be proportioned to the size and strength of the child: light furniture that he can carry about; low dressers within reach of his arms; locks that he can easily manipulate; chests that run on castors; light doors that he can open and shut readily; clothes-pegs fixed on the walls at a height convenient for him; brushes his little hand can grasp; pieces of soap that can lie in the hollow of such a hand; basins so small that the child is strong enough to empty them; brooms with short, smooth, light handles; clothes he can easily put on and take off himself; these are surroundings which invite activity, and among which the child will gradually perfect his movements without fatigue, acquiring human grace and dexterity, just as the little kitten

acquires its graceful movement and feline dexterity solely under the guidance of instinct (Montessori, 2008:151)

Attention

Whilst most educational psychologists have written at length about the difficulty young children (2-3 years of age) have in paying attention to any one object or situation at a time and thus needing the adult to bring them to it, Montessori observed that in all these young children it was ‘an object (not the teacher) which fixed that attention, as if it corresponded to some internal impulse; an impulse which evidently was directed solely to the things necessary for its development’ (Montessori, 2008:155). All this came through the observation of children in their natural state - ‘*Liberty* is the experimental condition for studying the phenomena of the child's attention’ (ibid). The same said young children can be seen concentrating and repeating a similar tasks more than 30 times in a row because it meets an internal need. Attention, however, needs to be prepared for what is to come so that a child can connect more easily – which then is the job of the teacher in preparing the environment according to what they’ve observed to be the child’s needs and interests because ‘

the things which are useful to our inner life are those which arouse our interest... we manifest ourselves externally by our aptitudes; it is not our attention which creates us... the "experiences" with which each constructs his ego in relation to the external world ... are directed by his intimate individual aptitudes. (ibid).

The above brings Gardner’s work in Multiple Intelligences to mind. Montessori materials are designed to correspond to the natural instincts of the child – hence they hold their attention.

The Will

Montessori states that a child’s will is that which ‘acts and persists among his aptitudes and is built up on the internal fundamental fact of a prolonged attention (2008:170). The will is expressed in movement –when the child decides to accomplish a certain act, to move or simply not to. The interplay between impulses and inhibitions is the work of the will. Children need help

to be able to ‘bring about, as soon as possible, the reciprocal contact of impulses with inhibitions’ (ibid); movement and working with objects will allow them to learn about working with others and to achieve equilibrium between impulses and inhibitions.

Movement in some public schools is so limited and extreme cases simply not allowed – which takes away the freedom required for children to exercise and establish this equilibrium; ‘it is in the education of the will by means of free exercises wherein the impulses balance the inhibitions’ (Montessori, 2008:177). This education of the will in turn builds character which allows the child to be able to be consistent in work, finishing tasks and eventually becoming a man of character described by Montessori as being ‘persistent... faithful to his own word...his own convictions *and*...his own affections’ (2008:178). Once again, the child must be afforded freedom in choosing their work and that which they think is important to them in building their own character. As teachers we need to be aware of disturbing this process -

He who interrupts the children in their occupations in order to make them learn some pre-determined thing *and*...makes them cease the study of arithmetic to pass on to that of geography and the like, thinking it is important to direct their culture, confuses the means with the end and destroys the man for a vanity (Montessori, 2008:180).

A large part of the will is decision making; this ‘clarity of ideas, the mechanism of the habit of decision, give us a sense of liberty’ (Montessori, 2008:182). The failure to make decisions will make children (or adults) become forever dependent on others due to a fear of making a mistake. The constant work which children create is made possible by their decision to do or not to do something. Parents and teachers should be careful not to constantly decide for children as this impedes their development in decision making; we should aim to ‘protect *their* powers and direct them without disturbing them in their expansion; and *to* bring *them* into contact with the spirit which is within *them* and which should operate through *them*’ (Montessori, 2008:194).

Intelligence

Our care of the child should be governed, not by the desire "to make him learn things," but by the endeavor always to keep burning within him that light which is called the intelligence. If to this end we must consecrate ourselves as did the vestals of old, it will be a work worthy of so great a result
Montessori

Montessori describes intelligence as the child's own that is arrived at through the freedom of activity in working on manipulating an intelligent object in the formation of personality; so intelligence is that which they arrive at freely on their own; to collect facts and be able to distinguish between them. She encourages us to

Recognize...that the fundamental rights of man are those of his own "formation," free from obstacles, free from slavery, and free to draw from his environment the means required for his development. In short, it is in education that we shall find the fundamental solution of the social problems connected with personality (Montessori, 2008:197)

Personality is largely formed by intelligence which, as already stated above, is the ability to distinguish, to arrange and also, in life, it is to prepare for creation; it is to help to put the images of consciousness in order (ibid). The sensory materials in Montessori environments help students to not only distinguish and to classify but to find the difference within and among objects, which lays the foundation for intelligence and culture (Montessori, 2008). The aim is never to pile facts one upon another but to prepare the mind for the organization of facts in a meaningful way so that the student can assimilate any kind of information and classify it as needed to glean the knowledge therein.

Imagination

Imagination based on scientific research - 'an exact method based on observation, prudence, and patience...- as long as it is 'is a construction firmly allied to reality...' (Montessori, 2008:244) is the vehicle for discovery. In developing imagination, Montessori advises that 'is necessary for every one first of all to put himself in contact with reality' (Montessori, 2008:250). That is why

Montessori warns educators about encouraging imagination that is not based in reality but fairy tales as it only introduces entertainment and nothing else.; she quips that ‘every child should be able to experiment at first hand, to observe, and to put himself in contact with reality’ (ibid)¹. Giving examples of literary giants like Dante to brilliant artist like Raphael and Michelangelo, Montessori notes that their imagination comes from careful observation of what they were about. Montessori writes that children have a tendency to believe in fantasy which, unfortunately, can be aided by adults who encourage credulity² through images of Santa (Christianity) and Befana in Latin American countries during the Christmas period; this should not be allowed because imagination that is not based in truth does not create anything. As teachers it is our job to reduce and indeed erase credulity to allow children to mature sooner into an imagination based in reality. This has nothing to do with avoiding fiction – it only advises that the fiction be based in reality so that it makes sense to the child. Indeed Dante’s metaphors about Hell are all based in reality – hence the power of the visualization. Waiting for children to come to their own realization about things that have been either falsely communicated to them as truth or their own fantasies is a waste of time, ‘imagination unsustained by truth consumes the intelligence until it assumes characteristics akin to the mental characteristics of the insane’ (Montessori, 2008:266). In allowing imagination to mature in a child, it is important for teachers to realize that it cannot be manufactured and that too much direction actually stunts whatever creativity could ensure. Montessori states it more eloquently below

We ought to tend and nourish the internal child, and await his manifestations. If imaginative creation comes late, it will be because the intelligence is not sufficiently mature to create until

¹ If, then, the true basis of the imagination is reality, and its perception is related to exactness of observation, it is necessary to prepare children to perceive the things in their environment exactly, in order to secure for them the material required by the imagination (Montessori, 2008:254)

² Education, therefore, should not be directed to credulity but to intelligence. He who bases education on credulity builds upon sand (Montessori, 2008:261)

late; and we should no more force it with a fiction than we would put a false mustache on a child because otherwise he will not have one till he is twenty (2008:275)

References

Montessori, M. (2008) The Advanced Montessori Method Gutenberg Ebook Project

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