

NOTE ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONTESSORI MOVEMENT

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Introduction—A Vital Movement

IT is now upwards of forty years since the Montessori Method came into being. It has in fact existed long enough to have a history; and from a brief study of that history we may glean some important truths about it.

In the first place it can be safely affirmed that the Montessori Method is not just one of those educational fads that come suddenly into prominence, and then as quickly die out. In spite of the double catastrophe of two world wars, and all the confusion and insecurity consequent upon them, the Montessori Movement is stronger today and more widely spread than ever before. In this present year Montessori Training Centres exist in Great Britain, Ireland, Holland, France, Denmark, Italy, Germany and India; and others will be opened up as soon as trained personnel is forthcoming to carry them on.

It is not, however, merely a question of geographical extension. More important still is the question of depth. During all these years—a whole generation and more—the Montessori System has never ceased to develop, probing ever deeper into the mysterious roots of the child's developing personality, and culminating, during the past ten years, in Montessori's Doctrine of the 'Absorbent Mind'.

The Characteristics of a Vital Movement

There are, as Cardinal Newman pointed out, certain traits which are characteristic of every vital movement which makes a permanent name for itself amidst the ever-changing ideas that agitate the minds of men. It will be useful to pause for a moment to apply these to the Montessori Movement.

In the first place, a vital movement throughout its history will *remain true to type*, its earlier phases anticipating its later ones. There will of course be many new developments as the years pass; but, if it is a genuine development and not a corruption, the movement as a whole will remain—in essence—what it was in

the beginning. This is because all its subsequent developments do but unfold what was already there implicit from the start, as the oak tree exists potentially in the acorn.

On examination we find this to be eminently the case with the Montessori Movement. If one reads for instance the articles on Freedom and Discipline, and other fundamental principles, which Montessori wrote in McClure's magazine in 1908, it is quite astounding to see how clearly and fully developed were her seminal ideas from the beginning. In her *The Secret of Childhood*, which was published 30 years later, Montessori—after reviewing the astonishing events which happened in the first Casa dei Bambini—goes on to make the following remarks, which are so germane to the point under discussion that no further comment is required. She says:

‘It is indeed marvellous that, in the subsequent building up of a real method of education worked out by the experience of a long period, these early principles . . . have remained intact. It makes one think of the embryo of a vertebrate in which a line appears which is known as the primitive line: it is a real design without substance which will later become the vertebral column. We may carry the comparison further. In the vertebrate we see the whole divide into three parts—head, thoracic section, abdominal section: then a number of points that little by little follow an ordered evolution and end by solidifying—the vertebrae. Thus, in the primary outline of our educational method which is a whole, a basic line on which three essential factors stand out—the environment, the teacher, and the apparatus—with a number of special features that evolve little by little like the vertebrae.’ (Part II, Chapter III.)

Because preservation of type is one of the marks of a vital movement it does not follow that there should be no change in it. On the contrary, in a vital movement we must expect to find *developments*. These later developments, however, must be in a line with what has gone before, and arise naturally from it, and have a preservative influence upon it. This, again, is very true of the Montessori Movement. To take one example out of a host of others. In January 1952 a correspondent, reporting to *The Times Education Supplement* on the Conference of Educational Associations held at King's College, London, wrote:

‘The Montessori Society mounted the most ambitious display . . . and demonstrated convincingly the Montessori Method of Teaching History. The “Time-Lines” of the Juniors—long slips of paper coloured to show the development of life on the planet from pre-historic times—the illustrated genealogies of the Seniors, and the profusion of models, charts, instructional cards, were graphic witnesses to the breadth of the system.’

This quotation brings to mind another of Newman’s characteristics—viz. the power of assimilation. A vital movement, like a strong and healthy organism, always possesses the capacity to absorb into itself elements from without; but does it in such a way as to mould these external elements to its own form. In a word, it assimilates or digests them. By this process it not only preserves its own existence, but grows in strength and expands in stature. Of this characteristic the passage just quoted from *The Times Educational Supplement* is also a case in point.

At the very beginning, Montessori’s work was only concerned with small children, ages 3½–5 or 6 years; but since then its principles have been successfully applied to children of all ages;¹ and to almost every subject in the curriculum.

This power of assimilation is, however, by no means confined to the ever-extending field of cultural acquisitions: it applies also to the way in which the Montessori idea has been able to hold its own in the presence of new discoveries, both in the realm of theory and of practice.

No movement such as the one we are discussing could, even if it would, carry on a cloistered existence. If it is to thrive, it must go out into the world and meet opposition and criticism. From the beginning the Montessori Method was criticized from all sorts of angles, and still is. Furthermore it has been threatened on many occasions by internal factions; yet it has weathered all these storms, and now confronts the future with greater confidence than ever. The paralysing weight of dead custom has not broken it, nor has it been swept off its balance by the sudden and transient enthusiasms of the hour. It has progressed steadily and continuously along its own path, meeting old and new ideas on equal terms.

¹ There are some schools in Holland that use the Montessori Method up to University entrance age.

To take an instance. Since the beginning of this century an almost wholly new science has come into existence, based on the genius of Freud and his many followers. The revelations of the unconscious have served only to illuminate and corroborate, from a new and unexpected angle, the psychological truths that underlie the Montessori System. Freud himself once made the remark to Montessori that, if all the children in the world were brought up according to her principles, the greater part of psychoanalysts would be out of work! The whole doctrine of the 'Absorbent Mind of Childhood', referred to above, is founded on the idea of the unconscious; and would be quite incomprehensible without it.

Montessori's ideas are of value, not only to those who wish to study her educational methods, but also to psychologists themselves 'who do not yet see in the child an open door into that unconscious, which *they* are seeking to discover and decipher solely through the study of the maladjusted adults'. (*Formazione del Uomo*—Montessori, p. 43).

What Newman said of Christianity is true of all other great movements—that 'no one aspect is deep enough to exhaust its contents, no single proposition which will serve to define it'. This is especially true of the Montessori Movement. That is why the serious student finds it necessary to study it from so many different aspects, singling out now this principle, and now that, for separate consideration. In reality, of course, these principles do not operate in isolation, but are inseparably connected like the parts of a single organism. As the mind begins to contemplate one of these principles it tends to pass, as though by an inevitable sequence, to another; thence to a third; then on to a fourth, until they are all seen to complement one another like the spokes of a single wheel. This quality illustrates the fourth of our 'characteristics of a vital movement'—viz. that 'it must possess logical sequence'.

Finally, a vital movement displays the characteristic described as 'chronic vigour'. If, on the contrary, it should contain within itself some vital defect, some inherent inconsistency, it will run itself out quickly. It may be vigorous for a while, and locally for a longer while; but when it meets with adverse circumstances, or sudden and unexpected changes in the environment, it will fail in strength and pass into a decay. In contrast to this a vital

movement possesses the power to recuperate itself after suffering adversity and even loss—as a wound will heal again by the operative powers of nature.

Nothing is more striking than the way the Montessori Movement has displayed this 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 liberty—something inimical to the genius of Fascism and Naziism alike. It is not surprising, therefore, that—whilst these régimes 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 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.

To sum up, then, we can truly say that the Montessori Movement has been 'able to preserve its substantial unity, because it is seen to be one in type, one in its system of principles, one in its unitive power towards externals, one in its logical consecutiveness, one in the witness of its later extent to its earlier, one in its union of vigour with continuance, that is in its tenacity'.

The Secret of its Vitality—The Biological Foundations of the Method

If asked wherein lies the secret of this vitality, most persons would probably reply 'because Montessori has built up a successful method of education'. But this answer, though true in a sense, would be very superficial. The secret lies in something much deeper and more fundamental than a method of education; something in fact which was prior to the Method itself. Without doubt the vitality of the Montessori Movement is due to the fact that it is based on the observation of life itself—i.e. on a study of living beings. In other words, its foundation are, in a sense, as much biological as paedagogical.

To enlarge for a moment on this. No one would deny that Montessori has already made for herself an assured place amongst the great educationists of history—amongst Comenius, Pestalozzi, Froebel and the rest. Yet, curiously enough, she herself was inclined to regard her true place as being just as much amongst biologists such as Darwin, Mendel, de Vrees and Henri Fabre. I have, in

fact, often heard her compare her method of research to that of the great French naturalist, Henri Fabre—‘The Homer of the Insects’ as he is often called. ‘Fabre’, she says, ‘did not take his insects into his study and experiment upon them there. Rather he left them free in the environment most suited to them, and—without letting his presence in any way interfere with their natural activities—patiently observed them there until they revealed to him their marvellous secrets.’

So it was with Montessori. She realized that neither the ordinary infant school, nor yet the home, had been designed to suit the needs of children. So—if one may use the paradox—she *created* a natural environment for the child; that is, one specially made to respond to all its needs. And then, whilst other people continued to *talk* about the value of giving to children freedom in education, actually *gave* it to them. At the same time, with unrivalled insight and powers of observation, she studied their ‘free behaviour’ in this new environment and discerned its inner significance. Indeed, if it were possible in a phrase to sum up the Montessori Method of education, one might call it a method based on ‘freedom in a prepared environment’.

In this context, we would recommend every one interested to read Montessori’s own account of the ‘revelations’ given to her by these ‘free children’ in her book *The Secret of Childhood* (Chapter II, ‘How it Originated’ and ‘What They Showed Me’).

It is important to appreciate the fact that these ‘revelations’ were there before ‘The Montessori Method’, as now known, had come into existence. There has been, and still is, a great confusion on this point. Most people still think of Montessori primarily as the inventor of a new method of teaching; but she herself always maintained that, if she had any claim to be considered at all, it was as ‘The Interpreter of the Child’—as one who has discovered, almost by accident, a different and higher nature in the child than had hitherto been suspected. In the last edition of her book on her Method she changed the title. It is no longer ‘The Montessori Method’ but ‘The Discovery of the Child’.

In *The Secret of Childhood*, after giving an account of those wonderful ‘revelations’ in the first Casa dei Bambini in the tenement houses at Via Giusti, she goes on:

‘This brief account of incidents and impressions will have thrown little light on the question of “method”. Here is the

point. One cannot see the method: one sees only the child. One sees the child soul, freed from obstacles, acting in accordance with its true nature. *The childish qualities of which we catch glimpses are simply a part of life, like the colours of buds or the scent of flowers; they are not at all the results of any "method of education"*. (Italics ours.)

'But the phenomena presented in a Casa dei Bambini are normal, *psychological* characteristics. They are not apparent like the natural facts of vegetable life; for psychic life is so fluid that its characteristics may completely disappear in an unfavourable environment, to be replaced by equivalents. Therefore, before proceeding to educative development, it is necessary to establish the conditions of an environment that will favour the blooming of the normal hidden characteristics. To this end it is enough to *remove obstacles*: this is the first step, the foundation of education. It is thus a question not merely of developing existing characteristics but *first of discovering their nature*: only after does it become possible to foster normal development.'

The Montessori Method is then essentially the consequence of a great discovery (perhaps the greatest of our age), the discovery of the 'existence of a hidden nature' in the child. This discovery came with as much surprise to Dr Montessori as to anyone else. It was as genuine a discovery as Mendel's Law; and, as genuinely, one belonging to the sphere of biology.

It is this intimate connection between the Montessori Principles and the observed phenomena of living beings which led Professor Godefroy, Lecturer in Psycho-pathology in the University of Amsterdam, to express himself twenty years ago in the following terms:

"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 the 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 should ever be abandoned.'