FULFILLING THE HUMAN POTENTIAL

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Paper presented by Barry Hilson

This talk was initially prepared by Pat and presented by her as a public lecture in Palmerston North (New Zealand) in 1992. She left notes of her talk, which form the basis of this paper. In the course of her live presentation she included several anecdotes – based on her experience as a mother and as an educator. While I can remember their richness, I cannot remember the details of those anecdotes and, regrettably, I am unable to include them in this paper. (Barry Hilson)

"No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind." (Gibran, 1978)

The notion of human potential is not new in education. It has challenged philosophers since the times of the ancient Greeks. These thoughts of Kahlil Gibran give an expression to the notion which is particularly in tune with that of Dr. Maria Montessori. It shows respect and sensitivity for the uniqueness and individuality of the potential in each one of us.

More recently, in a more prosaic way, human potential has become the focus for an extensive study undertaken by the Harvard Graduate School of Education at the request of The Bernard van Leer Foundation of The Hague in the Netherlands.

The Van Leer Foundation, among other things, supports innovative projects that develop community approaches to early childhood education and child care, in order to help disadvantaged children to realise their potential.

The purpose of this particular study was to assess the state of scientific knowledge concerning human potential and its realisation. One of the volumes published as a result of this study is: *Of Human Potential* by Israel Scheffler (1985). The purpose of the book is to delve into the concept of potential and to remove it from its traditional context – with a view to advancing a practical theory of potential and its development. Such a theory, Scheffler hoped, would provide guidance in the field of education – particularly to policy makers.

Dr. Maria Montessori, in 1948, wrote a book on the same general subject called: *To Educate the Human Potential*. Indeed, human potential was a central theme of much of her educational writing. She had a dynamic view of human potential – a powerful quality – as yet, substantially, unrealised in most educational environments. She championed the cause for fundamental changes in the way education is provided so that it may better support the realisation of human potential.

You will not be surprised to learn that there is much similarity between Montessori and Scheffler, although the approaches and emphasis are quite different. There is much to be learned from both, and I wish to draw from both sources in my talk today.

To begin with therefore, let us look at what we mean by "human potential".

The Oxford Dictionary tells us that:

Potential means ***potency or power.***

> Potentiality is described as: the state or quality of possessing ***latent power or capacity…capable of developing into…!***
>
> It is in fact: ***a power or capacity "to become…!***
> (The Shorter Oxford Dictionary)

A crucial question here for all of us though, is:
"To become what?"

That question itself has potential – the potential to evoke a major, value-laden discussion. It is a question to which I will return later in this paper. For now let us press on with a deeper understanding of the concept of potential.

Scheffler (1985) identifies three important aspects which, he believes, have important bearing upon our concept of potential. He writes of:

- Potential as a **capacity** to become;
- Potential as a **propensity** to become; and
- Potential as a **capability** to become.

If such distinctions seem somewhat nit-picking to you then, I can only suggest that you read this book by Scheffler to see how a philosopher can draw out of such distinctions important implications for educational and social policy. Let me, in shorthand form, try to pick out the distinctions in a sort of hierarchy:

Someone with the '**capacity'** to become may or may not in the future achieve that capacity. That is, no categorical prediction of realisation is implied.

'**Propensity**' does make some form of condition-al prediction that a capacity will be achieved; while '**capability**' recognises the existence of skills and perhaps effectiveness in achieving some performance or other relevant outcome.

It is not an exact fit, but I suspect that Montessori would view the new born as having capacity. The emergence of sensitive periods would probably be associated with propensities. Capability would describe that state where the child (or older, as the case may be) has had the experience of performance at least once.

Scheffler develops these three phases to explore pertinent aspects of growth and education. For instance, he draws our attention to such factors as:

- impediments which might block the achievement of a latent capacity;
- his concept of critical periods; and
- the concept of conditional propensities to acquisition of skills and effectiveness.

He seeks to explore how this progression can be optimised to promote the enabling of learning, and the self-development or empowering of learning.

This brings us to what Scheffler identifies as the three great myths regarding human potential, namely:

- the idea of fixed potentials;
- the idea that all potentials are harmoniously realisable; and
- the idea that all potentials are uniformly valuable.

Montessori would agree strongly with Scheffler's view that:

> *"the idea of fixed potential is a myth. Individuals may attain potentials they hitherto lacked – while the present lack of a given potential indeed precludes its realisation now, it does not preclude its realisation at a later time when the potential in question may have been acquired.*
> (Scheffler, 1985)

Surely this is the reason why the Montessori environment seeks to provide opportunities for the realisation of potential and to promote self-development of the child and the building of individual work habits. Like Scheffler she was acutely aware of the unpredictability of life and life experiences. Events and opportunities can have a profound effect – both on potentialities and on their realisation. The variables of human effort and effectiveness add further complexity. Presumably, that is why the Montessori approach seeks to prepare the child – to make it better able to interact with its world. That is, the Montessori environment is designed to help the child to develop concentration and self-motivation which will enable it to bring to bear human effort on points of interest.

Learning for the child occurs around 'points of activity'. These are not random. They are directed by inner sensitivities, which Montessori called ***sensitive periods.*** Scheffler (1985) is concerned with a similar concept when he talks quite clinically about ***critical periods***:

> *"The fact that, in at least certain systems (e.g. visual, auditory, bird-song) appropriate levels of experiential input may be required during critical periods for the attainment of normal function is not in doubt."*
> (Scheffler, 1985)

Montessori's (1949) treatment is more child-centred. She believed that between the birth of the child and approximately six years the child's development is guided by periods of extreme sensitivity to particular aspects of the environment. The sensitivity stimulates the child to engage in activities which bring about the construction of human functions. For example, the characteristic of speech, co-ordinated movement, sensory refinement, order and cultural adaptation are brought into existence through experience in the environment. Importantly, this is usually accompanied by a spontaneous interest on behalf of the child.

Montessori says that if the child is prevented from enjoying the experiences dictated to it by the sensitive periods, the sensitivity will vanish, "with a disturbing effect on his development, and consequently on his maturation" (Mont-essori, 1949). These unfulfilled periods will greatly inhibit the child's potential for later development.

There is, of course, another aspect. I was reminded of this when I looked at the thought for the day on a desk diary recently. I read: "To move forward a turtle needs to stick its neck out!" And so it is with the child! So much is experimentation – progressing into the unknown, and learning from the experience. Taking joy, comfort and reinforcement from repetition of an activity before, once more, sticking out the neck again. It is important that we empathise with the challenge that such experimentation poses for the young child and do our best to provide conditions which, at the very least, do not discourage it. Montessori took great care to foster the capacity for experimentation in the young child – but that is detail for another talk, at another time.

It is interesting that he chooses similar analogies to Montessori to describe his view of development. Like Montessori he rejects the Aristotelian view of the acorn-to-oak representation of biological development. Neither Scheffler nor Montessori sees growth unfolding in a wholly pre-determined way. In **The Absorbent Mind**, (Montessori, 1973), a volume which focuses primarily on the period of development between birth and three years, Montessori observes that the baby at

birth has only limited mental and motoric powers. But there exist, within the child, potentialities which will determine his/her development. The child's possibilities, she says, are unlimited.

The notion of unlimited possibilities in the new-born child is now widely accepted. Bowers (1985), in his book, **The Rational Infan***t*, draws on research observations when he concludes:

> *The new-born must be pre-set for many stimuli he will never actually encounter. The new-born human is set to expect a much wider range of possible inputs than is the older human. It is this openness that lets the baby react to humans of all kinds, speaking any language. With experience, or lack of experience, some items will fall out of the possible presentation set.*
> (Bowers, 1985)

Let us dwell for a while on three propositions which are contained in Bowers' observation. He notes that:

- the child's potential at birth is unlimited;
- the child's potentialities will find their form and content through experiences in the environment; and
- some potentialities will be lost due to lack of experiences.

These propositions seem remarkably close to those advanced by Montessori – almost 50 years earlier. According to Montessori, the child's human potentialities can only be realised within a social context. The prime representative unit of the social context in the first instance is usually the family. The principal agent of the family is, generally, the Mother.

Just in parentheses, I would like to highlight the different emphasis of Scheffler when he talks of the new-born infant:

> *"What the biology of the new-born infant leaves open at birth is, in short, filled out by culture, history, education and decision."*
> (Scheffler, 1985)

While there is no literal disagreement between the two, it is interesting to note the abstraction and generality of Scheffler's "social context." Montessori, in contrast, emphasises the role of family and the mother in her context of the young child.

Turning now to Scheffler's second myth that:
"All potentials are harmoniously realisable."

According to Scheffler, educators and policy makers find comfort in clinging to this myth. It absolves them of the task of selecting and nurturing in the child those potentialities which should be realisable. He attacks the myth by pointing out that some potentialities are unlikely to be jointly realisable. As an example, he suggests that it may be difficult for someone to jointly fulfil potentials to be a neurosurgeon and prize-fighter. If one is to be preferred to the other, there must be a judgement embodying such preference and educators and policy-makers have responsibility in supporting such judgement.

Whether, however, that needs to be the choice of the educator or the policy maker or the parent --- or the choice of the child is a central issue. I would have little doubt about what Montessori would advocate. Montessori saw great merit in developing the faculties of choice and will in the child. Her preference would favour the interest and choice of the child in choosing between potentialities. Her preference, also, would favour the child experiencing widely so that choice is made as far as possible on knowledge.

Scheffler dismisses his third myth that: “All potentials are uniformly valuable” as a rose-tinted illusion. He rightly points out that people possess potential for evil as well as for good. They are potentially considerate as well as callous, leading on through as many sets of opposites as you would like to describe the complexity of human behaviour. It forces us, he says, to take account not only of incompatible values but also of negative values. He appears to advocate that: “the educator’s aim is to destroy as well as to strengthen potentials – to block as well as to promote their realisation.”
(Scheffler, 1985)

My reading of Montessori implies a much less overt role for the educator or the parent and, conversely, a greater trust in the child as an agent in his/her own development. This is best expressed in Montessori’s view of the develop-ment of **will and choice**.

WILL AND CHOICE

The child's early development is by and large unconscious**.** Learning during this time is spontaneous. In other words the child does not **will** itself to learn. If you have had any experience with little children, you will understand when I say their learning is spontaneous.

The child takes in impressions through a special type of mind which Montessori called an **absorbent mind.** Montessori uses the analogy of ***the camera*** to describe the functioning of the Absorbent Mind. Today I would like to read to you one of her anecdotes that illustrates some symptoms of the **absorbent mind**:

> *“One day I myself saw a child of about two, who had put a pair of shoes on a white bed cover. With an unreflecting movement, impulsive, non-measured, I took the shoes and put them on the ground in a corner saying “That’s dirty!” and with my hand I brushed the cover where the shoes had lain. After this the child, whenever he saw a pair of shoes, ran to pick them up and put them in another place, saying “Dirty!” after which he would pass his hand over a bed as if to brush it, though the shoes had never been near it.”*
> *(Montessori, 1985)*

One can see that this was more than mimicry. The child had seen and heard. The child had absorbed. The child had abstracted some key elements from the experience. The rituals he later followed played out those elements in a variety of situations. As Bowers (1985) notes, “Perception in the young infant is more general than that of an adult. The child has a propensity to perceive in general terms and a propensity to act in terms of what is perceived.” The special mind is powerful and the impressions it takes in are long lasting. This has important implications for the role of the adult. Given the power of an absorbent mind the responsibility of the adult would seem to lie more in providing a positive and consistent example for the child. This would seem more constructive than to “destroy as well as to strengthen potentials – to block as well as to promote their realisation!” – as is advocated by Scheffler.

Typically, as the child comes to the third year, its learning comes progressively under the direction of the will. I would like to look at this aspect of development for a moment because, in my view, the emergence of the will is another modifier of critical importance in the conquest of potential.

Let us look at life as a series of achievements. To some extent, we tend to envy those who can achieve significant things with little effort. Possibly because the average person is conscious of the effort it takes to achieve something significant. But what does the effort consist of? You might call it concentration, or perhaps, stick-at-ability. Let's use the term **will; t**hat is: “the act of will that

permits a focus of energy on one activity rather than a range of competing alternatives." (Oxford Dictionary)

In my view, it is of vital importance that the child develops this capacity of will at an early age. It is a process that requires patience and constancy by the adult. It is also important that the child is given ***space*** to develop his/her will.

If you think about this carefully, you will appreciate that alongside the development of will, we need to allow the child to develop and refine the faculty of choice. In the Montessori environment, we rely heavily on a very powerful agent as a catalyst for development of both will and choice in the child. This agent is the child's interest in activities in his/her environment.

If we accept the fact that (at least at a young age) there are few innate limits on potential, then one of the major roles of education is to give a breadth and richness of experience in terms of:

- points of focus which can engage the child's voracious interest; and
- an environment in which the child can come to terms with the interplay between choice and will.

This is the essence of Montessori pre-school education. While the content of the child's experiences is important, I must emphasise that Montessori education, more particularly at the pre-school level, should not be pre-occupied with content and curriculum as a set of facts to be learned. Rather it should endeavour to create an environment:

- rich in experience;
- where interest is fostered; and
- where choice and will are given opportunity to grow.

It seems to me that Montessori saw no particular merit in the adult choosing to promote one potential over another in the young child. Rather she sought to build the capacity of choice and will in the child so that he/she would be equipped to make such choices later. Similarly, with the role of negative potentials. Prior to the development of the will, the role of telling, encouraging or discouraging a young child is infinitely less effective than the modelling of appropriate behaviour.

SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We have found many points of similarity and a few points of difference between Montessori and Scheffler. Scheffler's main analysis leads into public policy. He is interested in the policies which shape society at large, government and institutions. He is interested in policies which will:

- lead to barriers being removed so that capacities can be achieved;
- lead to acquisition of the "basic skills"; and
- lead to the development of enlightened policy-makers.

His writings lead me to think that Scheffler has an interventionist instinct in the development process. But above all, his scope seems to be "society at large", the State, Government and other institutions.

Overall, I am not convinced that Israel Scheffler's embryonic policies would produce outcomes of which Montessori would approve. But there is no doubting the importance of the public policy battlefield. It is good to see strong advocacy in this environment for the fostering of human potential in educational policies even if some of the directions and emphasis may not be "Montessori-compatible!"

For me, Montessori was more of an optimist in her view of the child in society. She seemed to focus on "getting it right" at the individual level. This meant getting it right at the stage of childhood where there is unique opportunity to help the child acquire the basics of will, choice and a sense of responsibility as the building blocks of a healthy society. She would have liked the quote from Scheffler:

> *"What opens and closes the life prospects of children determines the direction and quality of society itself."*
> (Scheffler, 1985)

If we were able to persuade the policy makers to this point of view, how would they best foster the development and health of society? If they accepted this responsibility, what sorts of changes would they make to the educational system?

This is the exact challenge that Maria Montessori accepted.

From her observations of what children did she concluded that the post-natal period, that is, between birth and six years, was a period of enormous construction during which the young child created the basic structures of its personality. She held strongly the view that education, especially at the pre-school level, but throughout the spectrum of the education process, should be designed to support the development of the human potential.

Education, as it was traditionally organised in her day, could not give that support, so she set about creating an educational environment that would.

THE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH OF MONTESSORI

She began by designing a specially prepared environment in which she placed materials designed to provide increasing challenge for the young child. As it was important for the child to learn about the culture, 'instruction' was necessary. The materials provide learning experiences to meet the needs of the child at each particular age/stage. The choice of materials which form the content of the classroom assumes that every child has the potential to learn in every area of human expression, whether in art, music, mathematics, writing or reading.

Central to this new learning environment would be the child's freedom to be active. This freedom in not permissive. It does not infer licence. It is, however, expansive. Children in the Montessori environment are given the freedom to choose activities from among those to which they already have been introduced. They may work with these materials for as long as they wish. As interest usually guides this choice, the child becomes engaged and deep concentration results. The child emerges from these experiences calm and deeply satisfied.

As the materials are self-correcting, over time the child develops a sense of his/her own abilities as well as confidence from the experience of achievement.

There are clear limits to the child's freedom. These limits are established around the good functioning of the group. Any action of a child which disturbs or interferes with the right of another child to learn, is discouraged.

In terms of the development of human potential, Montessori was aware that human potential could develop as much for the 'bad' as for the 'good'. She was clear that these negative traits should not find expression in the environment. She observed that when children were able to engage in purposeful work, not only did these negative behaviours become less prevalent but also children became more socially aware and helpful to those around them.

This pro-social response is the result of an inner development brought about through the deep satisfaction of purposeful activity. This is the process of education which Montessori saw bringing about a peaceful world.

To support the development of the child's self-knowledge, competition as a management technique is not used in a Montessori classroom. Competition, rewards and punishment externalise the learning process to the extent that children are conditioned to rely on the teacher's evaluation of their performance. In this process the student develops the idea that the teacher is the determiner of what is right. The teacher's evaluation is what the child comes to rely on. In other words self-evaluation is not exercised and the child abandons himself/herself to the judgement of others. Inner peace becomes more elusive because the development of self-knowledge is externalised.

These are some of the important aspects of her brilliant and purposeful response to the challenge. I have searched the bibliography of Scheffler's interesting little book in vain for acknowledgment of Montessori's work. I can only believe he would have been even more enlightened if he had been drawn to her insights.

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate therefore, I would like to leave you with the view that potential is an essential human quality, a power to become, which belongs to the child. It is for the child to fulfil.
As parents and educators, there is much we can do to support the process, but ultimately, it is the conquest the child must pursue for itself. We can not do it for the child. This reminds me to address the question I postponed earlier in this talk – namely: "human potential refers to the latent power to become, but – to become what?" I am not going to say – it's none of our business, because that attitude would never describe the legitimate concern and good will of every parent and educator. But I have found some inspired words with which, I suspect, Maria Montessori would have agreed enthusiastically. Once again I quote from Kahlil Gibran, his powerful and comforting metaphor where he speaks to parents:

> *"You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite and He bends you with His might that the arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness. For even as He loves the arrow that flies, He loves also the bow that is stable."*
> (Gibran, 1978)

So the "stable bow" lends support by providing an environment rich in experiences where interest is fostered, where the freedom and security to experiment is nurtured and where choice and will are given an opportunity to grow. Put another way, where the child can build the foundations of self-knowledge and self-esteem which will sustain him/her through-out life.
Above all the specifics of organised human knowledge, these are the qualities which are of most enduring value. These are the qualities which Maria Montessori so keenly recognised and bequeathed to us in her educational policy, an understanding and an approach dedicated to the fulfilment of human potential.

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