

MONTESSORI IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD - 33 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN AFRICA

Muriel Dwyer, Sister Gaspara Kashamba, Sister Angela Loko.

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Muriel Dwyer

First I must thank you for inviting us to be with you for this Congress.

May I introduce my friends and colleagues, Miss Lillian Kimata originally from Kenya, Sister Angela Loko from Kenya, Sister Gaspara Kashamba and Sister Salustia from Tanzania and Mrs Khatoon Murji originally from Tanzania.

We have been asked to speak about the work in Africa. It is not so easy for it has been going on for a long while and as we have all been so busy, very little is written down, but I shall try to give you a "bird's eye" view or just a peep into what has been and is being done.

First I shall relate a little of the History and then I shall ask my friends to let you know about the situation now.

It all began in 1967 when I was invited personally by the Aga Kahn community in Dar es Salaam to help them train girls, so that they could change their Nursery into a Montessori School. Together we ran 4 full International courses. Then the political situation changed and many of those people left the country.

As fate decided ... At the same time the work of many, many years of the Swiss Sisters of Divine Providence, both in Schools and in the running Teacher Training Colleges, had also come to an end. Instead of leaving the country as so many others did, they asked me if I would assist them as they wished to continue to help Tanzania, which had only gained independence in 1964. After a great deal of discussion it was decided to try to help the women, babies and small children particularly in the villages and poor areas of the towns.

How the first Training programme came into being is a story in itself for which there is no time here today. Suffice it to say, that having consulted with Mr Mario Montessori, the 'Help the Children' programmes began in 1971.

We were very, very poor. We obtained a room in the market place in Dar es Salaam, we were given one chair, one table and we put our trust in God.

One of the Sisters taught me how to use a fret saw and just using locally available, mostly waste materials (cardboard boxes, bottle tops etc), we made as much of the apparatus as we could.

The Sisters found twelve local girls as students and I must say we never looked back. As a result of our experiences we came to some very simple but highly important aims and rules to assist the success of the work. Our AIM was and is to help the poorest and the youngest children to have a chance to develop themselves as fully as possible, so that they could and can make the most of whatever life offers them.

Also, as many of the girls were married and had children, it was also our aim to teach them how to improve the care of their babies at home.

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Assisting Man in his work of self-development is what I understand Montessori to be.

To ensure that any help we could give would really reach the children in the villages, we decided to train only girls who would go back and work in the villages and the poorest areas of the towns and be self sufficient. It was also decided that it was essential not to import anything. We had no money and the people we were training would certainly have no money.

This meant that whatever we were to make had to be available locally and as there was so very little money waste materials were our main source of supply. We soon became known as the best "taka-taka" (rubbish) collectors in town. In fact it was the headline in the Daily News.

As our aim was and is to help the children and women of the country, it was also decided that it was essential that none of the training that we could give should be wasted. Therefore it was important that every student we trained must have the assurance and the possibility of being able to put their training into practice. To achieve this, it was obvious that before they could be accepted for Training, they must have the possibility of working or have someone who promised that they would make it possible for them to put their training into practice. This meant that some corporate organisation must be behind them such as a Village, a Mission or a Firm.

It was also decided that no student would make any piece of apparatus unless they could show that they knew how to use it. It was also our aim to give each student simple tools to take home so that if and when their apparatus broke they could mend it. Amazingly we were never able to find any organisation willing to help with this expense. They were willing to give us tape recorders - which are useless in villages - but not hammers, fret saws or screwdrivers.

With these fundamental rules we began our first training programme with the first twelve girls. We had a great faith in what we were trying to do.

Mrs Murji, who is at the end of this conference table, was one of the girls I trained in the first international course that was held in Dar-Es-Salaam. She had the courage to come out of her community to help us to train and to help the African people of Dar-es-Salaam. This was not easy at that time, I can tell you. She continued to work with me for ten years in three different countries. Of course we have had many difficulties, but we have never looked back, and thousands and thousands of children have been helped over the thirty-plus years since we began.

Although records are difficult to find, we know that the first programme that started in Dar-es-Salaam was the beginning of programmes in four countries: Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and Nigeria. Also we attended seminars in many more countries, including Botswana and the Seychelles. We have also taken part and spoken at both national and pan-African conferences on the young child in several countries.

Since we began, between the four Countries, 74 training courses have been run, which means, at a conservative estimate, that between three and four thousand people have been trained but it may be more. Of course not all of them are still working with groups of children. Many of them are mothers or even grandmothers now; but they still have a direct influence on the lives of their children.

After the first two or three years, we began to encourage suitable girls to assist in the training programs and then if they were successful, we found a way to send them to the MMTO in London for their international diploma and to gain a wider horizon. So from the beginning it has been our policy to prepare people who could carry on the work that we have started. I shall just take a moment here to publicly thank the Maria Montessori Training Organization for its vision in giving scholarships whenever I asked for them and also to Mrs Hilla Patell - who many of you know - and to Lynne Lawrence for their help and support over the years.

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As unfortunately nobody is here from Ethiopia I would like to tell you that there is one training centre there. Since the programs began in the nineteen-seventies there have been eight training programs; we think there are now fifty-five Children's houses. You must remember that in Ethiopia they have lived through a revolution – and a very violent one at that - and at least two famines. We have been able to help the poorest of the poor.

There are two groups of children, two "Case" that I can never forget (there are pictures of them in the hall). The first is one that was in a hut. There was no running water, no windows and no toilets and most of the children who came were the children of lepers. It was one of the most beautiful Montessori activities I have seen anywhere in the world. The second was for a little group of children who came from the poorest of poor, there they had taken over a pigsty – I didn't ask what happened to the pigs – and they had really cleaned it up and done their very best and it had given them a lovely base for them to do their work.

I must make known and thank of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul for all their help. Their order is now running the training programme. I would also like to give a public 'Thank you' to the Italian Capuchin Fathers for all their work and especially for helping me, and others, in the middle of the revolution – but that is a long story. The man who stands out in my mind is Father Franco Salvi, who sadly is no longer alive; he was a cultured wonderful man and a very holy priest.

Sister Gaspara will tell you about the work in Tanzania and Sister Angela about the work in Kenya. What we hope we have proved is that Montessori is not just for the rich or the so called highly developed. You do not have to have riches to help children to have a chance of developing their potential or of helping mothers. What you DO need to have is vision. You must have vision. You must be also willing to work extremely hard for nothing or next to nothing and most of all you must yourself have a sound and thorough understanding of training and the right training and experience for what you hope to do.

Thank you for listening. Please welcome Sister Gaspara who has been working with me for many years.

Sister Gaspara Kashamba

To add onto that, this line here (pointing to the conference table on stage) is the fruit of Mama Dwyer's work, so, you can applaud her.

As you have heard, I am Sister Gaspara from Tanzania and though the time is short, I would like to thank all those people who have made it possible for us to come all the way from East Africa to this congress. Thank you very much. We appreciate it.

As a young Sister in the seventies I came across the work of Maria Montessori because I was asked by my Superior to go and help one of our Sisters who was working in the Kindergarten and had been trained by Mama Dwyer. There, a love of wanting to work with children grew in me.

One day, Mother Superior asked me: -"Would you like to work with children?" I said: -"Yes", but I was not very sure how serious she was, because in those days, people were not asked what they wanted to do: you were told. But don't tell her I told you this, eh?

So it came that I was sent to Dar-es-Salaam to take the training and then I was sent to work in a parish that was very poor. There was one room and that room was the church, the parish hall... it was everything. So sometimes, when they had a long service, we had to be outside under a mango tree. I had to display my materials there; but you should have seen these children! They would transform themselves; they were really happy. Every time they would come in the morning

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they would ask: -“Are we going to be in or out?” So, if you tell them: -“out”, they are going to prepare everything we usually put out; and so it went like that.

After sometime, I was sent to England, to the MMTO where I obtained my International Diploma and then stayed another year working to gain experience both with the children and with the Training programme. I then went back to Tanzania, worked in Dar-Es-Salaam for about five years, before going to Lushoto, my hometown, and built – well, God was so good! We got the money to build a new Training Centre, where I have been working until now.

The work was really tough. We had the Training Centre and we had a forty-four children Kindergarten as a model school there. So I went back to my Superior to ask for help to get two more Sisters: Sister Salustia, who is here with me, and Sister Vincent. They had both trained with me and had run excellent classes. They were sent to London and then, in 1999, they came back with their International Diplomas and excellent reports. They have been working with me since then.

As well as the centre in Lushoto, there are three other centres in Tanzania and one is the “mother centre” (in Dar-Es-Salaam) that was started by Mama Dwyer and Sister Salvina (who could not be here with us today) and Sister Denise who is now running the centre in Dar-Es-Salaam. She was requested to start another centre in near Lake Victoria.

There is also Sister Bertraud – a German Sister working in Tanzania in the south – she came across the Montessori work in Dar-Es-Salaam, then went to London for training and came back to establish another training centre in the south – in what Mama Dwyer calls “lion country”. I don’t know why she calls it like that, but she does. It is a pity those two Sisters are not here because they are working really hard for the children in Tanzania.

The four Centres have joined together to form the Montessori Training Association of Tanzania and this is well recognized by the government of Tanzania. This recognition helps us to negotiate with the government in case it is necessary.

So one can imagine how many children have had a chance to have a better start in life: it must be thousands. So we thank very much all those who have made all these efforts to bring Montessori to Tanzania. I would like to say and to promise that we are going to go on carrying out this work in Tanzania to the best of our abilities. Thank you very much.

Sister Angela Loko

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. Since Miss Dwyer introduced us you might be wondering why we are calling her Mama Dwyer. When she trained me I was a young Sister and as she is older than me, automatically in our culture we go straight to calling her Mama. Someone yesterday heard me when I called: -“Mama!” and said: -“Is she really your mother?” And I answered: -“Don’t mind about the colour!”

When ‘Montessori’ came to Kenya, around 1972, Miss Dwyer and Mrs Murji started a Training programme with the Maryknoll Fathers in Nairobi it blossomed and several excellent Centres were begun: in the 1980s, the situation changed, as happens from time to time.

In 1978, I went to Nairobi – I was living in Mombassa at the time – where I was asked by my Superior to take the Montessori course. I asked -“Why?” and she said: - “Do you know we observed you since you came from your home and we found you are very good with the children. I

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said: “Yes, in obedience, I am going!” During that time Mrs Lawrence also used to come to help us during the holidays and we called her “Mama mdogo”, which means “our young mother”.

I want to talk about three points very briefly – because the time is running short. I want to talk about the child, the environment and the person who is being prepared.

Before I went to train, I taught for one year and that one year was very hard. I had no training. I had nothing. I used to talk from the morning on and by the evening I had no voice. When my Superior General heard about this course she said it was a different ‘style’ from what we knew. So I went to check about that ‘style’, which I was not sure of. I can assure you that after preparing my material... Well, I used to go to the dustbins and some people in Nairobi would say: -“Oh, it is a pity they go mad when they are so young!” They did not know what I was looking for: I was looking for bottle-tops. I went to look for them in a bar and the people stopped drinking! They said: - “Sister go home, we’ll bring them to you.” So for us, for me, for the child, I would have gone anywhere; nothing to feel ashamed of.

After my Course, I went down to Mombassa and the first thing I did was to talk to the parents because they did not know what type ‘animal this would look like’. I had meetings with the parents and I said: -“We were going to start something called Montessori.” They asked me: - “Montessori means what?”- “It is a lady, there, in Italy. Even I have never met her, but we are going to follow her method.” We started very well and the parents had no quarrel.

After working for a few years with the children, I was called in by my Congregation to do other jobs and later I asked to go to London to further my studies because I had fallen in love with the children. I was given permission and I went to train there.

After going home we organised with the Nakuru dioceses and Everet dioceses so they could start their Programme fast because they were ready. Last year – that is, in 2000 - we started our first training programme in Mombassa. I do believe that if one wants to do Montessori, one has to be very strong and one has to believe in what one wants to go for. You must not be discouraged by anybody. I have seen Montessori being done under the trees, as Sister Gaspara said, and even in mud-houses – not m-a-d, but m-u-d!

I would also like to say - as we have heard from other speakers - that much of the Practical Life (also in Africa) done in the class is also done in the home. May I quote Saint Francis; he spoke of Grace and Courtesy as ‘the fine flower of charity’. We hear people talking about love every day. If we could only stop the talk, and live the Grace and Courtesy, we would be better people, accepting everyone as the children do in the class: different tribes and different nationalities, as they live.

So let us educate human potentials (since they are the property of the human being) NOW. We are not talking about tomorrow because we don’t know about tomorrow.

When you really know and understand the Montessori approach to the Child and it is ‘in your blood’, whilst you respect other methods, you can never allow anything – as I said - or anybody, or any difficulty, cause you to drift away from the sweetness of knowing the Child and his formative work in the prepared environment.

Please we have some photos outside that you can come and have a look at later.

I would like to thank everybody for this great opportunity and I really mean everybody, because I cannot name each one. The Organising Committee; those whom I know have made it possible for us to be here; my teachers in London, teachers everywhere in every walk of Life, and also those who have journeyed with us in this walk.

I want to thank you all today and everyone seated here because if you were not here... We would not have talked to the walls! We are talking to the people. Thank you very much.

Miss Dwyer: - “Sister Angela was Mother General of her Order for ten years between her training and work in Nairobi, and her training in London. This is to give you an idea of whom we are dealing with! Many thanks, Sister Angela.”