

A SCIENCE OF PEACE

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To ask anyone to speak on peace would appear quite foreign to our time, since we think today that nobody is worth listening to on any subject unless he is a specialist....How strange it is therefore that there exists no science of peace.... Great numbers of people devote their lives to the study of the hidden causes of natural cataclysms, such as earthquakes, which mankind is powerless to overcome....But it can be asserted without hesitation that no research study of peace, even of the rudimentary character, has been undertaken. (Peace and Education, p. 3)

Introduction

These were the words of Maria Montessori in 1943. It was a conference like this where she was asked to speak on the subject of peace. Today, perhaps, we can begin to speak more definitively since, 64 years later, progress may actually have been made on the research study she alludes to, although those doing this research have not been consciously aware that they were doing it and little has been written, documented, or reported; no data has been collected or analysed or interpreted. Yet I am going to suggest that in 2007, we have already begun the study she wished for so long ago. Why would I say this? Because in Montessori environments around the world, certain phenomena have continued to manifest themselves in the work of children which, taken together, constitute a hope and a promise for mankind.

The Discovery of the Child

In San Lorenzo, as we all know, Montessori felt she had made a momentous discovery. She said she had “discovered” the child, had unveiled the “secret of childhood.” What was that discovery? What is the secret of childhood? It is that children, when allowed to develop according to the natural plan, display quite amazing characteristics: for example, they become calm; they are industrious; they enjoy silence and working alone. They are generous, loving, happy, and have an intense attraction to reality—characteristics that most people still would not ordinarily associate with children! What causes such a change? It is today as it was in San Lorenzo: the possibility of purposeful work, freely chosen. When young children are given freedom to choose their own activities, and allowed to act from their own spontaneous (and at times mysterious) motivations, each will repeat the activity and concentrate profoundly on the work at hand.

Normalisation: The Young Child and Peace

Recognising that “the longer one does attend to a topic the more mastery of it one has,” American psychologist William James remarked, “An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.” (James, W., *Psychology: The Short Course*, p. 95). Montessori, who corresponded with James, set out to do just that: to provide environments for children that would be conducive to concentration. She believed that if environments could be prepared with “objects which correspond to...formative tendencies” (*The Absorbent Mind*, p. 169) the child’s energy and interest would become focused on that aspect of the environment which corresponded to the developmental need. She studied this phenomenon of concentration throughout her lifetime. Please allow me to read you a bit of what she had to say on the subject:

She suggested that a child concentrates when he focuses his attention, his energies, on a single exercise, a single work—“where the movements of the hands are guided by the mind.” (*The Secret of Childhood*, p. 149) She said that given “an environment favourable to the child’s spiritual growth,” the child “will suddenly fix his attention upon an object, will use it for the purpose for which it was constructed, and will continue to repeat the same exercise indefinitely.” (*The Advanced Montessori Method*, p. 153)

- And with concentration, she said, the majority of the children grow calm. Their “nervous systems rest.” “They only move their hands when they work. A child who concentrates does not disturb others.” When children find objects that interest them, “disorder disappears in a flash and the wanderings of their minds are at an end.”
- “When a child concentrates,” she said, “his character is changed. It is as though he had taken off a mask.”
- “It is as though a connection has been made with an inner power or with the subconscious and this brings about the construction of the personality.”
- “It is concentration of power which gives strength, and whatever means that provoke this concentration...become a means of building up of character.”
- “Concentration connects the exercises with something inside. If the creative energies of a child...are disconnected, broken, concentration brings a new connection which results in normality.”
- “When this spiritual connection is made, all the powers in the individual will function, all the little lights in the individuality begin to shine. When we have obtained this,” she said, “we are at the starting point.”

The activities available to the children in a Montessori classroom are those which Montessori described as “purposive” and which can be performed by the children for both selfish and social ends. When children work in this way they increase their level of independence while at the same time they come to realize their actions benefits others.

In a Montessori environment, one child will be seen buttoning the clothes of a another, or helping tie his shoes or apron; they rush to sweep up a spill.

When a child washes the dishes or scrubs the cloths, he cleans what others have soiled. When he sets the table he works for the benefit of the others. Yet, he does not consider all this work done in the service of others to be special or in any way to be an effort deserving praise. It is the effort itself that is for him the most sought after prize....In this way, the child develops a sense of social purpose—unconsciously, effortlessly, without even realizing it.

Once they have reached this level, the children no longer act thoughtlessly, but put the group first and try to succeed for its benefit. “This unity, born among the children in the prepared environment, which seems to be produced by a spontaneous need, directed by an unconscious power, and vitalized by a social spirit,” is what Montessori called “cohesion in the social unit.”

And this cohesion, Montessori said, “forms the ‘warp’ on which is later woven the ‘weft’ of law, producing the fabric of society.”

Responsibility: The School-age Child and Peace

So, in the early years of life, children construct their personalities. If allowed the opportunity for normal development, they emerge at around the age of six or so, adapted to the world of human beings as experienced in their first environment, the home and the family. If they have been in a Children’s House, they will already have experienced being a part of a working society, each having done his or her part. If they have had the opportunity to construct themselves normally, they will already be disciplined, happy, industrious children who are instinctive learners wanting to learn more.

In the next phase, the child is spontaneously driven to learn about the world outside the close confines of home and family and Casa, and for this we provide a different environment, for what suffices at one stage is no longer adequate at the next. The child, who is an adult-in-the-process-of-becoming, has no choice but to begin to orient to the greater world of human beings because

eventually he will have no choice but to live in a social context, to live with others in the world. Therefore the child at this age must adapt to the world and the greater human culture out there.

The children should love everything that they learn, said Montessori. “For their mental and emotional growths are linked.” (*To Educate the Human Potential*, p. 25) Whatever is presented to him must be made beautiful and dear, striking the imagination. Once this love has been kindled, all problems confronting the educationalist will disappear....

She makes it clear that she is talking about Intellectual Love and not personal love. The younger child’s “love of the world” is now sublimated to the realm of ideas, as Dante’s originally personal love of Beatrice was sublimated to a Platonic love, a more perfect kind of love. At this age, the possessive instinct can become a strong desire to possess not things, but a knowledge of things. In *To Educate the Human Potential*, she writes, “It is hoped that when this sentiment of love for all subjects can be aroused in children, people in general will become more human and brutal wars will come to an end.” (*Ibid*, p. 26) She asks us to call the attention of children to “the hosts of men and women who are hidden from the light of fame, so kindling a love of humanity; not the vague and anaemic sentiment preached today as brotherhood, nor the political sentiment...nor patronising charity for humanity, but “a reverent consciousness of its dignity and worth.” (*Ibid*, p. 33)

Man as Cosmic Agent

In an address given in London in 1939, Dr. Montessori said, “Men are better than they appear to be. Indeed human beings impress me as being extremely good and charitable, but they practice goodness and charity so unconsciously that mankind does not realize that it possesses these virtues.” (*Education and Peace*, p. 137)

She goes on to say: “Even if men and women are fighting one another today or have fought in the past, ...they have nonetheless been working throughout history to build the world that will be the world of peace.” (*Ibid*)

And so the history given to the elementary child is not the usual list of battles and kings, or dates to be memorised that most of us remember from our school-age years; it is more the story of human beings, people living in different climates and geographical regions, solving problems and working together to meet their fundamental needs. It is the story of men and women and boys and girls, creating and inventing ingenious ways to fashion an existence in what were sometimes inhospitable circumstances, first in one way and then in another, based on the circumstances. And it is the story especially of all those unnamed individuals who came before us and to whom we owe such gratitude.

In the cosmic tales told to the children at the elementary level, the animals, rocks and plants, the wind, the sun and the water, all work according to their nature: rocks, water, air; solids, liquids, and gases all work in a sense, and when they do their work—each in their own way—the balance is maintained. Today as yesterday and millions of years ago, the world spins around itself and round and round the sun.

When we see the order in nature, we can see the strange fact that all living things not only do things to benefit themselves, they also benefit others. The dung beetles and other scavengers, for example, are sweepers of the earth, they keep the earth clean. Trees take in carbon dioxide from the air (a poison for animals), and put out oxygen (necessary for animals). Thus they keep the air pure. Nature has this beautiful arrangement whereby everyone does something for its own life, but in so doing also acts unconsciously for the betterment of everything. Elementary children learn that, when all the particles, living and non-living, do their jobs, the cosmic order is maintained and things run smoothly. When the school-age child understands how the universe works, they also

understand how all the peoples of the world along with the rocks and the wind, the sun and the rain, the plants and the animals, and so forth, are inter-dependent.

Valorization of the Personality: the adolescent and peace

As you know, when it came to the adolescent, Montessori especially espoused secondary-school reform. Society, she said, was “reaching the bursting point....facing a crisis that menace(d) the peace of the world and civilization itself.” (*From Childhood to Adolescence*, p. 95) Science and the rapid material progress of the modern world had transformed social life but the schools had not kept pace. Education, she said, must be “very broad and very complete.” Labourers needed to learn to work with their heads and intellectuals needed to learn how to work with their hands, as “men who have hands and no head and men who have a head and no hands are equally out of place in the modern community.” (*Ibid*, p. 98)

She suggested a boarding school in the country, where a life in the open air, the sun and a diet rich in vitamins would nourish the body of the adolescent while the calm, the silence, the marvels of nature, would nourish the spirit.

On the farm, the ethic of the land and its destiny is deeply personal, touching at some unconscious level the will to live and to provide for future generations. “The ethic of the land and its preservation is a moral principle,” says David Kahn, who has worked with adolescents in Erdkinder settings. The ethic of the land asks the mind and the heart to work together “to make sense of the world and what is most valued.” (*David Kahn*)

In the first chapter of *From Childhood to Adolescence*, Montessori speaks of the insecurity of modern children: “We have lost that security which we had in the past,” she says, and she uses an agricultural metaphor to describe the extreme changes of the world. “The world,” she said, “is like a piece of land that is going through the vicissitudes of a settlement of the soil.” (*From Childhood to Adolescence*, p. 99) To counter a world that has an unsure future, especially from the point of view of the adolescent, the young person must have both feet planted firmly on the ground.

Montessori says, “a man must have strong character and quick wits as well as courage; he must be strengthened in his principles by moral training and he must also have a practical ability in order to face the difficulties of life. Adaptability—this is the most essential quality; for the progress of the world is continually opening new careers, and at the same time closing or revolutionising the traditional types of employment...there is a need for a more dynamic training of character and the development of a clearer consciousness of social reality.” (*Ibid*, p. 100)

According to Kahn, “Adaptation at the adolescent level, because it encompasses a widening level of social reality, entails a higher level of complexity and a direct connection to emotional life.”

And to Montessori, “adaptation meant happiness, ease and the sort of inner equilibrium which gives a sense of security...It is based on the permanency of the spiritual, ethical and economical equilibrium of the group.... For adaptation thus considered, “stability” plays a great role, because it represents the basis from which to start towards the realisation of the individual’s aspirations. It is as the solid ground is under one’s feet when walking.” (*Mario Montessori, The Human Tendencies and Montessori Education*, p.1)

“The value of the personality” she said, “must be actively cultivated by concrete experiences.” (*From Childhood to Adolescence*, p. 138) The school of the Erdkind is designed to provide adolescents with the concrete experience necessary to create an emotional equilibrium whereby the shoals of adolescence may be successfully negotiated, enabling the young adult to emerge, when the time comes, “to make a triumphal entry into social life, not entering it debilitated, isolated, or humiliated, but with head held high, sure of himself.” (Margaret Stephenson)

Conclusion: The Adult and Peace...

Montessori felt that our modern age, our time, represented a time of crisis...a period of passage from one era to another comparable only to the opening of a new biological or geological period in which new conditions of life would be realized which have never existed before. Today, new knowledge in the fields of physics, microbiology, chemistry and genetics is available to anyone who wants to “google” the internet. We talk of the “information age,” and information, per se, is amoral. Montessori warned us.....

“If the sidereal forces are used blindly by men...in view of destroying one another, the attempt will speedily be successful in doing so, because the forces at man’s disposal are infinite and accessible to all.”

The natural boundaries of mountains, deserts and seas no longer limit man, “now that he can fly over them,” she wrote. In this new age, laws and treaties will not be enough; the limits will have to come from within.

For this, we desperately need a fundamental change in education: one which can contribute to the formation of man and his personality, for “the child who has never learned to act alone, to direct his own actions, to govern his own will, grows into an adult who is easily led and must always lean upon others.

Dr. Montessori, living through a period of great war, tyranny, and oppression, grappled with fundamental questions of man and society, and asked herself how education might best enhance our hopes for a world of peace.

She saw the possibility of a new kind of education: an education which would begin at birth: an education which, rather than merely helping children adapt to what presently exists, rather than helping them accommodate, would allow for the formation of individuals who are adaptive to human concerns, individuals with the critical insight and awareness necessary to penetrate ideology and ensure a more responsive culture. She understood that peace could not be brought about by marches or taught through a curriculum. She understood that a “New Age” would not emerge from meditation or peak experiences. A peaceful society cannot be built on a foundation that does not seek to integrate body, mind, and spirit....

What the world needs—and soon—is WHOLE men and women: not mutilated persons, but individuals who can work with their hands, their heads, and their hearts. I have seen some of these WHOLE men and women that Montessori spoke of – and they are the same children who grew up in our schools and are now adults.

Today’s children can show us the way, just as they did for Maria Montessori 100 years ago. Politics and peace talks may provide a cessation of war but they cannot create peace. Over and over we realize that we cannot change the adult. Peace will emerge only when there is remote preparation. This must be the work of education. Education cannot simply give facts and pass on formal knowledge. It must be understood as the help we can give for the “normal development of the new man.” To learn how to assist “the constructive work that the human soul is called to do, and to bring to fruition a work of formation which brings out the immense potentialities with which (all) children...are endowed.” (*The Absorbent Mind*, p. 17)—THIS is the study, the science of peace Montessori asks us to create.

Today on this joyous celebration of the Montessori Centenary let us vow together to consciously pursue this study, this science of peace. For the children of today are still the bright new hope for mankind.

All unreferenced quotes come from unpublished lectures of Dr Maria Montessori. If you would like a fully annotated copy of this article please contact the MAF Office on info@montessori.org.au.