

MONTESSORI'S CONCEPT OF THE SPIRITUAL EMBRYO

by Patricia F. Hilson, May 1982

The Spiritual Embryo

Montessori developed the concept of the spiritual embryo at the turn of the century. She suggested that man develops through two successive embryonic stages – the first (physical embryo) in the prenatal period from conception to birth and the second during the period from birth to around three years. She called this second stage 'the spiritual embryo' and regarded it as the most significant phase in the life of the child.

Montessori believed that observations and understanding of this phase were of key importance to education and could lead the way to a more profound understanding of mankind – for in the small child is seen an all-encompassing attraction to the environment and the people in it (she referred to this natural attraction as love) and, above all, a tendency to want to belong to the group.

The child develops in the security and protection of the family. It is through the family that he adapts to his culture to become as Montessori said, "...not just a man, but a man of his race."

This means that it is through the family that all the customs, behaviour, morality and religion of his cultural group are transmitted to the child. Unfortunately, this task, which is the task of the parents, is becoming increasingly difficult for parents now seem to be less secure in their own beliefs and ideas. What was right when they were growing up seems to be less relevant in today's circumstances. Confused by the media message of materialism and competition, parents increasingly are finding it difficult to set standards of behaviour and morality that were in their day and age more clearly spelt out and more generally accepted.

Coupled with this is a pervasive liberal sentiment in the community which says that a parent's views (moral, ethical and religious) should not be imposed on an immature child, but suggests that the child should be free to make a rational decision as to what beliefs, if any, he will adopt when he feels ready. This careless approach to the question of beliefs permeates other areas of responsibility with regard to cultural transmission.

As our culture becomes increasingly materialistic, old virtues take on new meanings. Honesty is the best policy because it pays. Love your neighbours because they might reciprocate. [David Kahn (p. 1)]

And, more destructive than these, "If it feels good, do it." [newspaper excerpt]

How foolish is this abdication of parental responsibility. During the early stage of birth to three years the child absorbs his environment totally. Whether the message is confused and inconsistent or whether it is clear and confident, whether it is right or wrong, the child in these early years will absorb it totally. He will not absorb the bad and reorder it to make it good for he does not have that capacity. Neither has he the capacity to reject. The absorption is total. The import of this for parents is profound.

In the midst of these facts of social disharmony it is true that psychological research into man's mental problems has never been more widespread. It has been shown clearly that for man to maintain a state of psychological and social equilibrium, some basic common needs must be satisfied. These needs are best met in a secure environment where love and respect give support to the individual's feelings of self-worth and where harmonious relationships promote sound

psychological development. But these human attributes are not automatically bestowed nor acquired with the attainment of adulthood – their foundations are laid in childhood.

Although we do not fully understand the specific contributions of nature and nurture to their formation, it has been shown that they are best fostered in a loving environment within the structure of the family in the early years.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that the most critical time for the establishment of the foundation of these characteristics occurs in the early years between birth and three. It is appropriate then that this be recognized as an embryonic period.

The Physical Embryo

The analogy of the spiritual embryo is an interesting one and worthy of examination.

Observations of the physical embryo show that life begins in a fertilized cell of the body. This cell has within it potential for development – a development which takes place according to a predetermined pattern. Nourishment for the developing foetus is provided through the placenta and, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, the nourishment will effect the outcome of growth for it is through the placenta that the foetus absorbs totally and without discrimination what come to it – for better or for worse. In this sense the finalistic goal of life can be deviated by causes from the outside environment.

Surrounded by the warm environment of the amniotic sac, the foetus has intrinsic potential for development. The uterine environment, however, will determine in large part the constitutional health (or otherwise) of the foetus. Through this placental link the developing cell is potentially vulnerable – not only to the effects of maternal disease but also to deprivation of the nourishment so necessary for sound physical growth.

The Spiritual Embryo

Parallels with the concept of the spiritual embryo are highly relevant.

As with the germinal cell which did not contain a complete child but only the potentialities for development, so now the child is born with no fixed voluntary behaviour (having only instinctual, involuntary behaviours, i.e. suckling, breathing, etc), no psychic organs, but only the potentialities for their development. Montessori (1976, p. 76) refers to these potentialities as nebulae:

Growth and psychic development are therefore guided by: the absorbent mind, the nebulae and the sensitive periods, with their respective mechanisms. It is these that are hereditary and characteristic of the human species. Just as hormones act as inner influences on physical growth, so the absorbent mind, the nebulae and the sensitive periods direct the growth and development of the spiritual embryo.

Nourishment for the developing child is now provided through the senses, which take in everything from the environment without discrimination or selection, in the same way as the foetus received nourishment in the womb.

As the foetus was protected by the amniotic sac, so now the child should be protected by the close environment of the family of which the mother is the principal agent. Sensory stimulation provided by the family can again be considered in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Depreciation can be observed on two levels. Quantitatively, sensory deprivation has been seen to be responsible for both physical stunting of the body and psychic stunting of the personality. Research on institutionalized children has highlighted severe effects of environmental deprivation resulting in

personality dysfunction in the developing child. Even in a so-called normal environment, low levels of sensory stimulation have been linked with poor social adjustment and retarded language development. [Tizzard and Joseph (1970)]

The effects of qualitative sensory deprivation are usually less obvious and frequently overlooked. Modelling is a principal medium through which the child absorbs language customs, behaviour and morality. This is his 'spiritual territory'. [Montessori (1966)] It provides the components which will largely determine spiritual development.

As with the physical embryo, where the fertilized egg passes through a 'formative period' guided by hormonal and chemical activity, so too now the spiritual embryo passes through various stages in its formative development guided by 'inner sensitivities' [Montessori (1955 p. 82)] and assisted by a very special type of mind referred to by Montessori as 'the absorbent mind'. Montessori says (1948 p.101):

The child is specially favoured. He observes everything in sight, and experience shows that he absorbs it all equally...He does not absorb only by the mechanical camera of his eye, but a kind of psychochemical reaction is produced in him, so that these impressions become an integral part of his personality.

The Absorbent Mind

So, while the child is interacting on a sensory level and absorbing from the environment, he is aided by this most powerful tool – the absorbent mind, an intelligence unlike that of the adult, an intelligence that works on an unconscious level, a mind

...which received all, does not judge, does not refuse, does not react. It absorbs everything and incarnates it into the coming man...to achieve equality with other men and to adapt himself to live with them...The Absorbent Mind welcomes everything, puts its hope in everything, accepts poverty equally with wealth, adopts any religion and the prejudices and habits of its countrymen, incarnating all in itself. This is the child. [Montessori, 1948 (p.292)]

Freedom

As the first embryonic life of the child is necessary for physical development, so now the infant must complete a second embryonic stage of psychological development. Montessori says [1948, (p.61)]:

This postnatal work is a constructive activity which is carried on in what may be called the 'formative period' and makes the baby into a kind of spiritual embryo.

This period of psychological development has two purposes: firstly, to develop these psychic characteristics – intellect, will, emotions, fantasy, imagination and language; and, secondly, to permit adaptation "to the conditions of the world about him". [Montessori, 1948 (p.61)]

Montessori uses the term 'Spiritual' because it is during this time that the child internalizes at a subconscious level – the level of the absorbent mind – all the elements of his spiritual territory which constitute the total environment of any social group. Montessori says [1948 (p. 65,66)]:

...the true function of infancy is an adaptive one; to construct a model of behaviour which renders him free to act in the world about him and to influence it.

This quotation highlights the importance of freedom in the child's development; that is, freedom to allow the natural laws of development to proceed. Just as in the physical embryo – where biological development occurred according to natural laws, relatively free from outside causes and in large part protected from negative influences – so also in the spiritual embryo, Montessori believed that the child required freedom.

If he has been given the key to his own personality and is governed by his own laws of development, he is in possession of very sensitive and unique powers which can only come forth through freedom. [Polk Lillard, 1972 (Chap 9, p. 30)]

Language

Perhaps one of the most powerful and universal examples of the child's acquisition of culture is the way he learns his language.

This achievement is made possible by the power of the inner sensitivities which direct his development and by the power of the absorbent mind.

Much research has taken place recently in the area of environmental effects on language acquisition.

Bernstein (1961) in his paper "Social Class and Linguistic Development" theorized that whatever cultural group the child was born into (e.g., within the framework of the English language), the child would learn his language according to the limitations and possibilities offered by that environment. So, all the elements/idiosyncrasies of his particular group will be transmitted through him. This exposure will come principally through the family with the mother as its principal agent. [Olim, Hess, Shipman, 1967]

He will absorb language at the level of the language environment he experiences. This means that should the language be grammatically simple with poor syntactical form, then this is the type of language he will acquire. [Bernstein, 1961]

The effects are not restricted to language. The language structure internalized by the child will have subsequent effect on his style of thinking. If the structure is imprecise and vague, then these limitations will be reflected in the child's ability to verbalize and conceptualize. [Bernstein, 1961]

Language is only one element of the child's psychic acquisitions. Examination of it can provide a useful parallel when considering acquisition of other elements of the child's spiritual territory, i.e., behaviour, customs, religion and morality.

There is an important difference however from the observer's point of view. With language acquisition, the child is usually able to provide some form of output through speech to give some evidence that he has received and processed inputs from his cultural environment. Outputs related to customs, religion and morality are frequently not obvious at this stage, and very often this lack of visible output is mistakenly taken to suggest that the child is not culturally aware and is impervious to the subtleties of adult culture.

Generalizing from the experience of language acquisition into other cultural areas, it is reasonable to assume that similar developments do take place and that comparable problems can be expected if an inadequate environment for cultural (spiritual) acquisition is experienced.

What message does this have for adults – parents and caregivers? Consider again the elements of embryonic life – a phase of growth within a more or less protected environment during which intrinsic potentialities of the foetus can develop: where the nature of the environment and nourishment to the foetus via the placenta have a significant bearing on the quality of that development; and, where the foetus absorbs everything that flows to it via the placenta without discrimination.

Translating that analogy to the ‘spiritual embryo’ of the young child, in the first instance we should be aware of the need to construct a protective environment for him. Montessori believed this should start at birth or even before. For that reason, the maxim of the Training School for Montessori Assistants to Infancy in Rome is: “Let us learn to know our children even before they are born.” [Mario M. Montessori, 1960]

These assistants begin their association with mothers at about 4 or 5 months before the birth. They assist the other at both the physical and psychological levels and are present at the birth.

After the birth of the child, the Montessori Assistant remains with him or her for a period ranging from two weeks to one month, observing him hour by hour, studying the behaviour and putting down in a diary the reactions, the characteristics, the likes and dislikes and the moods of the child. [Mario M. Montessori, 1960 (p.1)]

This valuable assistance at this critical time gives support to the bonding process which must take place if the infant is to develop normally. The bond relationship for the child is considered to be the source of his social development and is said to form the basis and determine the quality of all future relationships. [Rutter, 1980]

There is wide variation, however, in the ability of newborns to interact with the mother. With the hold given by the Montessori Assistants “even the most unruly newborn begins to eat regularly and sleep quietly with a feeling that the world which surrounds him is full of understanding and affection.” [Mario M. Montessori, 1960 (p.1)] The “locking together” process referred to by Klaus and Kennell (1976) is assured. The bonding process and the introduction of order therefore start to form the protective cocoon within which the ‘spiritual embryo’ will develop.

This protective environment must recognize and be responsive to the growth and development of the child over the embryonic period. As an example, if we examine the environment of the child in these early years, all too often we see a home designed to meet adult needs. Usually everything is arranged to serve the needs of the adult but not always those of the child. The ideal home environment should reflect careful recognition of the child’s needs analogous to the recognition given to the needs of the physical embryo.

Further, we should consider very carefully the nourishment of the spiritual embryo via his senses. He needs a stimulating environment – quantitatively and qualitatively rich in sensory experience.

By way of example, some suggestions for consideration are:

1. The child needs to be close to mother and father but particularly close to mother or caregiver in the early years in a loving environment;
2. The child should not be isolated but should enjoy close proximity to others in the family;
3. The child needs to be talked to. It is only through exposure to the language that the child will absorb his language. Nursery rhymes and songs are valuable at this stage;

4. The child needs to see what is going on. Children at a very young age experience boredom. This boredom will often be a cause of crying which will cease when the baby is moved; and
5. The child should not be kept for long periods in his crib. Activity is essential. Exploration and discovery help the child come to terms with his environment.

Summary

In the complex dimension which involves transmission of the culture – language, attitudes, values, ethics and morality – reference has been made to the profound responsibility resting on parents and caregivers. It is not enough that the child simply grows up in a family. The quality of all that he absorbs during this period is of fundamental importance for his later development.

Referring again to the physical embryo, it was believed, until quite recently, that the foetus, with few exceptions, was protected within the amniotic sac. Alas, the thalidomide case abruptly changed that view. A drug that was meant to assist the mother was found to cause terrible deformities in the unborn child. Recent research has revealed the potential for harmful effects of mothers' consumption of alcoholic drink on the foetus, of cigarette smoking, of certain drugs and even of stress. The natural protection of the foetus is therefore less than complete. Considerable care is necessary on the part of both mother and doctor to avoid exposing the foetus to undue risk.

While a great deal of progress has been made on the level of research into the physical embryo, unfortunately, we are not so well served with research regarding external threats to the 'spiritual embryo', but they are none the less real and dangerous. Television is but one instance of a potential hazard to the security of the child's life.

The negative impact of the social and institutional disarray which surrounds the modern family is usually reviewed in adult terms. The influence of this external environment on the developing child is as yet insufficiently understood but is undoubtedly negative.

The concept of the Spiritual Embryo is yet another valuable contribution of Maria Montessori which gives a new dimension to our understanding and appreciation of the nature and needs of the developing child. It underlines the formidable responsibility assumed by the parent or caregiver – requiring careful reconsideration of values, standards and priorities in order that the child be given proper protection, nourishment and support during this second embryonic stage.

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