

The Secret of Childhood by Maria Montessori – Book Review

In the mind of the child we may perhaps find the key to progress, and, who knows, the beginning of a new civilization (Montessori, 1966:3)

Montessori surveys psychoanalysis and notes that even though it was not very effective in healing the sick, it nevertheless gave us a window into the subconscious; it helped us to glean into the evolution of a child's soul, it's 'development through conflict with its environment, to learn the dramatic or tragic secrets of the struggles through which the soul of man has remained disfigured and darkened' (1966:6). One of the most impressive findings Montessori notes is that 'psychosis¹ may originate in the distant age of infancy...' (ibid). Montessori reckoned that the suffering of the infants originated from the repression of spontaneous activity of the child by the adult; the problem being that the adults – whose mistaken attitudes are buried in the subconscious - try to master the child without understanding him – 'If the adult, through a fatal misunderstanding, instead of helping the child to do things for himself, substitutes himself for the child, then that adult becomes the blindest and most powerful obstacle to the development of the child's psychic life' (Montessori, 1966:208)

Instead of psychoanalysis which was used for adults, she advises observing children to understand them better. Montessori calls for the 'modification of the adult' if the latter is going to make any meaningful changes in the life of children; the strong suggestions to retrain our thinking about what we know and how we should educate children is apt in the new discoveries that Montessori made through observing children over many years.

¹ Psychosis is a serious mental disorder characterized by thinking and emotions that are so impaired, that they indicate that the person experiencing them has lost contact with reality <http://www.healthline.com/health/psychosis> accessed August 16, 2015

On the Spiritual Embryo Montessori brings our attention to the fact that a new born child has an instinctive spiritual or psychic nature about him and has certain expectations – freedom being one – which he requires for normal growth and must be nurtured by those around him, a realization that demands education to begin at birth². Montessori places greater emphasis on the right setting, ‘an open environment... one that is suitable to his age, a child’s psychic life should develop naturally and reveal its inner secret.’ (Montessori, 1966:110). During this period from birth to 3, also termed the Sensitive Period, the child experiences his external world intensely and is accumulating a lot of information from the environment to build up his reason, understanding and memory. It is also in this time period, the first two years in particular³, that Montessori noticed the need for order in a child’s life and the sense of foundation it brings –

...nature endows a child with a sensitiveness to order. It is a kind of inner sense that distinguishes the relationships between various objects rather than the objects themselves...it thus makes a whole of an environment in which the several parts are mutually dependent...when a person is oriented in such an environment, he can direct his activity to the attainment of specific goals...such an environment provides the foundation for an integrated life (Montessori, 53)

Montessori classrooms are highly organized and that helps students to orient themselves much quicker and also, to utilize the materials much more efficiently since they know where the various interconnecting materials are, a point well expressed by Montessori –

Order consists in recognizing the place for each object in relation to its environment and in remembering where each thing should be. This implies that one is able to orient one's self within one's environment and to dominate it in all its details (53)

² ‘Special care should be shown for the psychic life of the newborn child. If it already has such a life at birth, how much greater will this be as it grows older? If we understand by ‘education’ a child’s psychic rather than its intellectual development, we may truly say, as it is said today, that a child’s education should begin at birth’ (Montessori, 1966:29)

³ ‘A child's sensitiveness to order may be noticed even in the first few months of his existence. A positive manifestation of it may be seen in the enthusiasm and joy which children demonstrate at seeing things in their proper places’ (Montessori, 49)

Movement is yet another topic seriously discussed in the book. Montessori corrects the wrong perception of infants as weak and notes that they have been moving since they were born –

A newborn baby shows the strength of its muscles in the way it moves its limbs. Sucking and swallowing are complex operations involving a great deal of coordination of the muscles, and yet infants at birth, like other animals, can perform these action (1966:32)

What is more interesting is how she observes the connection between movement and the will – that without the muscles to move the will would be immobilized not just in humans but all other sorts of creatures as well - ‘a complex of voluntary muscles... are moved by the will...without these muscles, so intimately connected with man’s psychic life, the will could do nothing’ (1966:32). This connection of movement, the spirit and the will is also articulated by Montessori in the Absorbent Mind

The little child’s first movements were instinctive. Now, he acts consciously and voluntarily, and with this comes an awakening of his spirit.... Conscious will is a power which develops with use and activity. We must aim at cultivating the will.... Its development is a slow process that evolves through a continuous activity in relationship with the environment (Montessori, 1949: 231)

In the Secret of Childhood she mentions use of hands by children for touching, feeling and exploring and the tongue for communicating as most connected to intelligence. The use of his hands will eventually be how the child builds himself through work –

Man builds himself through working, working with his hands, but using his hands as the instruments of his ego, the organ of his individual mind and will, which shapes its own existence face to face with its environment. The child's instinct confirms the fact that work is an inherent tendency in human nature; it is the characteristic instinct of the human race (Montessori, 1966:195)

Yet adults, instead of celebrating hand use by the child in its many forms and their desire to talk constantly, can be found to be either stopping the child from touching things or talking; indeed

being silent in most public schools is mistaken for being busy, studious and being in 'flow' as discussed by Goleman, Gardner and others. Movement therefore is an integral part of intellectual and spiritual growth as it enables the child to not only encounter the external world but to begin to interrelate with ideas, concepts and expression of self.

We are also encouraged to see a child as involved in a creativity that matches that of adults if only different in nature; the child is 'a worker and a producer...*with* his own, a great, important, difficult work indeed - the work of producing man (himself)... done unconsciously, in abandonment to a mysterious spiritual energy, actively engaged in creation... it is indeed a creative work... perhaps the very spectacle of the creation of man, as symbolically outlined in the Bible' (Montessori, 1966:200). Seeing the child in that light forces us to give him space and freedom to unfold as what he considers work and creativity is taken into full consideration; here the idea of 'following the child' can be employed in many different ways.

The book also touches on 'normalization' when through self-discipline, intense concentration, 'a calm, serene child, attached to reality, begins to work out his elevation through work... normalization has been achieved' (Montessori, 1966:162).

In all this book exhorts adults to think differently about the child through observing and note the miracle of his unfolding; she encourages us to allow the child freedom to grow and flourish and reminds us of our sacred duty to protect and cherish the infant in our contact with him –

Care should be employed in lifting a child. This requires a certain amount of practice and skill...The manner in which we touch and move a child, and the delicacy of feeling which should inspire us at the time, makes us think of the gestures that a priest uses at the altar. His hands are purified, his motions are studied and thoughtful, and his actions take place in silence and in

darkness that is penetrated only by a light that has been softened in its passage through stained glass windows. A feeling of hope and elevation pervades the sacred place. It is in surroundings such as these that a newborn child should live (Montessori, 1966:23)

References:

Montessori, Dr. Maria, (1949). *The Absorbent Mind*. Claude A. Claremont trans. Madras, India:

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