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Theodate L. Smith

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DR. MARIA MONTESSORI AND HER HOUSES OF CHILDHOOD

By THEODATE L. SMITH

Within the last few years an experiment in elementary education has been going on in Rome which is productive of such remarkable results that it is attracting widespread interest in all educational circles. In Dr. Maria Montessori's *Case dei Bambini*, children from four to five years old read, write and do number work with a facility equal to that of children of the second and third grades, and this result has come about with no over-exertion on the part of the child and without the slightest forcing but as a process of normal development. Dr. Montessori's method is due to no fortuitous circumstances but is the result of years of scientific research and is founded on anthropological and psychological principles. The first woman to receive the degree of M. D. from the University of Rome, while acting as assistant in the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome she became interested in the education of feeble-minded children and devoted herself to the study of this problem. She made herself thoroughly familiar with the work of Seguin and with Itard's experiment with the savage of Aveyron, and investigated the Seguin method as used in the Bicêtre. As a result of her lectures on the education of the feeble-minded, given at Turin and Rome in 1898, she was appointed director of a new school, the *Scuola Magistrali Ortofrenica*, which for two years she conducted with great success. At the end of that time she re-entered the philosophical department of the University of Rome and devoted herself to the study of experimental psychology and anthropological pedagogy, continuing the work for seven years and making investigations in the schools and in the psychological laboratories of Italy. In 1906 an opportunity for trying upon normal children the methods worked out upon the feeble-minded was offered to her through Edoardo Talamo, the head of a real estate society which was part of a scheme for social betterment in Rome. In the group of tenement-houses managed by this association, between January, 1907, and 1908, four schools for children of these tenements were established. For these home schools the following rules were announced:

"Attention must be paid to the health and the physical and moral development of the children by means of lessons and exercises adapted to their age.

"There will be in charge of each *Casa dei Bambini* a directress, a physician, and a caretaker. All children in the block between the ages of three and seven years have the right of admission to the *Casa dei Bambini*.

"The parents of children attending the *Casa dei Bambini* pay no contribution whatever, but they assume these imperative obligations: A. To send at a specified hour their children to the schoolroom, clean in person and clothing, and with a suitable pinafore. B. To show the greatest respect and deference towards the directress and all other persons connected with the *Casa dei Bambini*, and to coöperate with the directress in the work of educating their children. At least once a week mothers will be able to speak with the directress, reporting observations on their own children in their home life, and receiving from the directress notes and suggestions for the welfare of the children.

"There will be expelled from the *Casa dei Bambini*, (a) those who present themselves in an unwashed and slovenly condition (b) those who show themselves not amenable to discipline, and (c) those whose parents fail in respect to those placed in charge of the *Casa dei Bambini*, or in any way threaten to destroy by bad conduct the educational work which is the aim of the institution."

As a further incitement to the keeping of these rules, the report from the *Casa dei Bambini* was to be taken into consideration in the yearly award of prizes offered by the society for the best-kept tenement. The greatest difficulty in carrying out the experiment was naturally in obtaining teachers or directresses, as they are called, who were both adapted by nature and sufficiently trained in the principles of Dr. Montessori's method to conduct the work successfully. This will probably always be one of the chief difficulties in the successful application of the method, but the work has passed beyond its beginnings, as part of a sociological experiment, to private schools for children of the more fortunate classes, and is beginning to be introduced into public school systems not only in Italy but in other European countries. In Switzerland there are now seventy schools conducted by Dr. Montessori's method.

The fundamental principles which distinguished Dr. Montessori's method are the complete liberty of the child in its spontaneous manifestations and the utilization of every atom of its natural energy. Dr. Montessori calls a child dis-

ciplined who is master of himself and therefore able to dispose of or control himself whenever he needs to follow a rule of life. The liberty of the child must have as its limit only the collective interest. He must then be hindered from any acts offensive or harmful to others. All else that he does must not only be permitted but observed by the teacher, and the teacher must have not only the capacity but the interest to observe this natural development. She must avoid rigorously the repression of spontaneous acts and the imposition of work at the will of another. To interfere with this spontaneity is, in Dr. Montessori's view, perhaps to repress the very essential of life itself. The aim of discipline is to train to activity, to work, for the welfare of self and of others. To this end the development of independence in the child is necessary. So long as he is served by others and dependent upon them, dressed and undressed, fed, and so forth, he is not free. But if properly trained he ought to be able to do these things for himself by the time he is three years old. It is, of course, far easier to feed and to dress a child than it is to teach him to do it for himself, but the first is the work of a servant and the latter of an educator.

In Dr. Montessori's system rewards and punishments are banished. Reward comes in the child's own sense of mastery. Failure is a mere negation, to be taken as a sign that the child is not yet ready for that particular exercise. The teaching is almost entirely individual and the three fundamental rules for lessons are that they shall be brief, simple and objective. No superfluous words must be used in giving the lesson since they tend to confuse the child and to distract his attention from the main point, and the teacher must not insist on the repetition of a lesson against the child's inclination, and she must not let the child know that he has failed or has not understood.

If one visits one of Dr. Montessori's schools, the children all seem to be occupied in interesting play. Some are lying on the floor playing with blocks or strips of wood painted in different colors. Some are playing blind-fold games, finding out by the aid of their fingers alone the shapes and sizes of objects and different textures of silk, satin, wool or linen. One child who was absorbed in writing on the blackboard did not even notice my entrance into the room. She was writing in large vertical script and forming the letters beautifully, and in answer to my question as to how long she had been writing, I learned that she had begun the day before. Occasionally some child called the teacher when he had finished his game and received either approval or a suggestion

that perhaps he would like to do something else. But the interest and the attention of the children is never interfered with. If a child wishes to spend the entire school period of two hours in doing one thing he is allowed to do so on the principle that the spontaneous attention is a fundamental educative principle which must not be interfered with. In spite of the fact that this particular school in the convent on the Via Guisti draws its children from an exceedingly poor section in Rome, their appearance was neat, and although no discipline was apparent, the schoolroom was in the truest sense controlled and orderly.

The first item in the order of the day's exercises when the children arrive at nine o'clock (for in this particular school the children are cared for from nine until half past five, although only two hours or at most two hours and a half are devoted to school work), is a visit to the toilet rooms, where they are taught to wash their hands and their faces, necks and ears, and to put on their pinafores, which they do for themselves or by helping each other. Then comes a tour of inspection of the schoolroom to see that everything is in perfect order, to detect if there is any dust left in corners or if anything is out of place, that any deficiencies in this line may be remedied by the children themselves. There is also play in the garden until ten o'clock. As the pedagogical method has been developed from those used with feeble-minded children, many of the things which the younger children are doing are familiar to those who have seen the instruction in the schools for defectives. Various items in the way of motor-training, buttoning and unbuttoning, tying and untying, hooking and unhooking, lacing, and so forth, are all a part of the lessons of the little ones. But they are lessons which the child works out for himself. He is allowed the pleasure and the triumph of finding out how to do things himself. To a certain extent imitation comes in, since he sees the other children doing these things. There is also a regular system of sense training. In this sense training some of the materials used are the regulation kindergarten gifts. In other cases, they are materials devised by Dr. Montessori or everyday objects which are adapted to the purpose, for Dr. Montessori's fundamental principle when she began her work was to study all systems but to be bound by none. She kept as her fundamental principle Wundt's saying that all methods of experimental psychology are reducible to one, that of controlled observation, and her system has been worked out by this method of individual observation of the child and consists in giving it the environment adapted to individual normal

growth. The touch and muscle-sense, which seem to have fallen into disuse in the teaching of normal children, Dr. Montessori has re-introduced from her experience in the training of defective children, and in the plays and lessons constant use is made of the principle of establishing the associations between visual, muscular, and tactile, and auditory sensations. For example, in the sight training, the children have a set of cubes graded from large to small. They are given these to pile up in the graduated order. They are taught to run their fingers along the outlines and thus connect the tactile, muscular and visual sensations. Then they have blind-fold games, in which the blocks are piled wholly by the sense of touch, the children finding a great delight in discovering when the bandage is taken from their eyes that they have "seen with their fingers."

In her first school, Dr. Montessori found that her children from three and a half to four and a half years old were already fairly expert in the preliminary training. They could dress and undress themselves, that is, they had learned to apply practically their various exercises in buttoning, unbuttoning, lacing, tying, etc.; they had learned to be neat in person, they had had considerable sense training, and they were eager for something more, in fact they clamored to be taught to read and write, and the experiment was tried with surprising results. The writing came first. Dr. Montessori had learned by her experience with feeble-minded children that in the process of learning to write the mechanism of muscular control and holding the pen should precede the mental effort of learning to write. The child should not be set to the task of learning to manage a pen and produce certain forms at the same time. The didactic materials for training the muscular mechanism and for holding and managing instruments of writing are, for the first step, either solid or outline forms of triangles, squares and other geometrical figures, made of metal, cardboard or wood. The child traces the outline of these and is then given a colored pencil of large size, to fill them in. No directions as to manner of holding the pencil or of making the marks are given to the child. His movements are left free and unconstrained. At first, naturally, the filling is irregular, often exceeding the outline or failing to touch it at every point, but the children enjoy playing with these colored forms and gradually the strokes become even and the space is accurately filled in. When this happens, the child is ready for the next step but a week is usually allowed to elapse before it is taken. Script letters of large size cut from fine emery paper are pasted upon

squares of cardboard, and the alphabets thus formed are placed in a case, there being four copies of each letter, and the letter is also painted at the bottom of the compartment to assist in the resorting. The child is given a letter, a vowel first, and told to touch it. Being already expert in this sort of exercise, he usually does it correctly, but if need be the teacher takes his hand and directs the first and middle finger properly about the form of the letter and at the same time the teacher says, "This is *a*," giving, however, the phonic sound, not the name of the letter, thus associating the visual and the tactile and muscular sense with the phonic sound. The child is usually interested in this and repeats it by himself, in some cases many times. The next step is to teach the child to recognize the letter when he hears the sound corresponding to it, so the teacher says to him, "Give me *a*" or whatever the letter is. And the third step, after the letter has been lying on the table for some minutes, is to test the memory and recognition, and the teacher asks the child, "What is this?" the child, of course, being expected to give the phonic sound of the letter. The vowels are usually taught first and the consonants second but there is no established order, as often the interest of the child in certain words or letters will determine the progress. In giving the consonants the teacher gives the sound of the letter several times, for instance, *m, m, m*; she then combines it with vowels which the child knows, saying *ma, me, mo*, but always finishing with the sound of the consonant, *m, m, m*, and having the child repeat this after her. Besides the individual letters, words are given in the same way. For instance, the word *mano*. The teacher says to the child, "Give me *m*," and so on with the other letters, giving the phonic sound to each letter, and finally pronouncing the word *mano*, the child always tracing the word with the fingers. This they often do blind-folded and a very common request in the school-room to the teacher is "Please blind-fold me," or "Please put the bandage on." Some day when the child has become familiar with the vowels and a part of the consonants, for it is not considered always necessary that the entire alphabet should be learned before he begins to write, he is given a piece of chalk, and having potentially learned to write without ever having had an instrument of writing in his hands, he suddenly finds himself in possession of a new power and thinks he has grown old enough to write. For a few days this acquisition becomes an absorbing occupation. When I marvelled at the remarkable accuracy and evenness in the formation of the letters I asked the teacher if the children were given no directions as to even-

ness of stroke. Her answer was, "They teach themselves." No child is ever told that a letter is faulty but the practice in tracing the sandpaper letters with the fingers is kept up long after the children are able to write and in fact they write more by muscular sense than by sight, and if a child is in doubt as to the next letter that she wants to write, instead of looking at the letter, she runs her fingers over the cardboard model, so that the muscular training is continued.

In learning to write, the child has taken all but one step in learning to read. He knows the letters by sight and the sounds which correspond to them. He has learned in composing words to associate those combinations of symbols and sounds with the word and the object or action for which it stands. But he has no practice in translating visual symbols into their meanings. In Dr. Montessori's reading lessons there is no particular effort made to begin with easy words. That is not necessary, for the child already knows how to read the words as composed by their sounds as he himself has put them together. The remaining step in learning to read that is to silently interpret the visual symbols, is made a game. A number of cards containing the names of objects or actions, in script, are placed in a box. The objects used are usually playthings. The children are allowed to choose one. The child must read the word mentally, that is, without pronouncing it aloud, and keep it a secret from the others. Then when he gives it correctly he gets the object to play with. And as in all the plays and games use is made of the spirit of co-operation. Children are included in the game who do not yet know how to read, and some child who has already learned, chooses for the little one, who is not yet so far advanced, and gets the desired plaything for him. This particular game is exceedingly popular and can be greatly varied. Names of the children, of objects, of actions, which the children are permitted to execute, are all used. And the children continue to carry on this game in their recreation hours as well as in the school period, spontaneously. In passing from words to phrases and sentences the children are given cards on which directions or request for some action is written, no particular effort being made to express these in any terms simpler than would be used in ordinary conversation. For example, "Close the window-shutters, open the door and then wait a moment and put them as they were," and the child carries out the directions.

Teaching of number and beginnings of arithmetic are also taught in Dr. Montessori's schools. The children three years old usually can count as far as three when they first come

to the school. In teaching them to count, the objects about them are used. For instance, it is said to the child, "There are two buttons lacking on your pinafore," or "Three more plates are needed on the table," or playthings are used as objects of numeration; in general, things at hand rather than any special apparatus. The first definite lessons are in changing money. Actual money is used, care being taken for hygienic reasons to procure new pieces. The children first learn the names and values of the coins and then match the larger pieces with the number of smaller pieces required for the equivalent. As further material for teaching, a set of rectangular bars already used in sense training is utilized, the longest of these being a meter and the shortest a decimeter in length and all divided into lengths of a decimeter, painted alternately red and blue. These are used as aids in counting, and in their different arrangements, for the simple processes of addition and substraction. Little sets of colored spindles, and colored counters and rods, have also proved attractive material. There are also used two boards placed at right angles, one placed horizontally on the desk and the other remaining vertical, the horizontal one being divided by strips into five compartments, in which objects may be placed, and large figures are placed in the vertical series, so that a number of objects can be placed in the corresponding compartments of the horizontal board. Various games and exercises are played with this. Froebel's cubes and the discs used in playing quoits or any other convenient material is used. The teaching of zero naturally presents more difficulties than the teaching of the digits. A sample lesson on the zero is the following: A group of children stand around the teacher, who says, "Take zero steps." There is an immediate impulse to movement and the teacher says, "But zero is nothing." A second trial and the children stand still and laugh. Then the teacher tries again, "Come and give me zero kisses." Again the children laugh but stand still in their places. And so the game goes on, varied with the digits, a lesson in inhibition and self-control as well as arithmetic being skillfully introduced into the teaching. Another play which involves a lesson in self-control as well as arithmetic is a game in which the children choose from a box on the teacher's desk a folded paper containing a number, which they are to take to their places without showing anyone, keeping it quite secret, and having read it and after its verification by the teacher, they may take the number of objects or playthings from the desk corresponding to the number on the paper. There is generally, at first, a tendency to take a larger number than that

called for. But here again the approval of the teacher as to the correct choice becomes a restraining influence. They are at liberty to take more than the number but the exact number is the thing which wins the teacher's approval. Here, again, the child with the zero has a lesson in self-control for she is apt to show disappointment in her expression but it is a part of the game to keep it quite secret, so she, too, comes to learn the value of absolute correctness and in the end to consider it just as much fun to get the zero and not let anybody know it, as to draw the nine. There are many other lessons or plays in this school which are not to be found in ordinary schools. The game of silence, for instance, is one which the children not only enjoy, but as they grow more perfect in the game they learn many things about what makes a sound, as for example, their own breathing, other movements. They learn to notice the ticking of the clock and the many little noises which, as a rule, do not come into consciousness and as a means of control the game of silence is often very effective.

It will be noted that refractory children who are not amenable to discipline are dismissed from the *Casa dei Bambini*, but a question as to the actual number of refractory pupils was met with a smile. They occur but rarely and in Dr. Montessori's view, a naughty child is a sick child and to be treated accordingly. In actual practice, a child who does not naturally fall into the ways of the school is simply given a little chair and table with playthings apart from the others and especial tenderness shown him because he is sick and cannot take part in the common life. Suggestion and the natural impulse to imitation are the mental therapeutics employed, but a physician forms a part of the regular staff of every school and the children receive any needful medical treatment.

Taken in its entirety, Dr. Montessori's system involves physical as well as mental development and in her schools simple apparatus adapted to the needs of the children and exercises both for development and grace of movement are given. She lays stress, too, on diet and in the philanthropic schools where the children are given at least their noon meal, this can be to some extent carried out, for it is the development of the whole child that Dr. Montessori seeks. As yet Dr. Montessori has not carried out her method experimentally beyond the kindergarten age, that is, three to seven years, but she looks forward to doing so. But even in its present stage of development her system of training would do away with certainly the first two grades of the ordinary school system.

Within recent years we have had in Germany and the United States published reports of children who according to our usual estimate are mental prodigies, who like Dr. Sidis' son or the children of Dr. Berle and Professor Wiener of Harvard are prepared for and do enter college at ages varying from 11 to 14 years. It is claimed by the parents of these children that their remarkable proficiency is due not to special natural endowments but to methods of training. And it is interesting to note that these methods of training, though never formulated into a system and differing somewhat among themselves, and having the emphasis laid on different factors, have nevertheless certain principles in common, and these agree with those laid down by Dr. Montessori: the conservation of the natural energy, of natural interests, early training in self-reliance, in habits of attention and quick, correct thinking, and this without forcing. Dr. Sidis emphasizes suggestion more than the others, but he, too, declares that the chief aim in education is to train the child to make "any habitual and profitable use of his hidden energies."

In these days of keen competition in professional and business life when more and more specialized training is required, the question of the conservation and utilization of natural energy becomes of great import. We have had critics in plenty of our school systems and their lamentable deficiencies, and endless discussions as to where time might be saved, but of constructive work of demonstrated efficiency, Dr. Montessori's schools furnish a challenging example.

A detailed exposition of her method has been given by Dr. Montessori in her *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica Applicato all' Educazione Infantile nelle Case dei Bambini*, published in 1909, (*Città di Castello, Tipografica della casa editrice S. Lapi*), and for those who wish to make a scientific study, her "Antropologia Pedagogica," published in 1910, will also be of interest. A German translation of the former work is already in progress. The only notices of her work which have as yet appeared in English are articles in the May and December McClure's of the present year, which attracted widespread attention, and a few brief notes in educational or medical journals.¹

¹ An English translation of the *Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica*, which will be ready early in 1912, is now in preparation by the F. A. Stokes Pub. Co. of New York. Arrangements have also been made to furnish materials for the Montessori method at the House of Childhood, 603 Flatiron Building, New York City.