

## THE COMMON SENSE OF MONTESSORI PEDAGOGY

By Renilde Montessori

Since the beginning Montessori pedagogy has been appropriated, interpreted, misinterpreted, exploited, propagated, torn to shreds and the shreds magnified into systems, reconstituted, used, abused and disabused, gone into oblivion and undergone multiple renaissances. Followers have lamented, detractors have vociferated.

Throughout all the furore, year after year, decade after decade, the sane and sensible principles and practices of Montessori education have blossomed here and there, now and again - frequently partially, rarely totally - allowing a glimpse of their immense potential. Mostly, their vitality has remained dormant as wheat in the pyramids, ready to germinate in fertile ground when the time is ripe, when the moment arrives that humanity as a whole, and not in isolated pockets, becomes adequate to perceive the wholesomeness and common sense which underlies Montessori education as an aid to life.

"Help me to do it by myself" is not a marketing slogan, it is a phrase well-known amongst Montessori teachers and parents. A myriad of children have repeated it over and over again, throughout time, all over the world.

There is another phrase, equally significant, this one particularly well-known to Montessori trainers. It is voiced by students in Montessori training courses as they listen to the theory lectures and as they work with the materials and little by little enlightenment dawns: "This is all pure common sense."

A revelation indeed for those who come with little knowledge and, perhaps, a faint disquiet arising from an inchoate attraction exerted by what is still considered in many circles an esoteric mode of education.

The underlying principles of Montessori pedagogy are rooted in the common essence of our species. Maria Montessori was a scientist and as such a master in the art of observation. Observation is a cyclical phenomenon. Interest, contemplation, study, knowledge, understanding - ergo, awareness. Each point of awareness reached awakens new dimensions of interest and the cycle is repeated. The premise for interest to be awakened in the first place is that vital energy called love.

In *Education and Peace* Dr. Montessori writes:

"The child has given us striking revelations of different kinds of love, all of them directly related to work. Most of us experience the kind of love that causes us to be deeply attached to others; but this is a passing love. There is ample reason, however, to believe that the human spirit is inherently capable of another kind of love that is not transitory, that does not change, that does not die.

This love is the essential fire in man, without which he cannot live. It is not simply tender affection. I assure you that I have seen this love; I have been amazed by it; I have called it 'love for one's environment'.

The love of one's environment is the secret of all man's progress and the secret of social evolution.

Love spurs man to learn. It leads to intimate contact between the thing that is loved and the human spirit, which in turn leads to production. Labour, life, and normal human development result. Love leads human beings to study things.

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Love is the instinct that guides our actions."

In his foreword to *The Year of the Graylag Goose*, Konrad Lorenz, a great proponent of the common sense of science, writes:

"In any kind of descriptive study, whether it deals with the spatial arrangement of organic structures or with the temporal patterning of movement in a living organism, our perceptual mechanisms play an important part. Such study thus involves a genuine cognitive process that underlies all our scientific knowledge. However, since the process takes place at a subconscious level and is inaccessible to introspection, it is mistrusted by research workers who place too much faith in rational thought. They will not concede that their own hypotheses, and the questions they tackle experimentally, depend on that same perceptual process. The contempt for the descriptive sciences that is so widespread today can be attributed to this very denial of perception as the source of scientific knowledge - a denial that has been elevated almost to the status of a religion.

It is possible that perception if treated with suspicion by some scientists - those who wish to keep their research 'free of value judgments' at all costs - simply because perception is inseparable from sensations of beauty. It is a common error, but a pernicious one, to think that only what is gray and boring can be 'scientific'... A special gift for observation is virtually identical with a talent for perception, and indivisible from a hypersensitivity to the beauty of living organisms.

The harmony inhabiting all living things is what attracts our interest, and it would be utterly unscientific, if not downright dishonest, to deny this. A strictly objective description or illustration of an animal or plant departs from the truth in one crucial respect if the beauty of the living organism itself is not made evident."

Both quotations are a paean to humanity's potential for perception - for the exercise of an element common to all human beings, our senses - source of our individual intelligence and therefore of the collective intelligence of our species. Both quotations confirm the fact that life is a joyful phenomenon, and the contemplation and study of its myriad of expressions, a cause for endless delight. They also make clear the equation that perception with delight begets truth. Truth and reality are the essence of Montessori pedagogy, the common sense necessary for education to indeed be an aid to life.

William Blake has a deeply disturbing verse.

Every night and every morn  
some to misery are born.  
Every morn and every night  
some are born to sweet delight.  
Some are born to sweet delight –  
some are born to endless night.

The desolateness of this is that whether a child is born to endless night or to sweet delight depends entirely on the awareness of its progenitors and educators, on their unquestioning faith in the wholesomeness of the human spirit, the capacity to perceive the clear guidelines for its own construction inherent in every child, and the willing of each child's good.

The conclusion to be drawn from these seemingly disparate statements is that the common sense of Montessori pedagogy springs from a scientifically inseparable trinity - love, perception and awareness.

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Having said all that, let us select at random some of the concepts in Montessori pedagogy that best illustrate this common sense. The primary one is the Prepared Environment. Every living thing can only thrive in an environment which responds to its vital exigencies. Children come into the world with unlimited potential for delight and immediately commence the awe-inspiring task of self-construction. The prime matter for this great work they find in their environment. Therefore, common sense dictates that from the moment of conception environments have to be provided for every stage of the child's development, responding to the physical, intellectual and spiritual characteristics appropriate to each.

The small person comes into the world disposed to learn the arts of life following inner dictates common to all infants of our species. Hence the first environment is all important for, as is now universally accepted, it is during the first three years of life that the personality is formed. If the environment is mean and poor, the fabric of this personality will be threadbare. If it is rich and wholesome, a rich and wholesome foundation is laid for life.

Further environments will be more or less appropriate depending on the adequacy of parents and educators to perceive and be enchanted by the phenomena typical of each plane of development, on the companionableness between the adults in charge and the children in their care. This care should be mutually enriching thereby becoming a most gratifying responsibility, for there is no greater satisfaction than to learn from the children, to see the world anew through their wise and innocent eyes. They know so much that we have lost under the debris of our daily enterprises. In our schools, the environments are clearly delineated and prepared for each stage of development. Maria Montessori once said "If we have done nothing else, we have at least introduced mixed age groups in our classrooms". And it is indeed an outstanding example of common sense. Beyond the more obvious reasons why it is sensible to group the ages three by three years, such as "the little ones learn from the older children and the older ones learn by teaching the younger", "every child can work at his own pace and rhythm eliminating the bane of competition" there is the matter of order and discipline easily maintained even in very large classes with only one adult in charge. This is due to the sophisticated balance between liberty and discipline prevalent in Montessori classrooms, established at the very inception of a class. Children who have acquired the fine art of working freely in a structured environment, joyfully assume responsibility for upholding this structure, contributing to the cohesion of their social unit.

Another consequence is the comfort of remaining in one environment throughout a cycle of development. There is a perspective both toward the future and toward the past. The young children see what work awaits them, the older ones can contemplate the path they have completed and by the time they have outgrown this first environment, before the restlessness sets in of confinement in a space become too small, they go on to become the younger ones again in an environment where they can explore new dimensions of what they have made their own.

Tenderness, compassion and respect for each other's work flourish in a mixed age group, as does delight in one another's achievements, particularly in classes where children with difficulties are admitted.

If a three-to-six environment is furnished with enlightenment, the Practical Life area will be a place of beauty and, again, explicit common sense. The phrase "children learn through spontaneous, meaningful activity" is not merely a statement of fact, it contains an instruction for the choice of appropriate material. The very first consideration when creating Practical Life exercises is that they should have a clear and lucid, purpose. This will establish a habit of the intelligence - that of discriminating between what has meaning and what has not, between essential and non-essential.

The beauty of the materials is not merely to attract the children's attention, it is a courteous response to their tendency to find beauty in all that surrounds them, a tendency which springs from the passionate love of the environment that is part of their human condition. The deliberate

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creation of beauty is a call to aesthetic awareness, which, to paraphrase Maria Montessori, goes hand in hand with moral awareness.

Another kind of awareness is called forth by the fragility of the materials. The need for delicate handling is one of the many subtle means in the area of Practical Life that help the child to develop and strengthen his will - defined by Maria Montessori as the intelligent direction of movement.

Purpose, beauty and fragility are but three aspects of the Practical Life environment which most sensibly encourage the children's development.

In the Sensorial Materials there are again many silent and powerful teachers, *Il Signor Errore* [My Lord the Error] being one of the most significant from the point of view of the child's physical, intellectual and moral development. This multifaceted master is introduced with elegance through the control of error inherent in the materials. There are obvious advantages to allowing the child to become aware of his mistakes and to be allowed to correct them without interference. The materials judge not, nor do they condemn. They do not praise, nor do they punish. They mutely demonstrate that any action has consequences. This raises errors to a level of benevolence rather than allowing them to become a malevolent source of guilt and fear, a tool for evil in the hands of proud and angry educators.

By eliminating guilt, the children are freed from the vicious cycle of imposing guilt. Becoming comfortable with their mistakes, coming to realize that they are a necessary part of the process of learning, gives the children a sense of security. By eliminating insecurity, they will grow straight and free and rich, not beggars mortified by the mercy, or ridicule, or disapprobation of others.

The independence gained leads also to an awareness of one's solitude as beneficial rather than as a source of loneliness, and therefore evokes respect for the solitude of others. This makes possible an interdependent society based on the dignity of the individual rather than on the need to cling to others for security and support.

Another eminently sensible tenet in a Montessori environment is that everything within it, including the adults in charge, should be limited in scope and quantity.

To begin with the adults, one trained person and perhaps one assistant are sufficient for a Casa class of thirty-five to forty three to six-year-old children. Their mandate is very clearly delimited and their duties are well-defined. "How can the teacher get to all the children?" is the anguished cry we hear from our students. We then reply "The reason for this ratio is precisely so that the teacher will not 'get at' all the children", who are therefore free from unsolicited onslaught and can, indeed, learn at their own pace and rhythm, in their own fashion.

Many excellent side-effects accompany the limitation in scope of the materials. If they are to be keys to the environment, they must provide just so much possibility for work and exploration and no more. Once these possibilities are exhausted, the child is gently weaned and able to go forth into his world with a wealth of new awareness and capabilities. The simplicity and beauty of the purposes Maria Montessori gives for the Sensorial Materials are to be pondered: refinement of the senses, and classification of sense impressions.

Implicit in these purposes is that the child has been using his senses since he is born, and that he has accumulated an immense amount of sense impressions. The child is taught, in essence, nothing new. He is allowed to explore, enhance, enrich that which is already part of his human constructs. He becomes a scientist of his own experience.

The limitation of the materials as such is of optimum importance from the point of view of clear and simple common sense. One of the more obvious benefits is that it allows the children to develop

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respect and courtesy towards others. Another is that if a child finds the material of his choice in use, he has several options. He can observe the child who is working with the material thereby learning something new perhaps, in silence, uncritically critiquing the others' activity and planning how he will do it himself; he can choose another piece of material; or he can do nothing at all.

The freedom to do nothing at all is a privilege possibly unique to Montessori classrooms, unfortunately granted at times reluctantly and at times not at all, thereby depriving the child of the opportunity for his mind and spirit to lie fallow. Maria Montessori's concept of the centre and the periphery merit close scrutiny. Frequently children are forced into peripheral activities without taking into account that time is an essential dimension if their experience is to be centrally integrated and become fertile.

In Montessori pedagogy language is approached with unique common sense. Language is a specifically human phenomenon and a striking example of the child's self-construction, used by Maria Montessori as the most evident manifestation of the absorbent mind. When the child comes into the classroom at around three years of age, he is given in the simplest way possible the opportunity to enrich the language he has acquired during his small lifetime, and to use it intelligently, with precision and beauty, becoming aware of its properties not by being taught, but by being allowed to discover and explore them himself. If not harassed, he learns to write, and as a natural consequence he learns to read, not remembering the day he could not write or read in the same way that he does not remember that once upon a time he could not walk.

This is but a sketch, composed of a few randomly selected samples from the treasury of Montessori pedagogy. For the ultimately magnificent exponent of common sense we must look to the child himself. Children are sensible creatures, who must of necessity follow the instruction of the most sensible of teachers - nature herself. Children are disposed from birth to follow her commands with joyful obedience. It is our mandate as parents and educators to become adequate to heed, with the child, his inner dictates, providing a sane, safe place where his unique human potential can be fulfilled, thrive, and flourish.

The most sensible advice Maria Montessori gives is 'Follow the Child'. It will take many generations for humanity to understand the common sense of this injunction. When it does, and only then, humanity itself will begin to fulfil its potential.

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