

NURSERY SCHOOLS AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

(Written for U.N.E.S.C.O. by Maria Montessori)

In 1910, two journals with a wide circulation—the American "McClure Magazine" and the British "World's Work"—printed reports about a successful educational experiment of a new kind, the Nursery Schools.

The experiment had been started in Rome with children between three and six years old, from wretchedly poor homes, and was extended almost at once to children rescued from the ruins of the Messina earthquake of 1908. It was based on a method of education which consisted in helping the children, gently, without forcing them in any way, to recover—or more exactly, to discover for themselves—the sense of human fellowship. This was done through community life and work.

Before long the children began to develop, of their own accord, a much stronger spirit of discipline than could have been created by ordinary scholastic methods, and a social sense that sometimes made them behave like one united team. They formed a community where freedom and discipline went hand-in-hand. In this atmosphere, the little victims of the Messina earthquake soon got back the happy, lively spirit natural to their age: they recovered from the shock that had saddened them for a time, and their sleep was no longer haunted by nightmares. Their manners became much improved, and they began to do their share of collective work, from which they derived a feeling of responsibility that seemed to satisfy an instinctive social need.

All these were new phenomena, of a psychological and social description, much more closely connected with nature than with education, and which could have been produced at any time in favourable circumstances. What I had done was simply to encourage the free activities of the children, and to prepare special equipment for teaching them.

FREE SELF-DISCIPLINE.

What I did after that, was to try to bring about the same phenomena in ordinary circumstances, and to develop a system of education by which they could be generalised and extended. Free self-discipline continued to be the outstanding feature of the Montessori schools.

Education does not depend only upon methods, but also upon psychological conditions, which vary according to age... certain age present psychological characteristics favourable to this or that branch of study, so that the pupil makes easier and more rapid progress than would be possible at other times.

That is why the study of human beings and their individual psychology at various stages of development forms one of the essential bases of education.

The attention of several Dutch psychologists was arrested by what we had observed, i.e. that intellectual development is not uniformly progressive, but reveals special features at certain periods, and that very small children often learn better and more quickly than their elders. They saw a connection between these facts and the occurrence of "sensitive periods," as demonstrated by De Vries, in the development of various animals. During the sensitive period, habits useful to the still immature creature are formed, and once the habits are well established, the sensitive period comes to an end. Many psychologists have now come to believe in these periods "of intense activity," connected with the development of certain faculties.

My own observations, recorded in a book "Il Segreto del Bambino" ("The Secret of Childhood"), point not merely to the existence of various sensitive periods, which occur in cycles and come to an end at certain ages (for instance, at puberty), but also to the fact that far more rapid internal developments precede the

external manifestations that give them expression. (For instance, the mental development of language begins long before the actual ability to speak). This cannot be shown by "tests," because they can only register external manifestations, i.e., immediate reactions.

MORE INTELLIGENT THAN SUPPOSED.

During our experiments with the Children's Homes, I lived for a good many months among children of less than three years old, and was able to watch them from morning till night. Without the slightest doubt, tiny children are much more intelligent than people are apt to suppose. Only their intelligence differs in certain respects from ours. And this

brings me to my final point—which is, that such children are not mentally fitted to learn from us by word of mouth, and through explanations; but that they are able to absorb from their surroundings even notions of an intellectual kind, which take root in a special way not as ideas, but as characteristics that become part of their personality.

The implications of this theory are very far-reaching. It was by acting on children that the totalitarian governments were able to build up huge reserves of young fanatics, devoted to their leaders and filled with warlike spirit. The dictators prepared their men even before preparing their armaments, for they realised that an undertaking draws its greatest strength and its greatest hope of success from suitably trained manpower.

But what is there to prevent a nobler society, guided by ideals of peace and humanity, from building up—not fabricating, but training, through the encouragement of free and spontaneous development—future generations in which friendship towards all men, and understanding between nations would become natural qualities?

Apart from that possibility, the method put into practice by the Nursery Schools in the early years of this century can be applied to general cultural education. Useful principles of training are as follows:—

(a) Children less than three years of age take an interest

years of age take an interest in what their older companions are doing; and when it is something for which they have a natural inclination, they try of their own accord to imitate it.

(b) Tiny children find the explanations they get from older children, when they ask for them, easier to understand and more satisfying than anything a teacher could tell them.

(c) Children learn by a kind of osmosis, rather than by being presented with ideas in the abstract.

(d) Older children greatly enjoy helping the little ones, and in doing so they seem to arrive at a better grasp of what they themselves have learnt.

(e) This process of reciprocal and spontaneous teaching gets the big and little children into the habit of working together at things that interest them all, and thus helps to build up a closely knitted society.

"Learn by teaching" would be a good motto for schools that follow the method adopted by Maria Montessori in elementary education.

What must be remembered with regard to the education of children, is first, that their minds always need to be helped by their hands in acquiring knowledge, and that their hands, in turn, need the help of objects which they can manipulate with ease; and secondly, that a child's mind develops through co-operating with its equals and sharing in freely chosen work.

When children are accustomed, from their very earliest years, to look upon all those around them as a source of help in their exploration of the world, a hostile or suspicious attitude towards members of other races, religions or nations becomes an unnatural tendency. People brought up in this way will therefore be of the greatest help in building a peaceful society and promoting that understanding between nations which U.N.E.S.C.O. has as its ideal. (U.N.E.S.C.O.).