

Sighe Fitzgerald

“Democracy in Education - Finding A Way With Montessori”

.

Good Morning!

I am happy and honoured to be invited to speak to such an august gathering of colleagues here in Vienna on the topic chosen by the organising committee of Montessori – Europe: “Democracy in Education – Finding A Way With Montessori”. I will begin by situating this presentation in an interesting and relevant piece of history.

It was here in Vienna that the setting for one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the Montessori movement took place. It reflects Montessori’s deep concern for justice and equality and a better social milieu in which to foster democracy. One of the pupils attending Montessori’s 1921 London Training Course named Lili Roubiczek, saw in the Montessori principles of education a way of doing something to help relieve the post war misery of Vienna’s poor by establishing a Montessori school for the children to be known as ‘Haus der Kinder’.

She believed that, with the help of two colleagues who had attended the Course with her, they could build a better society in the new Austrian Republic. Dr. Montessori was happy to help them how to find a way to foster this ideal through education beginning with very young children. The success of this venture is well documented in Rita Kramer’s excellent book –“ A Biography of Maria Montessori.”

It is fitting that we should return to Vienna to try to find a way to democracy through Montessori's philosophy of education. It is also timely, as the whole world turns towards democracy to try to find a way to peace and harmony among all people regardless of colour, race or creed. This goal was foremost in Montessori's mind at the dawn of the 20th Century and it seems that her message needs to be revisited as we approach the centenary of the opening of the first Montessori school in Rome. In my research for this presentation, I have found some very interesting views. Some from Montessori's own words, some from eminent educators and some from my own experiences as a labourer in the field for over forty years.

Professor E. P. Culverwell, Fellow and Senior Tutor, Trinity College, Dublin, Professor of Education, University of Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century, was an ardent admirer of Montessori's work. In his book "The Montessori Principles and Practices", he outlines the benefits that accrue from applying her principles to education:

"The chief importance of the Montessori idea lies in this, that it may help towards the reinstatement of those elements that have been lost from the Greek conception of democracy and thus help to place education, even the most advanced, on a biological basis, i.e. the scientific study of life, which is indeed, the only basis suited to a democratic State."

At this time the educational methods were based on the Greek tradition but they had lost all that was most valuable in the Greek conception. In the great world outside the universities the conception of evolution was revolutionising thought; Science was showing the way to new openings in industry. Above all, democracy as presented by the middle classes was beginning to make an effective demand for recognition and some measure of reform could no longer be delayed.

It was at this time that Dr. Maria Montessori devised a system of education in closer accord with the biological principles of child development than any previously practised. This system, in its

practical application, unites the physiological and psychological laws of which, as educationists have gradually been finding out, every rational system of education must take account.

It proceeds along the lines, which the political development of society inevitably dictates. It is said that the type of education always follows the type of society. Therefore, the Montessori system, being founded on the idea of liberty, fulfils an essential condition of democratic education. It seems to offer some security against the danger of democracies, that liberty might degenerate into licence on the one hand and tyranny on the other. For, as we will see, freedom in a Montessori environment soon ceases to be licence and becomes self-control, which is developed to a remarkable extent in such young children.

Discipline and steady application are obtained without the impetus of rewards or punishments. The successful outcome of the application of Montessori's vision in seeking peace in a democratic society depends on the weaving together of the principles that underpin her philosophy with the specific apparatus designed to assist the child's understanding of the task in hand. To her, the principles were everything; the apparatus was only the outcome and expression of the principles.

Many eminent Montessori educators agree that there lies an inherent danger in referring to Montessori's vision as *a system* or, *a method*. Professor Culverwell suggests that, we should consider it *a living principle*.

Montessori's background as a doctor of medicine, prepared her well for her new role as educator. She queried why so many children were referred to her as being ill. On examination she found that the problem was not of a medical nature but an educational problem. She reiterated the age-old maxim that had its roots in the cradle of democracy: "There is nothing in the intellect that did not begin in the senses". Aristotle.

Therefore, it is vital that educators should understand the importance of the early years when the senses are at the height of their sensitivity and the mind is at its greatest absorbency.

Montessori's fundamental principle of the *importance of the spontaneous manifestations of the child* had been already established and applied in education by some psychologists, but it took her genius to carry it out to its logical conclusion.

To establish a principle is one thing; to determine the limits within which it is to be applied is another. Especially is this true in education and Montessori pursued her goal with relentless, consistent logic. No one had ever dreamed of limiting the intervention of the teacher to the same extent. There were many who laid stress on the importance of giving full scope to the spontaneity of the child but none had the courage to lay down the revolutionary principle that the teacher must not interfere with the concentration of the child: (Remember the story of the soap bubble!). Instead of correcting when a mistake occurs the correction should be left over to a later time.

What has this to do with democracy you may ask?

It is the very bedrock on which the seeds of democracy are sown. In employing this principle of education we are fulfilling an essential condition of democratic education. We are giving the child the opportunity to examine his actions, to discover for himself, and with gentle guidance, lead him to find a solution to the problem thus fulfilling his profound, unspoken request: *Teach me to do it myself.*

In other words we have given him freedom. Freedom is not an absolute. One cannot talk about freedom without having an understanding of personal dignity and responsibility to society. Often freedom is defined as independence, but we are not floating islands without connection. There is always a body of water that holds us together. Therefore a definition must be based on principles within the context of the societal laws that keep order within our culture. One cannot have freedom without having responsibility to society.

Freedom has been defined as an absence of restraint or coercion. This is a negative view of a principle that is valued in a democratic society. A more positive perspective is, to view freedom

as the ability to make choices. Humans are rational beings and are not restricted by the same instincts that guide the behaviour of other species in the animal kingdom.

Constraint is viewed as the obstacle that denies freedom. However, constraints are needed to form limits and boundaries so that freedom can be defined. Societal laws bind us but we are also bound by the characteristics of our mind and personal will. Without personal dignity, freedom would be viewed as a right and not as a responsibility. For example, a child who views the law that forbids stealing, as a constraint will use his right to freedom to break the law if he chooses. However, a child who views that stealing is a law that protects society and keeps order, views freedom as a responsibility to the community. This child has made a free choice not to break the laws due to personal dignity. A child who continues to steal believes that he is exercising a freedom because he views the law as a constraint and not a necessary part of personal freedom and responsibility. *Freedom is a liberty not a licence.*

Montessori philosophy prescribes a balance between freedom and responsibility for educating the person at the various stages of development. During the first plane of development the child begins to make choices in the environment and has extensive use of the freedom he has over his own mind and body. Eventually, the child begins to use active reasoning rather than internal impulses to guide his own behaviour. This establishes personal dignity and self- respect within the child.

During the second plane of development the principle of personal dignity is continued with a greater variety of choices. Together with the fostering of a sense of independence, the elementary stage child is exposed to cultural aspects of freedom.

As the children learn about the society around them, they learn about a sense of interdependence and the responsibility of the individual needed to maintain the culture in which they live.

The maturing personality of the child now understands that behaviour is controlled from within and the individual understands what is good or bad rather than what society dictates as good or bad. The child is then able to use judgement and compassion to guide his own freedom.

In order to foster a sense of freedom and responsibility, certain conditions must be maintained within the classroom and in the attitude of the teacher.

Freedom should be regarded as a point of arrival and not a point of departure.

Freedom with no responsibility is chaos, anarchy, and licence. Responsibility without freedom is slavery and oppression. Neither of these situations can help the child create his own individuality and independence. This is the essence of education.

What then do we understand by freedom and responsibility in preparation for a democratic society?

How are these presented to the child in a Montessori school?

What is their significance in terms of the child's development?

Freedom and responsibility are developed in a Montessori school by:

Using the child's characteristic dispositions, his power of reasoning, his desire to know good from bad, his sense of justice and his sense of compassion and generosity;

: Giving him a way of understanding the harmony of the universe in which man can freely cooperate with nature, where everything is so closely interrelated that the good of the whole depends on the accomplished task of each of the elements;

: Giving the child freedom of choice of activities, freedom of movement, freedom to form a group with his peers when he is ready to do so and to work in groups to foster cooperation and freedom to work outside the classroom to expand his knowledge;

: Making him aware of his task as part of the group, especially in the care of the environment;

: Discussing with him, his plans and activities to achieve a particular aim;

: Setting clear limits regarding the environment in which he lives and works, having due regard for the rules of society and the right of his peers to work undisturbed.

It is through freedom and responsibility that the child will grow into a fully mature adult, peaceful and happy with a constructive role in a democratic society.

The Role of the School in a Democratic Society:

Montessori had little doubt that, in nearly all respects, the educational system of Athens in its noblest days was something worth examining. Schole or school means leisure. By school, the Greeks meant the place of freedom and opportunity, leisure not in the sense of idleness, but leisure in the sense of liberty to be oneself, as we all are in our leisure time.

School then according to the Athenians is the place where one has leisure to be oneself where the child has leisure to become itself. It is a view, ideal and practical alike, worthy of the nation that produced philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato.

Maria Montessori's philosophy of education embodied this vision. She appreciated that the role of the educator was to guide, suggest, inspire, direct and correct where necessary in a sensitive and gentle manner for, if the future citizen of the world is essentially a mind and a spirit, education must be personal and spiritual or it is nothing.

As 'Montessorians' we should be fully aware of the pathway to follow in the search for democracy.

We need to get to the root of our vocation and live up to the ideals set before us by Maria Montessori. We must do as she did. We must '*Follow the child*'.

In his book "Freedom to Learn", Carl Rogers re-echoes much of Montessori's philosophy. In the phrase, *Teaching is vastly overrated*; he encapsulates much of his thought in the content of his book. He emphasises learning rather than teaching and he focuses on creating conditions that

promote learning. Self-motivation is the basis for the approach each has taken to learning. Both emphasise freedom for the learner.

Both of them renamed the role of the educator from teacher/director, directress to facilitator. The role of the facilitator was to put the learner in touch with learning situations relevant to his personal needs.

The Role of the Facilitator in a Democratic Society:

The primary purpose of education is to bring out what is in the mind. Instruction is only an instrument of education and the misuse of the instrument may even ruin the material upon which it works.

Essentially education is not a process of insertion or intrusion or instruction but of extrication. If a child's mind i.e. the developing mind of man were likened to a portmanteau, education is not packing the portmanteau as we commonly suppose, but unpacking it.

We have to look at the problem biologically because it *is a biological problem, a problem in the development of a living being.*

Education is the provision of an environment, no more and no less. It creates nothing whatever.

Whenever we suppose that education has created something, it has only provided the environment, the opportunity, and the stimulus for the development of what was already potentially there.

Many people have supposed that Montessori's stress on the provision of an environment is a phrase that reduces the function of education unduly. But if we begin by asking ourselves what mankind is, we shall soon see that the provision of an environment for the whole of man in his young state is a great and complex task. Since the body of man is animal, it shares all the environmental needs of animals. But since man is more than an animal, he has special environmental needs and susceptibilities of his own.

Our difficulty is to appreciate the importance of environment, and therefore of its provision that we call education and at the same time to realise that it creates nothing.

Life grows and develops from within, in virtue of what it is.

If the body is what it eats and digests so too is the mind what it absorbs, retains, digests, alters, forgets and combines just as the body does. Every mind does this in its own way for its own purposes, unlike every other mind that ever was or ever will be, just as the body does.

This is the meaning of individuality or personality and this it is what the educator must decide, first to recognise, then to value and lastly to provide the right environment for education to do what it should and must do.

In former times the English word ‘to educate’ was a synonym for ‘to govern’. Perhaps it is time to return to this in order to understand the relationship between education and democracy. As Amy Gutmann, Director, Programme in Political Philosophy, Princeton University states: “Education entails governance whether of the young by the old, the ignorant by the knowledgeable, the foolish by the wise or the relatively powerless by the powerful. The most defensible conception of democratic education is democratic in both its ends and its means. The end of democratic education is to create democratic citizens, people who are willing and able to govern their own lives and share in governing their society. And the means of educational governance are a complex balancing of parental, professional and public authority, a combination consistent with the political ideals of representative democracy, which support the basic liberties of all adult members of a society.” Montessori would agree whole-heartedly!

