



*25th International
Montessori Congress
Papers*

*Montessori's Vision
of Service*

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*Sydney, Australia
14 – 17 July 2005*

Montessori's Vision of Service

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André Roberfroid, a Belgian national, was the UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for Programme and Strategic Planning until his retirement in 2003. He was responsible for the formulation and implementation of the UNICEF strategic objectives and programmes. From 1974 to 1996 he served as a UNICEF field officer and representative in a variety of countries including the Congo, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran and Mali. He was particularly involved in the development and implementation of programmes for children in extremely difficult circumstances such as the civil war in Lebanon, the unrest in the West Bank and Gaza, the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda. From 1996 to 1999 as director of the UNICEF office in Geneva, he was in charge of the coordination with the main humanitarian agencies.



***I did not invent a method of education;
I simply gave some children a chance to live.***

Let us keep in mind these simple and far reaching words. Let us be inspired by the mess age while we are trying to define our role in serving the children of the world.

Maria Montessori wrote that the teacher should “work in the service of the human being”. Who would not agree with such a statement? Could not we say the same about a doctor, an artist, even a politician or, for that matter, any decent human being?

Why is it that the teacher has a specific and unique role to play “in the service of human being”? It is almost a cliché to claim that educating children is preparing for the future. Is it not a common, perhaps candid, wisdom to pretend that the better the children are educated, the better the society will be? But are we so sure? A quick look at history may challenge this common wisdom. The Greeks were probably better educated than the Romans, and yet the Greek society, in spite of great achievements in art, literature and philosophy, was dominated by internal wars. The roman society, less intellectual and less academic, succeeded to establish and run a large and lasting empire dominated by the “Pax Romana”. Later on, the highly educated Europeans established a relationship with the much less educated Africans, that was based on slave trade and colonial exploitation. Last century, the German society was probably better educated than Poland or Denmark, Japan was probably more advanced than the Philippines or Cambodia...and yet we know were civilisation stood.

It seems that the common wisdom may not be so wise after all!!

In saying that the teacher should “work in the service of the human being”, Maria Montessori was not just glorifying the role of the traditional teacher. She clearly meant something else. Another quote from ‘The Absorbent Mind’ may help us to understand what she really meant: “if we really aspire to better things, at spreading the light of civilisation, it is to the children that we must turn”. The message becomes different. The teacher will not serve the human being by educating the children, but by turning to them. It is in serving the child that the teacher will serve the human being. The child is the centre of the process, the actor of the progress and the builder of the future. The teacher is the service provider. The teacher will bring the tools and the materials needed; the children will build the future. The child is today the architect of tomorrow.

This is the first legacy of Maria Montessori: the teacher is the servant, the child is the actor. It is by serving the children that the teacher will contribute to a better humanity. Does this message make the Montessori movement unique and specific? Not quite!

Around the world and throughout history, many people recognised the child as the vehicle for a better society, as the builders of the future. The founders of modern democracies, the militants of human rights have very slowly discovered the concept of the rights of the child. At the beginning the overwhelming common understanding was that the parents and the society have “duties” towards the children. Until the end of the 19th century, the progress is essentially towards a better

“protection” of the child. The main characteristic of the child is “vulnerability”. The child is considered weak and subject to all sorts of dangers; and we the adults must protect him and give him a chance to become stronger essentially through education. But the child remains an object. The breakthrough came with the Swedish author Ellen Key when she published in 1900 “The Century of the Child”, a passionate plea for a child-centred pedagogy. Key promoted a new school that would really prepare children for life, by adapting to the children’s own world and creating a learning experience through their own activity. An approach that must sound familiar to most of you in this room, although not yet the elaborate and revolutionary message of Maria Montessori. But what’s important is that for the first time the child is recognised as a subject with rights and a potential for self-development. The movement for the rights of the child is born. It will culminate with the Convention on the Rights of the Child approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 20th November 1989.

The child is now almost unanimously recognised as a subject of rights and as a genuine builder of a better world. Very much a Montessori message is not it? But not quite our exclusive message. Many others share it.

For example, before joining you, I spend most of my professional life serving an organisation called UNICEF. Like Montessorians we considered our duty to serve the children. Like Montessorians we considered that when the children will exercise their full rights, the world will be a better place to live. Like Montessorians we believed that education is the key to this better world.

The UNICEF logo carries the words “Advance Humanity”.

What I am trying to say here is that we the Montessorians are not alone in our adventure and dreams. Our ambition is also to serve and advance humanity and to do that through the children. The question is what is, and what will be our specific contribution.

But before elaborating on this point, let us together do what we claim we do, that is listen to the children.

In May 2002, the United Nations General Assembly held a Special Session on children. At this occasion, children from all over the world gathered in a Children’s Forum to express their own views on their future. An extraordinary document came out of this forum. They called it “A World Fit for Us” and this is how the children see their world:

I quote:

*In this world
We see respect for the rights of the child.
We see an end to exploitation, abuse and violence.
We see an end to war.
We see the provision of health care.
We see the eradication of HIV/AIDS.
We see the protection of the environment.
We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty.
We see the provision of education.
We see the active participation of children.
We are not the sources of the problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them.
We are not expenses, we are investments.
We are the children of the world, and despite our different backgrounds we share a common reality.
We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all.
You call us the future, but we are also the present.
We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone.*

Everyone in this room will agree with every word of this statement.

We, Montessorians, certainly want to serve these children, to work with them to create this new world fit for them.

But again, we are not alone.

Let's look, at how the world responded to these children. During the same Special Session of the UN General Assembly, the international community, representing 190 countries, in the presence of 69 heads of States or Government, responded to this call. A declaration and a binding plan of action were unanimously approved. Let me quote some essential parts of the declaration:

“We hereby call on all members of society to join us in a global movement that will help build a world for children through upholding our commitments to the following principles and objectives:

- *Put children first. In all actions related to children, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration.*
- *Eradicate poverty: invest in children. (we are) united in the conviction that investments in children and the realisation of their rights are among the most effective ways to eradicate poverty.*
- *Leave no child behind. Each girl and boy is born free and equal in dignity and rights; therefore, all forms of discrimination affecting children must end.*
- *Educate every child. All girls and boys must have access and complete primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality.*
- *Protect children from war.*
- *Listen to children and ensure their participation. Children are resourceful citizens capable of helping to build a better future for all. We must respect their right to express themselves and to participate in all matters affecting them.*

In line with these principles and objectives we (are) confident that together we will build a world in which all girls and boys can enjoy childhood – a time of play and learning, in which they are loved, respected and cherished, their rights are promoted and protected, without discrimination of any kind, where their safety and well-being are paramount and where they can develop in health, peace and dignity.”

Again we certainly agree with every word of this statement. But what is most important for me is the challenge that the world community is launching to us.

“we call on all members of society to join us in a global movement...to build a world fit for children.”

The question in front of us is therefore: how can the Montessori movement join the global movement and what will we bring that will make our contribution specific and effective?

The first observation is that we have something in common with the international community. We share the believe that the child is the vehicle for a better society. And we are trying to put that believe in practice. In every Montessori school the child is the centre, and the child is the actor.

The second observation is that the Montessori message is adding something new and original to this common believe. We do not want to teach the child how to create what WE believe would be the best society. We want to put the child in the best conditions to develop his skills and values, so that HE the child will create what HE believes would be the best society. We are serving the child so that he can master his own future. Our sense of service is one of thrust and confidence. But a confidence that is no just an act of faith. It is the result of a careful and close observation of the child development. It is the extraordinary discovery made by Maria Montessori that the brain of the child contains in a potential form the energy necessary to develop itself, provided that the child is confronted with the appropriate and stimulating environment.

Therefore we can claim a first original contribution to the global movement for children. That is the systematic and scientific observation of the child and his interaction with the environment. Learning from that observation allowed Maria Montessori to demonstrate how the environment could stimulate the child's own capacities and to create with great details and precision the optimal environment for this to happen. You, the practitioners of the Montessori approach, you bring to the global movement an effective process whose success has been largely demonstrated. Is this an effective and sufficient contribution to the global movement?

We all know that the answer is no. The legacy of Maria Montessori is not just a method. We know that it will not be enough to make the Montessori writings available in universities and teacher training institutes. The Montessori contribution to the global movement is a practice and a call for action.

Our movement is not made of a group of specialists sharing, developing and discussing a theory, it is made of practitioners. It is made of people who are not just talking about children, but people who are actually serving the children. In every Montessori school around the world, true Montessori teachers are practicing the service, every day for every child. Our Association, the Association Montessori Internationale is the custodian of the method and the promoter of its practices. The many children who are today able to mobilise their skills and energy for the building of a better world are, indeed, our contribution to the global movement for children. And we can, legitimately, be proud of our achievements.

But, we are not quite satisfied. We know that we can do better. Maria Montessori's message is not only a method, even well practiced, it is a call for action. Our contribution to the global movement will be measured by our response to this call. And our vision of service demands that the response be effective and efficient.

So far we have succeeded in maintaining the best practice of the method, we have not succeeded in disseminating it sufficiently to make a true difference for the world of children. How do we allow more people to know the method, more teachers to practice it and more children to benefit from it?

If we truly believe that our method and our practice will make the children the agents of the change that will lead to a more harmonious and peaceful society, then the numbers count.

If we truly believe that the Montessori method is an effective way for the children to exercise their rights, then we cannot be satisfied with the current situation where only a limited number of privileged children have access to it. Specially when we see that most of the children benefiting from the method live in the affluent part of the world and too often belong to the wealthiest fraction of the society.

All of us here in this room claim to be human rights and child rights activists. We therefore agree with the idea that when a right is not accessible to all, it is a privilege for the few. Privileges lead to envy, competition, frustration and eventually fight and wars.

We therefore have no choice but to accept the challenge of numbers. How do we reach out to the multitude?

The main practical step towards more children is clearly more teachers. Training of teachers is therefore our most critical challenge. Serving the children starts with training the teachers and making their work attractive and rewarding. Yes it is a formidable task, with many obstacles, but unless we start addressing them, the Montessori movement will soon become meaningless.

The other step towards a more effective way to impact children is to continue to learn and further develop the method. In a document preparing for the San Remo Congress of 1949, Maria Montessori wrote that our work should "be a laboratory for the further elaboration of the method which must always be enriched and perfected". The challenge here is to be open-minded in our continuous observation of the children, to learn from them and from our experiences particularly in attempting to face the obstacles of numbers. The key to success is to keep the ambitious goals of

reaching out to all children, while preserving the modesty of accepting the imperfect and incomplete nature of our answers.

We are here in Sydney, gathered to “Champion the Cause of All Children”. That sets our challenge. Championing the cause means mastering the method and continuously improving on it. The cause of ALL children means reaching out to the entire world.

In conclusion, my understanding of service in the Montessori world is above all a service for action and results. It is based on five essential elements:

1. serving the child is an act of faith. Faith in the child’s potential and capacities.
2. serving the child is an attitude. An attitude of learning from observation.
3. serving the child is a duty to practice the results of our learning.
4. serving the child is a willingness to disseminate our knowledge and practice without limits.
5. serving the child is an effort to train teachers in quality and numbers consistent with our goal.

The Montessori vision of service is the one of a mission, a mission of a life time, a mission driven by the children themselves and by the confidence in the future of humanity. Maria Montessori expresses it very clearly:

“...humanity can hope for a solution of its problems....only by turning its attention and energies to the discovery of the child and the development of the great potentialities of the human personality.”

A mission worth serving, is not it?

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