



*25th International
Montessori Congress
Papers*

Our Essential Mandate

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Renilde Montessori is Maria Montessori's youngest grandchild. She lived and travelled with her grandmother as a child. She attended Montessori schools in Barcelona, Spain and Laren, the Netherlands, and completed her secondary school studies at the Montessori Lyceum in Amsterdam. In her late teens she audited one of Dr. Montessori's courses in Adyar, India. Renilde Montessori worked in various fields of endeavour before joining the Montessori movement as personal assistant to her father Mario Montessori in 1968. She went on to graduate from the Washington Montessori Institute in 1971 and from that time onward was actively involved in the work of the Association Montessori Internationale as lecturer, trainer and examiner. In 1989 the Foundation for Montessori Education was incorporated in Toronto, Canada. She served as Director of Training at this institution until 1995 when she took on the position of General Secretary of the AMI. She left this function in 2000 and served as President of AMI until 31 August 2004.

Bringing the finishing touch to a Congress of this extraordinary calibre is a demanding proposition. With elegance and vigour, the 25th Congress held under the auspices of the Association Montessori Internationale was superbly organised by the incomparable Aussie contingent that we boundlessly admire and in which we exceedingly rejoice —do we not?

The importance of this Congress lies in that it has confirmed and anchored the renaissance of Montessori as a cohesive movement on behalf of the child.

In the past hundred years Montessori pedagogy in all its varied dimensions has overtly and covertly contributed to the stirring of a new consciousness —as a system to be implemented in educational environments, as a means to achieve global peace, as help and instruction to professionals involved with the growing human being in all stages of its development, and as a social movement directed to the recognition of the child as the ultimate originator of human society.

This last facet of Maria Montessori's work dwindled after her death and it is only very recently that it is gaining a new vitality.

Evidently the moment is ripe, for the child is beginning to be recognised as the instrument that will channel the wholesome evolution of humanity. Also, awareness is burgeoning, however timidly, of the essence of education as a continuum from conception through maturity, not as a more or less kaleidoscopic amalgam of fragmented endeavours to serve different ages and achieve different ends which only too often hold little or no vital interest for the growing child.

The new state of enlightenment, if universally accepted, makes the unwonted demand not only on all educators, but on all human beings to hone fine their perception of the true nature of the child as the essential element that will ensure the sane perpetuation of our species.

We have heard outstanding presentations on various dimensions of Montessori pedagogy —principles, practice, philosophy and the farther reaches towards which these will lead. In these presentations our essential mandate as educators has been encompassed eminently well by a choice selection of speakers who, each in their own way, are scientists of the child —the term Maria Montessori used to denote the mandate of any and all educators.

However, "Our Essential Mandate" is the title on the programme for this address and honouring it is the courteous thing to do, particularly since the "our" in this title refers not only to the vast group of individuals pursuing Montessori pedagogy but also includes the Association Montessori Internationale, founded at the instigation of Mario Montessori Sr. in 1929 as a structure that should hold the body and soul of the Montessori Movement together, as a corporate foundation that would organise, represent and further Dr. Montessori's activities and to ensure the continuation of her work once the time came when she herself would no longer be there.

Within the context of this Congress, it would seem proper to include relevant excerpts from the Articles of Association endorsed by Maria Montessori herself in 1939.

Upholding the rights of the child in Society, and making known the child's importance for the progress of civilisation.

Making known the natural laws of psychic growth in order to help the child to develop naturally both in the family and the school.

The propagation of knowledge and understanding of the psychological and physical development of the child within the family and in society.

To make clear the true nature of adult responsibility toward the child as the worker whose spontaneous activity produces the full-grown man.

Disseminating and upholding the pedagogical principles and practice formulated by Doctor Maria Montessori, which ensure the independence of the child's personality through successive stages of growth until he reaches full normal development by means of his own activity.

Providing opportunities wherever possible for children to develop normally, thereby helping all adults to enter into a new life of harmony and co-operation with children; and by thus unifying the two fundamental phases of human life, to lead the way to a higher and more peaceable civilisation.

To function as a social movement that will strive to obtain recognition for the rights of the child throughout the world, irrespective of race, religion, political and social beliefs, co-operating with other bodies and organisations which further the development of education, human rights and peace.

Culling the essence of the above articles, there is one element that stands out forcibly, and that is the consistent and powerful injunction to reveal to all of human society the nature of the child and the means to allow it to fulfil its potential, thereby contributing to the betterment of mankind. Apparently we have been remiss in this aspect since, in the past years, we have heard over, and over again “You people have a treasure. Why do you hide it, why don't you show it, why don't you share it?”

Definitely a very important component in our essential mandate is the transmission of the scientific pedagogy developed by Maria Montessori over half a century of constant and assiduous study of children in all stages of development, of every possible origin, in many countries. A curious phenomenon is that, over the past hundred years, it has met with variegated forms of often quite violent opposition verging on hostility. This resistance can only be countered with philosophical equanimity and by acquiring the quiet art of making others adequate to hear and heed the sane and sensible principles and practice of a pedagogy rooted in discerning knowledge of the child.

In further formulating our mandate, it is a delight to pick and choose among the many concepts to be culled from the rich treasury of Maria Montessori's writings. After scrutinising a veritable embarrassment of riches, three seemingly disparate phrases stand out that, after decades of reiteration, have tended to acquire the slight taint of sophisticated platitudes. Yet these merit to be parsed with the spirit and fathomed with the mind for they are cornerstones of the Montessori edifice —Love of the Environment, Follow the Child, and Education as an Aid to Life. An elegant triptych in the background to inspire us in our endeavours.

The word ‘love’ has become tarnished by overuse and must be polished and given specific meaning whenever required. Maria Montessori does this eminently well when she speaks of Love of the Environment. In *THE SECRET OF CHILDHOOD (The Intelligence of Love)* she states

Indeed it is as love of his environment that we may envisage the irresistible urge, which, throughout the sensitive periods, unites the child to things. It is not love in the sense that is commonly understood, as an emotional feeling, but a love of the intelligence which sees and assimilates and builds itself through loving. Yes, the inner guide that leads children to observe what is about them could be described, in Dante's phrase, as "intelligence of love".

As one goes about one's business—in whatever sphere of action—and has the good fortune of becoming what is commonly known as a 'baby watcher', one of the choicest delights is to observe the infinite number of ways in which a child, from the very moment of birth, evinces love of its environment.

Contemplating the phenomenon of children seeing, assimilating and building themselves through loving, in all times, in all places and in all cultures, calls forth the quiet exhilaration that makes one go out on the terrace at night to tell the stars "Life is good stuff."

In EDUCATION AND PEACE (*The Importance of Education in Bringing About Peace*) Maria Montessori sheds further light on love of the environment.

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.

[...] Man has had intimations of this higher form of love because he has intuitions within his soul of every truth, though he has not often followed and applied them in his everyday life. This higher love comes naturally to children, however, and is characteristic of them.

[...] 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 of the environment inspires man to learn, to study, to work.

A most memorable phrase among the above quotes is "Man has had intimations of this higher form of love because he has intuitions within his soul of every truth, though he has not often followed and applied them in his everyday life." It is precisely the 'intuitions within his soul of every truth' that embody the complicity of the species, that portend the solidarity of mankind as it evolves to as yet unknowable levels of enlightenment fuelled by 'the higher form of love that comes naturally to children and is characteristic of them'.

If it is true that love of the environment inspires man to learn, to study, to work, what unholy machinations cause so many educators to, unconsciously or deliberately, prevent children from interacting with their environment and applying all the incredibly versatile constructive power of their pristine senses? It would be well for educators to remember that placing a young child for hours on end before a television screen is the equivalent of locking its spirit in a gas chamber.

Recently a woman remedially attending a group of troubled adolescents was lamenting the fact that they rebelled against having to study, for, they said, what was the use, what was the point of studying, where did it lead?

Her frightening response was a blank stare when told that these young people of more or less well-to-do middle class families must have had a highly deprived childhood from the point of view of their human exigencies. It was impossible for her to even consider that the inherent love of the environment directing the human being in its self-construction might have been stunted if not

altogether destroyed by educators that did not nurture the fundamental passion inspiring man to learn, to study, to work.

The central panel of our triptych, “Follow the Child”, is a directive only too often interpreted with bizarre obliqueness by adults to mean “let the child do as it pleases”. The catastrophic result is that the child finds itself abandoned in an amorphous limbo instead of an environment that cheerfully encourages it to follow the dictates of its inner teacher.

The obtuseness of many educators towards the vital phenomena of the young child’s self-construction is pleasingly absent in the adolescents who tend to regard the small new humans with joyful tenderness and understanding. For them “Follow the Child” is an intelligible, naturally acceptable indication while at a later age it is frequently subject to argument and explanation for here the dichotomy between the universal and the individual child may direly interfere.

To quote from the beautiful Congress Brochure,

Educators cannot be honest educators unless they look to the vast enigma that is our universe, to our modest solar system within it, to our planet and its many and varied inhabitants, to our species as one among them and finally, with greatest glee, to our children. Then it becomes incumbent upon us to stand very still and contemplate with delight the interplay between their individual uniqueness and the universal characteristics common to all young perpetuators of the life form known as man.

Many people find it an affront, if not impossible, to admit that they and their children share universal characteristics with ‘those others’, for it is a pitiful truth that the tendency exists to dichotomise the earth’s inhabitants into desirable and despicable orders —socially, locally, globally, culturally, ethnically, etc., etc. It would seem that if we do not despise, our worth wizens. One of the sweetest lessons we shall learn if we follow the child is that children unconditionally accept their fellow humans until such a time as the environment forcefully informs them otherwise.

It is precisely the universal characteristics inherent in the human child that must be known, recognised, heeded and respected if the education of the unique, unrepeatable individuals that are our children is to indeed become Education as an Aid to Life, for it is life directing and the educator’s mandate to obey along with the child.

Incidentally, the prime age to convey the wonderful saga of the science of human development from conception to maturity, its accompanying phenomena and the laws that guide it, is during the second plane of development, between the ages of six and twelve, when the intellect is at a peak of receptiveness and acumen, unparalleled at any other time in human existence.

The fact that we speak of Education as an Aid to Life with a certain ease and familiarity would imply that we know all about life while in fact we know an immense amount about the evolution of life on earth, but absolutely nothing about the phenomenon of life itself. When one hears that a very clever scientist has achieved a momentous breakthrough and created life in his laboratory, one tends to say, “Why, isn’t that nice, dear” and continue knitting.

Human beings do not create —human beings recreate, replicate, extrapolate; they do innumerable quantities of fascinating things compelled by that inherent love of the environment that inspires them to learn, to study, to work. Creation, however, belongs to another realm, another dimension, another reality.

Somehow, it makes Education as an Aid to Life a breathtakingly enticing enterprise to know that we are aiding the evolution of an ephemeral species on a small planet in an immense universe the origin of which is not for us to know —not yet, not now, but —who can tell?

If we heed our essential mandate and allow the children we bring forth to inform us on how to help them fulfil their unfathomed potential, mankind will transcend its present sorry state of imbalance

between constructiveness and destructiveness; of splendid achievements in science and technology and political imbecility; of high ethics and muddled moral values.

Being incurable existential optimists, we choose to believe that humanity finds itself in the throes of a final glitch before a benevolent universal consciousness dawns and we enter upon a phase of enlightened evolution.

When that time comes, we shall go out on to the terrace at night and, with profound contentment, tell the stars “You see? We told you life is good stuff.”

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