

LECTURE 19

MAY 17, 1921

by Maria Montessori

Montessori discusses the importance of the calm inner life (the soul) of the very young child. She stresses the importance of the soul's self-management, the child knowing what he needs to do, and of course, being allowed to do what he needs to do. The child can repeat the exercise or move ahead according to minimal clear and precise guidance from the teacher. Copyright Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 1921. NAMTA is grateful to the Maria Montessori Archives for making this article available.

What is absolutely essential in this method is a state of inner calmness. Nature helps us, for the little child is simplicity itself, and this simplicity is calm, which we can assist by preparing the order of the environment. When the soul is in this state of calm, it is not in a state of activity, but it is during this state that those impulses may be born of which we have already spoken. If we consider the limitation of space, and the soul of the child in this space, we can see that the impulse force needs some external form which shall act as a stimulate to the development of this impulse. The inner impulse exists as a potentiality and it needs some external object by which to explain itself; to express itself in such a way that it produces an inner organisation. The inner impulse is not agitation, it is concentration. It is an organizing energy which needs an external object; and there must exist this external object of which this inner force has need. That object must exist within certain limits and must exactly correspond to the inner force. As in the case of the little child already cited, what she needed was not ten gradations of colour, but four which sufficed. Though it is necessary for the teacher to have a very clear idea of

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these objects which the child will need. It is not sufficient for her to know the series of objects; she must have practice in the knowledge of the need of the inner impulse of the particular child who is in front of her at the moment. To her knowledge of the series of objects she must join knowledge of the condition of the child's soul. This knowledge comes from observation not from the art of guessing. It is true, the child shows his needs by his attitude. For an example: in a school in Barcelona there was a child who was extremely intelligent and able to guide herself in the choice of objects she needed. She had such a power of concentration and consistency in the exercises that she was always our model in the demonstrations. One day this child was seen to take successively every object that she might have used from the first day she attended the school, and she did the exercises almost as if she were reviewing all the material. She did them very quickly until she came to the first exercise in grammar, when the teacher made the remark, "She used to have such a strong power of concentration but she has now completely lost it and only passes from one object to another." It is difficult to believe that a characteristic can be wholly lost which was in the very nature of the child, and not only in the nature of the child, but which had also been exercised for a considerable period. Evidently when this child was passing in this way from one object to another, she was in the condition comparable to the little child who has not yet reached a state of inner concentration, and who takes up first one object and then another. But the little child who has not yet fixed his attention upon any one thing has a more agitated manner than the child who takes the objects up in logical rotation; and his activities have no relation to one another. However, this child in so acting was demonstrating that all the objects in the room could not really benefit her in any way. She herself was not conscious of this, but, without doubt, that was what she was expressing. The didactic material at the moment represented the world around her and there was nothing in it which aroused her enthusiasm. How is the child to know it? For the children know that with which they are familiar, but they know nothing of the future. It is the teacher who must know this. The teacher must realise that the soul that has gone on ahead will not return and needs to go still higher. Thus, when the child was presented with an exercise in grammar which was far more difficult than she had had before, that concentration,

which had previously been her characteristic state, returned with increased power. Very often the children will express their need in words, and will come to the teacher and say, "What shall I do?" Now if these children are accustomed to a free choice and are able to do successive exercises by themselves, what is the purpose of their asking this question? You will probably hear the teacher say, "Do so and so", mentioning something the child has already done many times. How is it possible that this spirit, this will, which is accustomed to free choice, of work should be turned back into the state of doubt? When this soul is accustomed to making its own decisions, why should it suddenly be compelled to ask? It is evident that the child does not ask advice about that which he has already done. This question probably means, "What shall I do besides that which I have already done?" or "Give me the next step." So we must have before our consciousness the fact that the soul of the child is in need of our help; and our help consists in serving the soul just when it needs help; giving the child the future of its soul; that which the child himself does not know, because he does not know that which is to follow. But the teacher must know so that she can give. The mode of giving must be considered. Remember what is said about



Botanical drawing at the Amsterdamsche Montessori School, 1930s.

the lessons. The teacher says "This is red" "This is blue"; she says something precise and sure. If she says "This is a triangle", she says something with precision. This precision is important for the child; because he is told something precise and sure, without any hesitation or doubt. The teacher does not say, "Now look at this, this figure has three sides, therefore, it is a triangle," for the child might begin to think, suppose it had more sides, then what would it be? When one says "This is a triangle", then there is no doubt. We present to the senses this form which has been determined in that particular way, and we give it that precise name, because it is so called. When the child is taught to touch the triangle it is so that he may assimilate that same figure by means of more senses than one. He can feel and see this figure, which is a triangle. This is the way to respond to the searching mind, by means of an absolute assertion. It is the simple truth. That the triangle has three sides, the child can discover for himself. He will know that when he knows numbers. But in that condition when he is searching he needs something simple and solid to reset upon.

Thus we are not only respecting his mentality when we choose a few simple words and avoid all complications, but it is as though we stretch out a sustaining hand to this mind or spirit which wishes to rise. When we wish to help a person who is climbing upwards, we stretch out a hand. It is not necessary for us to say "Now, I am going to put out my arm and at the end is a hand with fingers and thumb". We just stretch out a hand the person who is climbing feels that he has been helped upward, and that is all. In presenting the triangle to the child in this manner, it is not to be inferred that he will have merely this idea of the triangle during his whole life, this sensorial knowledge of the triangle is only for that particular speech. Clearness of mind will come from that simple definition. When this has taken place, there begins that work of the movement of which we have already spoken. In the observation class, children are often seen to go to the teacher with something they have done, a drawing they have made, or words they have written. They do not go to the teacher in order to ask for a sequence in their work, they simply wish to show what they have done; nobody asks that they should do so. If the teacher has a large class, it becomes quite difficult and tiresome to look at all the things the children wish to

show her; and sometimes, she is surprised to find that the children show her things which they have done many times before. They write a few words on a slate, and take it to show the teacher, and they will repeat this again and again. Their purpose is not to ask for help, or rather they are asking for help here, too, but not the kind of help which we have already discussed. This necessity to show what he has done is such a general phenomenon that it must come from part of the child's mind. Sometimes a child will show everything he has done, and another time only a few things. It is not done out of vanity, from a desire for praise, because a child will show the same thing over again; and it would seem logical that were his desire to obtain praise, he would change the object in order to obtain it. It is as though the child asked direction; as though he said, "I want to know if I am advancing correctly, if I am on the right road". He is walking by himself, like a person walking from one town to another on a road with which he is familiar, and who will ask a passer-by, "Am I on the right road"? The teacher does not need to praise, to say "You have done well"; she simply looks and the child is satisfied. He feels sure, and it is that security of which he feels the need. He needs to lean on something, and thus in this way, the teacher serves the child. She must always be ready to serve him; to serve him when he needs to advance by presenting him with other means of which he does not yet know; to help him when he is asking for assurance that he is on the right road. She must always be ready to meet these needs without being worried. She must have great patience and serenity. Compared with the work expected from teachers in the past, her work seems very passive. Really it is the work of one who serves, because here she does not act from caprice, but she simple responds to her master, which is the soul of the child. The teacher resembles a servant who serves the different courses of a dinner. The diner does not have to call out, "Now I have finished", "Now take away my plate", "Now bring the next course": the servant is always watching and ready to give the next course when it is needed. In such way must the child be served. The teacher must take great care not to help the child, as we have pointed out, he cares more for the act of feeding himself than for the nourishment he takes. The child wishes to dress and undress himself, etc. ... so that the adult who does these things for him offends him. The novelty of this idea lies in the fact



Teacher doing dictation with onlooking students, Montessori school at Tarrytown, 1912.

that the mothers and teachers are told not to do these things for the children, but to let them set for themselves. That is to say, they must no longer serve the children in the usual sense of that word. But if they are not to serve the children, how is it that this picture of the true teacher is that of one always ready to serve? The teacher must serve life at its root, just as one can serve a plant by giving it the support of the nourishing earth and the necessary water at its roots, so that the plant may live and live vigorously, having all of which it has need. But the fruit of the plant cannot be helped. We must not touch that; and so must we not use violence and handle the fruit of this budding life. Thus we serve the cause and not the effect. In this particular case quoted, the fruit is the child's activity in dressing himself, etc. and this the adult must not touch; it is the fruit of the intelligence. The child has his problem, and that also

we must not touch. The problem and the solution must be left to the child. We must give him all that is necessary to enable him to act and to act without dissipating his forces. We must try not to be the cause that disturbs his mental calm, for this calm is the point of departure for these conditions of active inner force. This peace may have already been destroyed by many complications which have arisen before the child comes to the school, even at a very early age. The question is: "What is the mental condition of the child who is brought to us, and on our part, how shall we deal with him?" Our interventions, when they are inopportune, without doubt, destroy this calm. Imagine a child having this inner impulse of force and finding everything about him calm and quiet. The didactic object he needs is presented to him, when the teacher, seeing him in this power or recognizing that which nourishes. We know that he is not nourished because he does not grow and his agitation is not soled. He is developing a vicious attitude, that of being satisfied by the means and not by attaining the end. The soul of the child becomes weak and predestined to disease in the same way as a body. Therefore one of the things the teacher should practice is the observation of different mental states of the child and the actions which accompany them. And it is necessary to have a light to guide us in all these things. Those who have not yet gained this experience for themselves should have faith that these things are so and try to recognize the real needs of the child, and serve them.

