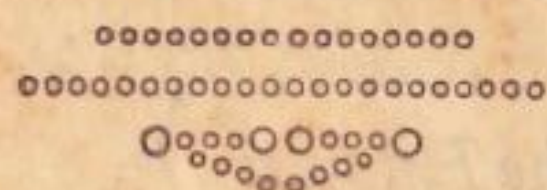


THE CALL OF EDUCATION

L'APPEL
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The new Mistress

by

Dr. MARIA MONTESSORI.

It is in the existence of psychic stimuli, calling into activity the intelligence of the child, that our Method finds its justification; and yet it would be wrong to attribute to them an effect that is all-sufficing.

It is, therefore, on the mistress that a great part of the effect of these stimuli depends; it is by her way of presenting the objects to the child that she will render them completely effective as stimuli. If, then, she finds within her reach a means of rendering them effective, of making them serve their whole use, her way of presenting them assumes as great an importance as that possessed by the objects themselves. This special way followed by the mistress in presenting the material may be termed her *Lessons*.

Students of my system are often much concerned about these *Lessons given by the mistress*. It should, therefore, be interesting to study side by side the way lessons are given in my system as compared with that used in ordinary schools. In our lessons the chief thing is to call forth auto-education. Once the child has become intelligently active, it is by repeating the exercises that he will perfect himself. The work he is thus doing is his very own; the mistress is an outsider, whose only business has been to present the stimulus.

In dealing with tiny children, not culture, but the development of intellectual activity, is our chief aim.

The lessons given by the mistress will be innumerable; for it is clear that the child cannot by himself guess at the use of the objects before him; clearly it is the mistress who must teach him

how to use them. Many mistresses enquire of me: "If we present the material gracefully, politely and kindly, is that all that is required of us?" It is far from being enough. The important matter here is the way in which the material is to be used. Let us take for example the knife, fork, etc. used in laying a place at table. We, Europeans, all know the use to which these objects are put; but suppose an Indian who sees them on the table for the first time; he will be fairly puzzled until he has seen them used by one of us.

Just so, when the teacher builds up the set of pink cubes into a kind of tapering tower, knocking it down as soon as made; when she takes out the cylinders from their holes in the block, mixes and replaces them; when she unrolls a carpet on the ground, etc. These are actually lessons that she has given. They are lessons without words, it is true; and this may seem strange to those of us who by *lesson* understand a discourse by the teacher. The teaching a child to sit down, get up, carry a table, or a tray with glasses; the teaching it in short to carry out movements, all these are lessons. Keeping silence, too, is one. We teach the child to keep quiet, his whole attention bent on staying motionless and silent till he is called by a voice breathing his name.

We may say, then, that this silence is a lesson symbolising all our teaching. We teach everything in this way: even things that it would seem impossible to impart without words. In all the things that surround him, the child has a teacher; well, the mistress is one who, by setting him in direct relations with his surroundings, can teach him all things.

Other methods do not teach him all things. They employ commands. The mistress says to the child "Hush!" or "Walk straight!" And these commands are held to be educative. For us, it is not by words or by commands that we teach, but by a patient, mysterious guiding of activity; and to our guidance the child responds by perfecting his aptitudes through the frequent repetition of the exercises.

The commands given by other schoolmistresses remind us of the Creator in Genesis, who said: "Let there be light!" (and there was light). "Let the earth be divided from the waters!" (and

it was so). But the possibility of obedience to these commands implies a formation previously achieved; the child must already possess an ability before he is capable of responding to a command. So it would seem that it is not a command which one should give to the unformed child; it is rather a formative exercise that we have to evoke.

How often one hears a piano-teacher say to her pupil: "Place this finger!" without telling him how; and he places it wrongly. Thus it continues: one always protesting, the other always placing it the wrong way, to the end of the chapter.

Previous to the spoken word we must have something more essential: we must have formation. It is only exercise that can *form*, and for that, words are not needed. Existence is the first thing: one must *be*, before one can *know*.

Not that words, too, cannot be taught. Then we have lessons in vocabulary and elocution.

Inexperienced teachers generally attribute immense importance to *lessons*, imagining that their own preparation ends when they have presented the material in the right way. The truth is far otherwise; the mission of the mistress is much more important than this. She has to direct the development of the child's soul. The limited role of a simple observer of children is quite different. Such a one does not aim at *knowing* the children, but simply at *helping* them.

It is, then, useful to know certain fundamental principles capable of aiding this work of direction. The chief thing here is to be able to recognise those states of polarisation of the attention which we have called *Concentration*. When the child is wrapped up in attention to his great work, the mistress must respect this attention; she must not interfere with either correction or encouragement. It is then that she must absolutely observe the principle of non-intervention. Certain teachers have absorbed this principle offhand, *en passant* as it were; they have told themselves that all they have to do is to distribute the material, then withdraw and be silent whatever happens.

Result: frightful disorder in the school! But non-intervention — the sign, that is, of respect for the child's activity — is only appro-

priate when some interesting phenomenon is taking place in the child's life; it is out of place when disorder reigns and the attention of the child is all astray.

I have seen in a school disorderly children who took all sorts of material and used it in an absolutely wrong way. Among them glided, sphinx-like, the mistress, without words. I suggested: "Wouldn't it be better for the children if you went for a stroll in the garden?" Whereat she started, going from child to child, speaking softly in the ear of each. "What are you doing?" I asked her; and she replied: "I don't want to disturb them; so I whisper."

Her mistake lay in fearing to disturb disorder! If she had feared upsetting order she would have been in the right.

A mistress once said to me: "You would have us respect the child's concentration as a very superior thing, comparable to the inspiration of an artist or of a man of science? Why, then, do you tell us we can interfere when the children play with the Didactic Material?" "It is quite true," I replied "that I respect the normal inner activity of the child as much as I do the inspiration of an artist, but it is the inspiration and not the artist which calls forth my respect. If I dropped in on the artist and found him sitting at home smoking and playing cards, I should not be afraid of trespassing, nor should I scruple to call to him, saying: "My dear friend, why sit wool gathering here? Come out for a stroll in the sunshine?"

Our method does not insist upon respect for the futile or the erroneous!

As a fundamental thing, therefore, in her knowledge of the method, the mistress must learn to distinguish between good and evil. By Good, we mean here the psychological states favourable to the child's development, to his health of mind. By Evil, we mean the psychological states void of formative influence or actually unfavourable to his development, since they lead merely to useless scattering of his forces.

Not only to mistresses do we recommend this fundamental knowledge, but above all to mothers.

Without any doubt the mistress might well admonish the child somewhat briskly in order to get him out of this state of disorder.

But a capable teacher possesses other and more efficacious means than force; although these means require sustained attention and persevering effort. One of the principles to be observed will be the minute supervision of the environment in which the child moves; which will become a veritable work of foresight and love.

As a wife supervises the arrangement of her husband's house, so as to make it pleasant and attractive to him, so must the mistress busy herself about the child's surroundings. Constant attention is needed, and even this is not enough; she must know all the child's needs. More still, she will work with her own hands to embellish the cradle of the new-born soul.

In addition to the perfect presentation of the material, in addition to this fundamental psychological knowledge of the child, she must take the most minute care of the smallest details in the environment, keeping a continual watch over the objects it contains.

By the habit of observation the mistress will arrive at understanding little by little, but clearly, what her mission is.

On this observation of minute details depend the order, or the disorder, of the children; on it depends the results she will obtain in her school. It is, therefore, essential that she should train herself if she wishes to arrive at the right observation of these details.

It would be easy to give an example of the serious consequences derived from errors apparently trifling. Let us suppose a house of workmen in which baths have been added. If the tenants use these baths to store coals in, they can obviously not wash in them any longer. Not only will this be bad for the house, but the error, trifling, if you will, in itself, will result in a state of inferiority; they will not be able to take advantage of the gifts of civilisation placed within their reach. Thus one will obtain very small results instead of the great ones that were expected; disorder instead of order. The ability of the mistress in our Method depends on the enlightened application of principles which inspire her to strive against little obstacles and thereby achieve great results.

Analogous to the Way of spiritual perfection is the path she has to follow. It is not that the trifling venal sin overcome leads

straight to perfection. It is rather that the soul, freed from these trifles, is capable of rising. The overcoming of the trifles has brought into play all the energies of life; by the overcoming of the little difficulty an obstacle is removed from the path to perfect order. It is not the child in himself that we take into consideration, it is the error that we have to track down. Our work is the dealing, not with the sinner, but with the sin.
