

THE MONTESSORI SYSTEM.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE TIMES."

SIR,—The discriminating article on "The Montessori Method," in *The Times Educational Supplement* of November 6th, encourages me in an attempt to divest the principles involved in this interesting method from meretricious adjuncts, such as the pleasing deportment and personal cleanliness of the children. Given, a pleasant room adapted to their comfort, and friendly visitors who give respectful consideration to their doings, and children will behave with ease and frankness; if the school be desirable to children and parents and cleanliness be made a condition of admission they will be clean. America has long known how to make free American citizens out of the motley crowds of little aliens who present themselves at her school doors, and her methods are practically identical with those of Dr. Montessori; the delightful spontaneousness shown by those Italian children is evidenced in every English nursery and cottage home as well as in our holiday schools; and certainly, no child under six should go to school unless with full freedom to run or squat or lie face downwards if the mood seize him.

Several years ago I wrote to an educational journal about the possibility of roof-schools to be used (except in bad weather) for quite young children, and it still seems to me that long hours in the open with twice as much time given to play as to work is what children require. In Germany, as we know, six is the school age, and the child has the proud knowledge that he has made a step in life and has entered upon an eight years' course; but the little children at home sometimes get in the mother's way and are packed off to some small dame school known as a kindergarten. Perhaps the flat roof of the big school would be a better expedient.

But—

"Me this unchartered freedom tires,
I feel the weight of chance desires,"

is as true for young people as for the poet, and for the rest of us. We must have the ease of habit, the discipline of habit,

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to save us from the labour of many decisions in an hour as to "which foot comes after which!" To make a cult of liberty in our schools would be to bring up a race of vagabonds. As for a long school diet of geometrical forms and coloured tablets, Dickens has told us all about it in his tragic picture of the young Gradgrinds at school, a passage we should do well to learn by heart.¹

But it is not the pretty manners of the children nor the freedom under compulsion which mark the Montessori schools that attracts educationalists everywhere, so that we hear of 70 such schools established in Switzerland alone. We all endeavour ourselves to secure these ends, and we owe gratitude to Dr. Montessori for showing us a way. But let us be honest; these children can read and write by the time they are four or five, while with us eight is the usual (and desirable) age at which these accomplishments are mastered. We run away with the fallacy that reading and writing are education, not as they truly are, mechanical arts, no more educative than the

mastery of shorthand or the Morse Code, and we think we see the way to add two or three years to the child's school life by getting this primary labour over at an early age. But here is no new thing. We are told that young boys in a Russian Ghetto learn Hebrew very quickly, because there is nothing else to learn.² This is the secret that all trainers of animals, acrobats, musical prodigies, are aware of; secure concentration by shutting off all other pursuits and interests, and you can get young children to do almost anything; their minds will work of necessity, and it is possible to direct their work into one channel. A child of five may read Greek, compose sonatas, or read and write, if you secure that his efforts are directed into one channel.

Leaving out the pretty manners, the personal neatness, and the rapid progress of the children in the fundamental arts of reading and writing, because these are pretty generally attained by similar means—the friendly notice of cultivated people, moral suasion, and concentration on a single end—what principles are left for our imitation? I fail to discover a principle, but only a practice—that of learning the contours of letters and other forms by touch instead of by sight. It is hard to see why the less accurate and active of the two senses should

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be used by preference; and the blindfolded children feeling for form remind one of the famous verdict—

“Whenever Nose puts his spectacles on,

By daylight or candlelight, Eyes should be shut.”

The reader tries “touching” the handiest objects which offer an outline, his own mouth or nostril for example, and after much patient touching he produces no resemblance at all unless as he is betrayed into one by memory. But possibly if he were to “touch” given objects for so many minutes each time, day after day and month after month, he might at last be able to draw a mouth or write an “m.” At first the act of touching is tiresome, but it becomes soothing and a rather sensuous state is set up; one is a little hypnotized, and the photographs of both Italian and American children in the act of touching seem to show that a hypnotic state has been induced.

We know that hypnotic suggestion is used in some Continental schools to further the work of education; and here, conceivably, we get the key to the sudden attainment of the art of writing so delightful to read of. But this way danger lies; the too facile child becomes the facile man whose will power has become weakened, whose brain exhausted, until he is little capable of self-direction. The very fact of inducing in eager and active children the habit of continuous “touching” would seem to indicate that undue influence has been exerted, whether through the mere act of touching or through the agency of an external will.

It is claimed that “the relief of the eye by continuing and developing the sense of touch” is a valuable educational asset; but it is well to inquire first whether the definite practice of this sense is safe. The blind man learns to read by touch, and if this “method” is to be carried into schools for older children we shall all need books for the blind; but the blind man's will is not practised upon, because his strong purpose goes with his “touching” effort and nullifies any hypnotic effect of the act. We cannot put children or

ourselves into his condition, and why should we? The eye is strengthened by light and natural use and enfeebled by darkness and inertia.

The Montessori method is one effort among many made in the interests of “scientific pedagogy.” “I don’t believe there’s no such a (thing).” *Would Betsy Prig say it? Would she be right if she did? I think so, although every advance we make*
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is towards Scientific Pedagogy. What we are saying is, practically, “Develop his senses, and a child is educated; train hand and eye and he can earn his living; what more do you want?” But a child so trained is not on a level with the Red Indian of our childhood; his senses are by no means so acute, and the Red Indian grew up with song and dance, tale and legend, and early developed a philosophy, even a religion.

The Montessori child has no such chances; he sharpens a single sense, to be sure, at the expense of another and higher sense, but there is no gradual painting in of a background to his life; no fairies play about him, no heroes stir his soul; God and good angels form no part of his thoughts; the child and the person he will become are a scientific product, the result of much touching and some seeing and hearing; for what has science to do with those intangible, hardly imaginable entities called ideas? No, let him take hold of life, match form with form, colour with colour; but song and picture, hymn and story are for the educational scrapheap.

We are all very grateful to the gracious Italian lady who has shown that courtesy and consideration reveal the dignity and grace that belong to all children, that the rights of children include the right of freedom in self-education, and that every human being is precious and worthy of honour, especially while he is a child. But I am inclined to think that all our indebtedness falls under these three heads, and that the elaborate and costly apparatus, the use of touch rather than sight and the exclusive sensory development are mischievous errors.

The contention goes deep. Is man a material being whose brain secretes thought as his liver secretes bile, or is Brother Body the material and spiritually informed organ of a non-material being, of whom it has been said:—

“Darkness may bound his Eyes, not his Imagination. In his Bed he may ly, like Pompey and his Sons, in all quarters of the Earth, may speculate the Universe, and enjoy the whole World in the Hermitage of himself”?

The person who educates a child must act upon one or other of these premises; there is no middle way, and there is no detail so trifling but it must be ordered according to one or other of these fundamental principles. The one is the method of scientific, the other that of humane, pedagogy. The cultivation of the organs of sense and of muscular activity belongs to both, but the *rationale* is in each case different. To take a single
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example, the scientific pedagogue (awful designation!) lets a child sort multitudes of tablets into colours and shades of colour, with a dim faith that perhaps his brain will be occupied in secreting delectable thoughts about various and beautiful coloured objects. The humane teacher, who has his own psychology, knows that the child with tablets is mentally paving the school-room, the street, the town, the whole world, with little squares of colour. Therefore, if he decide to teach at all what children learn incidentally,

he gives a child leaves and flowers, beads, patches of silk and velvet, things carrying associations and capable of begetting ideas; and the child does not pave streets, but does “a stately pleasure dome decree,” where are “gardens bright with sinuous rills and sunny spots of greenery.” The humanist knows that the immediate lesson is a fragment of material which a child uses to aid him in speculating the universe, and that therefore a lesson is profitable only as it lends itself to thought and to imagination. An artist entrusted with the woodcarving and sculpture in a great building complained to me that he could not find men with any initiative to work under him. “How shall I do this?” “Do it as you like.” But no way that he likes presents itself to the man. He has been brought up on a mental diet void of ideas.

A great danger threatens the country and the world. We are losing faith in ideas, and substituting practices for principles. As I have said in former letters to the *Times*, the note of popular education to-day is contempt for knowledge and for the books in which the knowledge of mankind is lodged. “Education by things” is boldly advocated, regardless of the principle that things lead only to more and more various things and are without effect on the thoughts and therefore on the character and conduct of a man, save as regards the production or the examination of similar things. A boy may turn out accurate and workmanlike models in cardboard or carpentry; if he is a neat and careful boy to begin with, these qualities help him in his work; but if he have learned against the grain to turn out good work, the acquired characters will influence only the particular work in question. Handicrafts add to the joy of living, perhaps to the means of living, but they are not educative in the sense that they influence character. Therefore a child should not do handwork (like the ordering of cubes and cylinders in sizes, or tablets in colours, for example) that is not either beautiful or of use. Because a child is a person, because

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his education should make him more of a person, because he increases upon such ideas as are to be found in books, pictures, and the like, because the more of a person he is the better work will he turn out of whatever kind, because there is a general dearth of persons of fine character and sound judgment,—for these and other reasons I should regard the spread of schools conducted on any method which contemns knowledge in favour of appliances and employments as a calamity, no matter how prettily the children may for the present behave. Knowledge is the sole lever by which character is elevated, the sole diet upon which mind is sustained.

I am, Sir, yours obediently,

CHARLOTTE M. MASON.

¹Omitted from *The Times letter for want of space*.

²Cf. Professor Vambéry's early life and *The Land of Promise*, by Mary Antin.