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Book Review: The Secret of Childhood by Maria Montessori

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In her book “The Secret of Childhood”, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) highlighted many of the problems faced by children in Italy during her time. Montessori, who started as the first female

At the time the book was written, she realised that children of her time have been deprived of their social rights in education. In her observation, she found out that children have been subjected to do many insurmountable hard tasks. They were shown little affection and respect as growing individuals.

During her time, the plight of children in Italy was a very disheartening thing for her to witness. The state paid much attention to the needs and rights of the adults compared to that of the children. Children's social well-being and education were not given serious consideration by the state. The quote below depicts the exact scenario of what children have to go through in their lives:

Many children came to school wearied from tasks they had already performed. Some had walked for several miles before school distributing milk to customers; others had sold newspapers on the streets or had worked at home. They thus came to school tired and hungry. Nonetheless these same children were frequently punished for being inattentive and failing to understand the teacher. The latter, concerned with his responsibilities and still more with his authority, sought to awaken their interest by scolding them. He exacted obedience with threats or humiliated his charges in the presence of their companions by reproaching them with their lack of ability or weakness of will. Children thus spent their lives being exploited at home and punished in school (p.211).

Besides the above, she felt very sad on how teachers and the families take a similar stand in inflicting punishment upon children to correct their mistakes and behaviour. According to her, children in Italy and elsewhere in the world were subjected to some of the inhumane adult behaviours.

They are insulted, scolded, slapped, beaten, banished to dark rooms, threatened with even greater punishments,

or fruit, which constitute their sole refuge and the only compensation for so many sufferings unconsciously endured. Then, too, they are forced to go to bed without their supper and thus pass a troubled night because of their grief and hunger (p.213).

Montessori felt very pathetic towards seeing children who suffer in the hands of adults. She strongly believed that much of the problems faced by children in the world were not well understood by adults. She further explained that the major shortcoming of adults was to see things only from their point of view and not looking at a problem from the children's point of view.

She is of the opinion that teachers, parents and society must show sympathy and empathy towards problems faced by children. In her book, Montessori dwelt at great length on issues that relate to childhood and children. To her, childhood constitute a very important element in an adult's life. Adulthood is the reflection of what one has learned and experienced during his or her childhood. As such, parents should avoid mistakes in the process of bringing up their children towards adulthood.

We shall die, but our children will suffer the consequences of our errors. Whatever affects a child affects humanity, for it is in the delicate and secret recesses of his soul that a man's education is accomplished (p.4).

She calls on adults to respect children in their process of growing up. Adults (parents and teachers) should cater for the needs of children. At one point in her book, she explains how a mother who goes through labour has been given a lot of attention compared to the infant who comes out from the mother's womb. She is of the opinion that the infant has equally gone through a difficult time coming through a narrow passage from the mother's womb.

society should view the mother and her infant as champions who have successfully gone through the pangs of labour. It would be improper to only pay attention to the needs of the mother upon delivering a baby.

Care is taken to shield the mother from light and noise. But what about the child who has come from a place where it was shielded from light and sound? It also has need of silence and darkness. It has grown in a place where it was protected from all assaults, from every change of temperature, in a fluid created for its rest. And in an instant it has changed this dark and silent home for the hostile air. Its tender body is exposed to the harsh contact of solid objects and is roughly handled by thoughtless adults (p. 21).

Montessori candidly highlighted that psychoanalysis has made known to us the secrets of how the human mind works, but it has solved very few of the urgent problems of our practical life. She agreed that one of the most striking discoveries of psychoanalysis was that a psychosis could have its origins in infancy. She further explained that psychoanalysis only dealt with psychopathological cases only and there was no real investigation conducted on the human soul of the healthy individuals.

Psychoanalysis can be helped by this study of the child's soul, since it deals with something that is normal and universal and aims at preventing the conflicts which are the cause of the mental diseases with which psychoanalysis is concerned (p.12).

Montessori agrees with Freud in describing that "repression" as the deep-seated origin of psychic disturbances in an adult. In a child's life "repression" is something that has been imposed upon him/her by adults. These adults are people who have authority over the child, like parents and teachers. They repress the freedom of the child by imposing rules and regulations.

his/her tender age. They were actually asking children to see and do things as they see and not as the way the child wanted to see and do. In other words, Montessori tries to bring to our attention that repression imposed by adults can deprive the child of all the fun and thrills of childhood. By imposing the rules and regulations, adults think it is their duty to take care of each and every aspect of a child's life.

Montessori further explains that some parents almost wanted to claim themselves as gods to their children. She refers this to the quotation in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament which says "I will make man in my image". At many times, these adults go overboard in carrying out their duties in a selfish manner.

In their dealings with children adults do not become egotistic but egocentric. They look upon everything pertaining to a child's soul from their own point of view and, consequently their misapprehensions are constantly on the increase. Because of the egocentric view, adults look upon a child as something empty that is to be filled through their own efforts, as something inert and helpless for which they must do everything, as something lacking an inner guide and in constant need of direction. In conclusion we may say that the adult looks upon himself as the child's creator and judges the child's actions as good or bad from the viewpoint of his own relations with the child (p.16).

She further explained that an adult who behaves in the above manner, even though he might be doing all the best for the child out of love, affection, compassion and sacrifice, but unconsciously he suppresses the development of the child's own personality. Montessori is one of those scholars in the West that acknowledged the existence of the soul and its important role in the proper functioning of the human body. In this sense she does not subscribe to the materialist notion of a human being. She further elucidates in her book that man's physical existence is pretty much driven by the energy produced in his psychic warehouse. This psychic life in a child later determines the type

An animal is like an object that has been mass produced. Each individual possesses the special characteristics of its particular species. A man, on the other hand, is like an object turned out by hand. Each one is different from the other. Every man has his own creative spirit that makes him a work of art (p.31).

In the process of the psychic development, the environment plays a vital role. It must cater for the education of the child. During the “sensitive period” (it lasts from birth till they are almost five), a child is an active observer. As such he/she is attracted to images through his senses. According to Montessori, a child is strongly attracted to light, colours and sound. Parents and others who come in close contact with the child must expose the child to new and different things and experiences.

Montessori is against parents who simply put their child to sleep as they can work in peace without any interruption. She is of the opinion that valuable time is lost when asking a child to sleep when he or she is not feeling sleepy or tired. “A child should be permitted to go to sleep when he is tired, to wake up when he is rested, and to rise when he wishes” (p.74). By forcing the child to sleep when he/she is not sleepy is an act of imposing the will of the parents on the child.

Who would hesitate to say that a child must sleep? But if a child is so alert and so quick to observe, he is not a “sleeper” by his very nature. He has need of, and certainly should get, a normal amount of sleep, but it is necessary to distinguish between what is suitable and what is artificially induced. A stronger person through suggestion can impose his own will upon one who is weaker. An adult who forces a child to sleep more than he needs is unconsciously forcing his own will upon the child through the power of suggestion (p.73).

new approach brought by Montessori in education are:

- a) The child's existence.
- b) Providing the child with the necessary aid as he/she advances towards maturity (proper environment for the child's growth on the one hand and minimising the obstacles on the other hand).
- c) Respect for the child's personality.

Montessori promotes a child-centred education. Each child is left alone to engage in an activity that interest the child most. The teacher acts as passive supervisor/director in the classroom. A teacher should pay attention to students on an individual basis. Being in the noble profession of educating young children, the teacher should perform his/her duty without any bias or prejudice. The teacher should not only prepare himself/herself intellectually by studying about children, but also about himself/herself. A good teacher is not one who acts as a tyrant or a king who imposes stringent rules upon the children. On the other hand, he must perfect himself by studying his/her own shortcomings and make the necessary adjustments. He must be less judgmental when dealing with children and able to rid his heart from anger and pride.

Montessori's first school for small children between the ages of three and six was opened on the 6 January 1907. The first batch of fifty students came from very poor background. They were ragged and timid. They were children of illiterate parents. These children were provided with a clean classroom which was a pleasant environment for imparting knowledge and education. Besides learning in a peaceful and conducive atmosphere, little tables and stools were made available to the infant learners to suit their height. Teachers were calm with spiritual humility and had intellectual purity necessary for the understanding of a child.

Montessori calls on parents not to be the makers of the child but as his guardians. They must not play the role of 'God' in the process of educating him towards adulthood, but be his guardians. They must take care of him as a trust given on to them by God. With this mindset, they must provide safety, security and protection in bringing him up. They must pay extra attention in

parents should yield good results in producing children who will be good and responsible individuals of the society. This in turn will produce a healthy society free from all social ills.

Appraisal

The book, "The Secret of Childhood" by Maria Montessori is a good read that portrays the life of children. The work of Montessori should be inspiring for parents, teachers and others who deal with children. In discussing the issues pertaining to children, the author has gone down the many avenues in the field of education, psychology, biology and religion. In many instances, she analogously explains the stark differences that exist between human beings and animals. She has done this to explain to her readers that the position of man is higher than of other creatures. Man is unique when compared to animals.

She has also utilised references in the Bible to justify her assumptions. She has been very persuasive in her writing about children, which is an interesting topic among people of all walks of life. Much of her information was gathered through her personal observation at her school. Through her work one would come to realise of how immensely she loved children, especially those children coming from an illiterate and poor background.

This book can be a real help for those who are interested to be a teacher and to those who are going to be parents. The human psyche and what affects the personality development of an individual has been well explained by Montessori.

For parents who read the book, it can make them ponder over the many unpleasant experiences they had with their children in the process of teaching them discipline. The book also calls parents who have been over protective in raising their children, to relax some of the stringent rules and regulations that create tension within the household. It also helps parents who are too strict with their children to feel empathy and sympathy for their children.

The author drives home the point that it is not enough for parents to say that they have given all the physical needs for their children in the process of growing up and missed or over-looked

his/her adolescent age but it starts during his/her childhood period. As such, the author emphasised a great deal on looking after children's need when they are small.

Maria Montessori has proved to her readers that she was successful in her mission to bring a change in the mindset of people through her new approach in education and how parents, teachers and members of the society should view children with regard to their education. One can witness the fruit of her labour with the mushrooming of Montessori schools on a global level.

The book should be viewed as a great contribution on the part of Montessori, as it discusses the emergence of the human personality with the strength and impetus provided by the human soul. Not many books on education and psychology written by Western scholars discuss on the role of the human soul in the personality development. In the case of Maria Montessori, her strong Christian background makes her not to depart from the concept of human nature as portrayed in the scriptures. Her ideas in a way reflect her religious worldview.

Montessori has some similar thoughts like Al-Ghazali when it comes to the education of a child. Both agreed that a child should not be dealt harshly during the teaching and learning process. Besides that, they believed that education is not only for the body and mind, but also for the human soul. With regard to the child in the process of getting educated, parents and teachers must take their responsibilities seriously as the child should be seen as a trust given to them by God.

In expressing his views, Al-Ghazali analogically explained that a child in the parents' hands is like an uncut diamond. It is responsibility of the parents like the one who cuts the diamond, to bring the refinement of character in the child. If the diamond is cut in the correct manner, one would be able to witness the transformation of it from an ordinary rock entity into something that sparkles/glitters. Likewise, if a child is properly moulded into character during its tender-age, one would be able to see its transformation from being raw and uncultured into a refined personality during its adult life.

first school in 1907. The fruits of her thoughts and ideas alongside with other scholars have somehow brought great changes in the mindset of the peoples around the world. Especially, after the two World Wars, almost all countries in the world have recognised the right of children for education. Child labour and child abuse are serious offences in many countries.

At the moment, most countries in the world give top most priority in providing education for their citizens. The mortality rate of infants after birth has dropped dramatically and their health has been given adequate attention. A lot of research has been conducted in the area of child psychology pertaining to children's mental and personality developments. Teachers in the world are well informed about children and their mental development and the role of education and how to impart knowledge through the training they gained during their Diploma in Education.

At the moment, there are more playgrounds and amusement parks built all over the world than before the book was written to improve the health of children through outdoor activities. Besides that, these places also provide joy and happiness for children who spent time there. There are facilities created to accommodate children in the restaurants and hotels for the needs of children.

Although a lot of progress has taken place in educating children towards adolescence and adulthood, the book still has its relevance in educating parents, teachers and the society on the amazing world of a child.***

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