

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

“Teaching is more than a job. It is a responsibility – one of the greatest responsibilities in civilized society. Teachers lay bare the mysteries of the world to us. They train our minds to explore, to question, to investigate, to discover. They ensure that knowledge is not lost or forgotten, but it is instead passed on to future generations. And they shape our lives in limitless ways, both inside and outside of the classroom.

But teaching is no easy task. It’s an art form; one that requires craft, sensitivity, creativity, and intelligence. Whether your classroom consists of 3 students or 300, it’s important to be as effective and successful a teacher as possible, both for the education of your students and for your own professional and personal growth”.¹

This is a citation with which I decided to start the final paper of my MA studies in Teaching English As A Second Language. Little that I knew that, a little over a year after writing this paper, I would not completely agree with all the statements of the author. After being exposed to the Montessori Method, didactic material and “teaching technique”, I realized that, in the Montessori classroom, it is not the teacher who “trains” the minds and “shapes” the lives of children, but the transformation comes from the inside of children by working with the prepared environment.

One of the reasons why I decided to write about the “role of the teacher” lays under the fact that Maria Montessori was the only one to write a philosophy of education and create materials to support it. This fact tells a lot about the accuracy and the truthfulness of this method of teaching and about the role of the teacher. But let me start with the beginning...

¹ P. Allitt - Art of teaching, p.1

Ever since my childhood, I wanted to become a teacher. I grew up under the care and love of my mother, a teacher herself, who used to hug me and tell me without a shadow of a doubt that, one day, I would become a teacher like her. This assurance planted in me a sort of empowerment in the sense that it was “easy” to decide what career to pursue when the time came. This inheritance of love for teaching and the love for language (that is any spoken language) inoculated in me also by my polyglot grandmother (who spoke three languages fluently) shaped my future and inspired in me the desire to become a teacher. My professional career started in Romania, where I was educated to become a bilingual teacher of Romanian and French. A few years after working as a teacher in my home country, I decided to immigrate to North America, a decision which did not stop the desire to continue my education and to become a teacher in my adopted country.

The decision to pursue my Masters studies was easier to take than the one to work into a public school setting. I knew there had to be more than a traditional classroom, with tables and chairs for the students, and a table in the middle for the teacher.

I consider myself blessed and thankful to be given the opportunity to get in touch with the Montessori method, which revolutionized completely the way I consider my mission as a teacher and my role, not only in the classroom, but in the society. As Dr. Montessori highlighted when talking about the “new system of education”, “there is an urgent need today of reforming the methods of instruction and education, and he who aims at such a renewal is struggling for the regeneration of mankind”.²

I will present as follows Dr. Montessori’s views on the role of the teacher and how the teacher “must”³ prepare for the mission that lays ahead which is far from being a quick and easy

² M. Montessori - The Discovery of the Child, page 18

³ A word found so many times in all the resources mentioned as bibliography.

plan on “how to become a teacher”:

“A teacher is destined by his own special work to observe not simply insects or protozoa but man. And the man he is destined to observe is not one busy about his daily occupations, like those of insects when they wake up in the morning, but man when his intellectual life is awakening.

One who desires to be a teacher must have an interest in humanity that connects the observer with the observed more closely than that which joins the zoologist or biologist to nature; and since this union is more intimate, it is necessarily more delightful. A man cannot love an insect or a chemical reaction without giving up something of himself, and such a surrender seems to anyone who watches it dispassionately to be a kind of suffering, a distortion of one’s own life, a martyrdom”.⁴

If I could briefly enumerate the tasks that comprise the role of the teacher in the Montessori environment, I would say that the teacher/directress needs to: 1. prepare the environment; 2. present to children; 3. observe; 4. evaluate.

These steps are presented by dr. Montessori in *The Absorbent Mind*⁵, where she describes the teacher’s preparation in three stages. This particular chapter titled “The Teacher’s Preparation” resumes, in a way, all the principles that dr. Montessori states in all the other books⁶ about the practices in regard to the role and the preparation of the teacher.

In the *first stage* “the teacher becomes the keeper and custodian of the *environment*. She attends to this instead of being distracted by the children’s restlessness. From this will come healing, and the attraction that captures and polarizes the child’s will”.⁷ In other words, the

⁴ M. Montessori - *The Discovery of the Child*, page 7

⁵ M. Montessori - *The Absorbent Mind*, pages 252 - 261

⁶ See bibliography

⁷ M. Montessori - *The Absorbent Mind*, page 252

teacher needs to *care of self* in the first place. She “must be attractive, pleasing in appearance, tidy and clean, calm, and dignified”.⁸ How does the teacher care for the *environment*, “to make surroundings in which a normal and constructive life can flourish”?⁹ To prepare an environment that is comfortable, peaceful, clean, in order, bright, cheerful. Also, “all apparatus is to be kept meticulously in order, beautiful and shining, in perfect condition. Nothing to be missing, so that to the child it always seems new, complete and ready for use”.¹⁰ Therefore, “the teacher’s first duty is to watch over the environment, and this takes precedence over all the rest”.¹¹

If the first stage in teacher’s preparation is about the care of the environment, the second stage shows how the teacher “shall behave towards the children”.¹² For example, the teacher needs to be firm and respectful, and not afraid to interrupt a disruptive child so that he/she does not disrupt other children. In this stage “the teacher must be seductive, she must entice the children”¹³ in the sense that, before the concentration occurs, the teacher can interfere with children’s activities “as much as she deems necessary” in order to break the flow of disturbing activity”. “The interruption may take the form of any kind of exclamation, or in showing a special and affectionate interest in the troublesome child”.¹⁴ Dr. Montessori explains that, in this stage, the interruption does not brake a cycle of activity or prevent its free expansion, but it is necessary because it represents “distracting demonstrations of affection” from the teacher towards a child on which this affection will have its effect in time. This practice is not to be confused with interrupting when a child is concentrating on a work in which he shows interest.

⁸ idem, ibidem

⁹ idem, ibidem

¹⁰ M. Montessori - The Absorbent Mind, page, 253

¹¹ idem, ibidem

¹² idem, ibidem

¹³ M. Montessori - The Absorbent Mind - page 253

¹⁴ idem, page 254

In this case “the teacher must not interrupt, because this interest corresponds with natural laws and opens up a whole cycle of new activities”.¹⁵

This principle leads us to the next stage, the third stage in which “the children begin to take an interest in something”.¹⁶ During this stage, the teacher “must”: be the most careful and not interfere, or not interfere unless asked, praise, help, present new things when the child has exhausted all possibilities of those he was using before. “As soon as the concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist”.¹⁷

Dr. Montessori highlights that the teacher needs to activate the skill of “not interfering” which “comes with practice, like everything else”. “It means rising to spiritual heights. True spirituality realizes that even to help can be a source of pride”.¹⁸ On the other hand, when the entire class becomes undisciplined, “the teacher sees in the disorder merely an indicator of some error that she has made; she seeks this out and corrects it”.¹⁹

The spiritual preparation of the teacher represents an important topic found in all the books used as bibliography.²⁰ For example, in *The Advanced Method*, the teacher is compared to John the Baptist from the biblical story which went through humility, self-abnegation, and patience in order to “prepare the way of the Lord”. In the same way a teacher, who prepares and guides the way of the child, “by means of humility and patience”²¹ is “initiated in to the observation of the phenomena of the inner life ... with the help of material designed to bring about development. When she feels herself aflame with interest, “seeing” the spiritual phenomena of the child, and

¹⁵ idem, page 255

¹⁶ idem, ibidem

¹⁷ idem, ibidem

¹⁸ M. Montessori - *The Absorbent Mind*, page 256

¹⁹ idem, ibidem, page 260

²⁰ *The Advanced Montessori Method*, p 105; *The Secret of Childhood*, p. 149; *The Discovery of the Child*, p.8, p. 29

²¹ M. Montessori - *The Advanced Montessori Method*, page 107

experiences a serene joy and an insatiable eagerness in serving them, then she will know that she is “initiated”. Than she will begin to become a “teacher”.²²

In addition, during this third stage of the preparation of the teacher, observation and evaluation are two important step in the process. These steps involve another important part of the teacher’s preparation: the scientific education. “A scientific education is therefore one which even though it is based upon science, modifies and perfects an individual. A scientific education based upon objective research should also be able to transform normal children. But how? By raising them up above the normal level and making them better. The object of a science of education should be not only to “observe” but also to “transform” children”.²³ The teacher needs to take time to observe what children are doing and also to evaluate what children are doing. Why? Because, as dr. Montessori states, “the greatest sign of success for a teacher ... is to be able to say “the children are now working as if I did not exist”.²⁴

Moreover, the teacher “must exercise herself with the material for a long time, trying in this way to evaluate through her own experience the difficulties of , or the interests inherent in, each piece of material that can be given to a child, trying to interpret , although imperfectly, the impressions which a child can get from it”.²⁵ This can be acquired only through observation. By observing the way children work with the material during their sensitive periods, the teacher knows what helps the children, why they keep repeating the same work, who needs a presentation on a particular material, etc.

In terms of giving lessons “a teacher must make a distinction between two different periods. In the first she puts the child in contact with the material and initiates him in its use. In

²² idem, ibidem, page 110

²³ M. Montessori - The Discovery of the Child, page 32

²⁴ M. Montessori - The Absorbent Mind, page 259

²⁵ M. Montessori - The Discovery of the Child, page 151

the second she intervenes to enlighten a child who has already succeeded in distinguishing differences through his own spontaneous efforts. It is then she can determine the ideas acquired by a child, if this is necessary, and provide him with words to describe the differences he has perceived".²⁶ The teacher should also observe if the child is interested in that particular lesson/object, if he understands the lesson or not and respect the child's will in what he is interested to do.

These principles presented above have transformed me and reshaped my entire view on "how to be a teacher". I could not agree more with dr. Montessori that humiliation, humbleness, patience, calmness, delicacy are virtues that represent a teacher's main qualifications rather than words.

I could not end this brief presentation on the role of the teacher in the Montessori environment with a more suitable citation, in my view, from dr. Montessori which represents "an invocation, a kind of syllabus, of our only syllabus:

"Help us, o God, to enter into the secret of childhood so that we may know, love and serve the child in accordance with the laws of Thy justice and following Thy holy will".²⁷

²⁶ M. Montessori - The Discovery of the Child, page 152

²⁷ M. Montessori - The Absorbent Mind, page 260

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