

# La Maestra

## LECTURE 2

*Communications 2002/1* featured Maria Montessori's "La Maestra", Lecture 1. As promised, here is Lecture 2, which was given during a training course in India. Both lectures complement each other, reinforcing the notion that unnecessary help and intervention, however well-intentioned, thwart the natural development of the child. When these two lectures first appeared in *Communications* in 1973, Mario Montessori wrote: '...taken together the two lectures give a more complete idea...of the theoretical and practical approach of the Montessori teacher to the child'.



It should be axiomatic for the teacher that she should not teach notions by means of objects, nor induce the child to use the material without committing mistakes, nor consider it her constitutive principle that the child finish well whatever exercise he is engaged in. If she did that, she would have to be busy all the time, either teaching or correcting.

The material is not a didactic help given to the teacher—as in the old object lessons—so as to make her meaning clearer to the children. The material is the means the child uses to achieve his own development.

The actual task of education is shared between the teacher and the environment. The latter plays the greater part in the teaching of notions since, in order to absorb them, special materials are used by the children. It is clear that the ones to be active are the children and not the teacher.

The teacher is, however, not eliminated; only her task is changed. In our concept of self-education the teacher's activity becomes prudent, delicate and multiform. Her words, her energy, her severity, are no longer necessary; they are replaced by a watchful wisdom and by spreading her attention to the whole of the community. Her task consists in serving, in going to assistance and in retiring; in

talking or being silent according to the case. As you see, to do this she must acquire a moral essence which has never been asked of her by any other method: she must be calm, patient, charitable, humble. In the old method her preparation was the use of instructing words. Here it is the mastery and possession of virtue.

Practically, she must explain the use of the material. In other words, she must become the link between child and material. This is a modest but delicate task; much more so than when the material was the link between whatever the teacher wanted to teach and the child.

Here the teacher renders clear the active work which can be done by the child when the choice of the objects has been made, so that he can exercise himself with them. She is somewhat like the gym instructor who shows the various apparatus in the gymnasium, demonstrating the use of the different items. That done, she withdraws because it is the pupils and not she who must exercise. What the Montessori teacher must be very clear about, what she must know well, is the difference between her task and that of the material.

To prepare herself merely by theory is impossible: she can be helped by the theory,

by some general principles which will be very useful to her in practice, but her preparation must and can be acquired only by experience.

It is difficult to change one's point of view towards the child: to renounce being the despot who must be obeyed in every word, in every action, so that the child's mind may be shaped according to a plan. More difficult still is to change one's moral attitude and become the humble servant of the soul which follows a path traced by nature.

The teacher's task is however easy. She is the means of putting the child in relation to its responses. Therefore, she must know how to choose the proper material and know how to awaken a deep interest in the child. In order to do this, the teacher must have a thorough knowledge of the use of the material, the exact technique of the presentation and be able to recognise when the child is ready for this material so that using it will be of really efficient help.

Here also the teacher must become aware that in order to acquire a proper knowledge of the material, it is no longer sufficient to do what she had probably been accustomed to doing hitherto—read books or listen to lecture—demonstrations. Long practice is necessary, not so much to learn how to handle the material but to try to learn what difficulties the child might encounter as well as to identify the interest that will be aroused in the child when using it. There is another thing: often the child repeats an exercise thirty or forty times. If the teacher repeats the exercise as long as the child does, she will then be capable of assessing how much energy and endurance a child of a certain age can have.

Another very essential attribute the teacher must acquire is to have very clear in her mind what is the "sequence of the material" and which are the "parallel exercises". Besides the attitude, the knowledge of the material

and how and when to present it, there is a third essential for the teacher. She must take vigilant care of the order. The teacher must also put the child into contact with a sense of order. To do this, she must give the child some external rules of discipline. These are very simple—but sufficient to guarantee peaceful work to the whole class. The rules are that each item of the material must have its own place where it is always to be found when not in use and where it is to be replaced after the child has finished using it. This implies that the child can take the material only when it occupies the place where it is exhibited for free choice, but also that the child must put it back in the same condition in which he found it.

This indicates that the exercise is not finished just when the child's impulses are satisfied. He must make an additional voluntary effort in obedience to the rules that ensures order in the environment. This signifies that even when the child has finished using it, he should never give the material to another child and neither must he take the material from another child. Thus, from the beginning, with this simple rule the teacher eliminates any idea of competition or possibility of conflict. The object which is not exhibited for the free choice is as if it did not exist for the child who seeks it. He can do nothing else but be patient and wait until his colleague has stopped using it and has put it back in its place.

Above all, the teacher must take care that the child who is absorbed in his work is not disturbed by any other child. She must be as a guardian angel for those souls who are concentrated in an effort that will uplift them.

With regard to giving lessons: in guiding the child, the teacher must distinguish two different moments. One is that of the initiation—when she puts the child in contact

with the material by showing him how to use it; the other is when the child has worked a long time with it and, as for instance with the sensorial material, he has clearly distinguished the difference between objects. At this juncture the teacher gives the nomenclature which enables the mind of the child to determine very clearly the notions he has acquired through working spontaneously with the material.

One of the most difficult things for the teacher is to train herself not to interfere uselessly. The intervention of the adult often results in substituting its own activity for that of the child. In many homes, for instance, because the child is awkward or very slow, his mother washes him, dresses him and combs his hair. This destroys the impulse of the child to enter the path of exertion which would have enabled him to initiate and develop an aspect of self-sufficiency and of self-perfection. It is instinctive for the adult to run to help the child who still has difficulties in reaching his aim. And this happens not only in the home but also in the school. From this unnecessary intervention the teacher must guard herself.

There is also another type of intervention she must avoid. On seeing the child who is hesitating in choosing what to undertake, many teachers make the mistake of giving him a piece of material to work with instead of waiting for him to make his own choice.

One must realise that what is important for the child is not only activity. Much more important for his spirit is to make his own choice. It is he who, from the many activities which attract him, finally decides which one to undertake. Then he is satisfied and happy because the choice has been made by him.

It is one thing to be active, but how much more satisfying it is to be active at something that oneself has decided upon than at a task which has been given by another. In the first

instance, one obeys oneself, one's own spirit; in the second, one obeys the spirit of someone else.

Then there are still other things about which the teacher should be careful. She may see a child who continues to be busy at the same exercise for a long time, repeating it again and again. She may have the impression that the child has been long enough at it and that there are many other attractive occupations he might indulge in. So she decides to intervene, suggesting that he has been doing whatever he was doing long enough and that she is sure he would enjoy doing something else she can show him. I have seen this happening very often. Here again, the teacher has made an incorrect judgement. When asked why she intervened, the teacher's answer was that she felt that the child should be bored by now, that she herself had become bored merely by watching him. But she was not the child. If he continued to repeat it, evidently he was deriving satisfaction from it. It was something connected not only with physical movement; a process was going on in his spirit in which something was developing or growing. What? Who knows? That is the secret of the child. The child himself—if one were to ask him—would not be able to tell. Evidently, it is something connected with his subconscious.

The fact is that generally after such an intervention the child stops working at what he was doing and even if he accepts the activity suggested by the teacher leaves it after a short while and wanders around the class like a lost soul. He does not even go back to the exercise from which he was called away. Resuming it no longer gives him any satisfaction. Evidently something has been disturbed within him which again he would not be able to describe because it happened in his subconscious. This shows how careful the teacher should be in her interventions.

Another common mistake is to correct the child when the teacher sees some actions carried out wrongly. She may have given a very clear presentation and the child may have understood it very well but in the beginning—especially when an activity is complex—the child may have retained only the importance of the aim but not the detailed movements involved in it. So he may grasp the cylinder with his hand instead of grasping its knob with three fingers. If the teacher goes and corrects him, she will often find that the child acts as if he has been deeply offended. Often after having registered what the teacher has told him—instead of continuing with his task—the child leaves the occupation altogether and it may be days before he chooses it again.

Evidently here also has happened in the spirit of the child. And what is more important: the cylinder block, correctly filled in, or the mysterious inner construction that takes place in the child?

If on another day the teacher shows the exercise with a different block of cylinders, stressing the point of the three fingers as an alternative way of doing it, the child accepts this innovation with readiness and enthusiasm.

Respect for the child and for his initiative is essential. In the beginning I asked the teachers not only to refrain but—once they had entered into the spirit—to count how many times they would have been tempted to interfere uselessly and had stopped themselves from doing it. And that was a help to them.

The endeavour of the teacher is to help the child to achieve independence, both physical and mental. Independence is a detachment from the teacher's aid and assuming the responsibility of doing this by oneself. Just like physical birth is the first step of independence from the mother who carried out all

the child's vital functions while she carried him, so here independence and detachment from the teacher is the birth of the spirit. Spiritual growth consists of the various steps the child takes as he progresses towards the final independence of the adult stage.

To choose one's own actions, to persist in them without being interrupted or disturbed, to direct oneself and to act with ever greater sureness and ability—this is the path of development the child in his manifestations has shown us. But how many obstacles he finds in his progress! He is surrounded by people who—for his own good, as they think and declare—will do things for him, order him about, try to make him conform by threat and punishment or by reasoning, and persuasion. All these represent not only repressions but regressions inasmuch as they push back the vital active impulses that would lead the child on the path of development. Yes, even what is confused with love and affection.

You may not know it, but at the beginning of my educational activities, I carried out a campaign to protect the children from a lack of respect which offended their dignity. At that time, kissing the children, patting them on their lower back or pinching their cheeks was considered the thing to do. I tried to show that the child has human dignity and the same feelings as adults. The only difference is that adults have more power and that this sense of power makes them regard their actions as a compliment for the children.

'How would you feel if you, a beautiful young teacher, were treated in the same way by a male inspector who came to visit your class? How would you feel if by way of greeting, he patted your lower back, pinched your cheek and kissed you?' 'But they are only children' was the usual answer. True, but being children means being more delicate as well as having keener sensitivity to hurt or

offence. I would like to re-emphasise that even now when one goes into schools and, when approaching a child, remarks that he looks attractive and well-groomed, the teacher may answer: 'Yes, but he is very backward, he does not know how to write or do sums'. The child is present and hears what type of information is given about him to a perfect stranger who admired him. So, do not speak disparagingly of the child in front of him and never touch him, either to show affection or to lead him towards wherever you want him to go.

One of the rights of a free man is that no one may lay hands upon him without his permission. This only happens to criminals when policemen arrest them.

Of course, if a child shows you affection and gives you a kiss, this should be responded to; but do not take the initiative. Always remember your place and the limits of your powers. It is growth that works the miracle of making the child an adult, not the mother or the teacher. It is growth which corrects the defects and gives knowledge. Children have shown unexpected qualities; intellectual and spiritual power that lay dormant within them. The orientation of the teacher is to seek that marvellous being that she knows is hidden within the child.

Maria Montessori