

Silence

Exercising the Body, Mind and Spirit

“We must help the child to act for himself, will for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit.”¹ Silence is the means to access this spirit.

Montessori Teachers know a great deal about the materials Dr. Montessori created for the classroom, these can be manipulated and the improvement of continued use by the child can be observed, their purposes are clear. Children gain control over their bodies and are able to move in their environment with more grace than children who do not have these manipulative materials. Far fewer teachers practice the spiritual component to her philosophy although without this, the method becomes a way to transfer knowledge from the teacher to the child, rather than cultivation of the whole child. There is little physical evidence of this work in the casa, yet “her writings about the spiritual nature of the child are fundamental to all of Montessori’s educational work”²

Dr. Montessori observed the children of the first Casa dei Bambini behaving badly because they lived in conditions in which their spirituality could not express itself. Their spirits rebelled in violence, withdrawal, selfishness and disregard for others.³ While developing her academic materials she had two things in mind. Freedom within limits would replace traditional discipline and the materials should be autodidactic, in other words, the material must teach the child without teacher interference. Montessori called this quality the control of error and it is present in some form in all the classroom materials. When a child is using the cylinder blocks, he will know there is a mistake, which must be fixed if one, or more of the cylinders do not fit perfectly, the material calls to the child to fix his error. Often as teachers we become excited to pass on all of the magic of the material. But when we do this, we are stealing the child’s discovery!

Montessori trusted the child would listen to the voice of the material far more intently than that of the teacher. The Control of Error would replace the teacher’s all knowing voice who knows better than the child, is always right and by inference, the child is always wrong. “This control confronts the children with themselves. They see their own error and have the satisfaction of finding their own solution. This gives the child clarity of knowledge and increased self confidence.”⁴

There are three streams of energy in a growing child, they are as interconnected as the three strands of a braid: physical, mental, and spiritual energy.

Most people agree that a child who is unfit physically or mentally will not enjoy life to the fullest extent; the importance of exercising a child’s body and mind is understood. When an educator suggests that he or she will be exercising the child’s spirit, feathers become ruffled. This is mainly due to the misunderstanding that nurturing a child’s spirit is synonymous with converting the child to a religion. It is this misunderstanding that scares many educators from addressing the child’s spirit at all. The definition of spirit is an elusive one. “While it manifests itself in a person’s mental and physical activities, the spirit itself cannot be seen, heard, touched, analyzed or proven. Yet from the dawn of civilization, some form of spirituality has been inherent in every culture that is known.”⁵

When describing the importance of spirituality in a child to parents an educator can quote Aline Wolf in Nurturing the Spirit in the Non-Sectarian Classroom, “Nurturing the spirit will include the experience of silence and reflection, a reverence for nature, an appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things, the cultivation of peacefulness, compassion, generosity and love.” Parents will have a greater understanding if the approach of their child’s education is based in these universal values of all peoples and all faiths.

¹ Wolf, Aline. Nurturing the Spirit in the Non-Sectarian Classroom. Ch. 1. Qtd. Maria Montessori. Education for a New World. p. 89. 1996

² Wolf, Aline. Nurturing the Spirit in the Non-Sectarian Classroom. Ch. 1. 1996

³ Wolf, Aline. Nurturing the Spirit in the Non-Sectarian Classroom. Ch. 7. 1996

⁴ Montessori, Mario. “Meditation on Silence”. AMI Communications 1967 p.20

⁵ Wolf, Aline. Nurturing the Spirit in the Non-Sectarian Classroom. Ch. 2. 1996

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A child learns the basic motions of walking in the first three years of life; the movement is continually refined during the ages of three to six, the time of the child's life in the casa. Montessori observed that children in this second phase of development find things in their environment that offer greater and greater challenges of controlling the body. When a child passes a wall that is of a height she can clamber onto, she will walk as carefully as possible so not to fall off. When there is no such wall to practice balancing, the child will walk on sidewalk cracks. The ellipse provides the opportunity for children through a progressive series of exercises. This is not an area for teaching children how to walk.

The line, or ellipse, is made with tape or painted on the floor of the casa. It was not in the original casa in 1907, however by 1914 Dr. Montessori realized it was "the most important gymnastic activities offered to children."

The line of an ellipse changes in direction gradually at varying rates, focusing the child's attention on the placement of each footstep. The ellipse is an essential element of the classroom and there should be some teacher directed work done on the line each day. This is the area of physical fitness inside the classroom, just as children are called to refine their hand eye coordination or visual discernment by manipulating the pink tower or sewing a button, children are called by their inner motivations to refine their whole body and equilibrium.

"One single activity runs through every complex activity- balance."⁷

A child is made aware in small stages that they do in fact control their own body and slowly gain the skill to control their body both when they choose to and when doing so would be good for the whole community. Walking on the line becomes a moving meditation for children.

"A child's self-confidence grows as the ability of the mind increases from being able to center on one goal," as in walking on the line with natural steps, "to the ability of splitting their attention so it could control the body to achieve simultaneous goals" such as walking on the line with a silent bell. Finally the mind, exercising the will, is able to control every movement as in the silence lesson."⁸

One might wonder why silence is considered control and coordination of movement. Children who are making silence are in complete control of every aspect of their body. They are controlling their legs and hands, but also, they are controlling their breathing, even their thinking.

"It is more difficult not to move than to move well. For this reason children must have done long exercises in moving well and controlling their motions before being able to succeed in this sort of triumph of the will, which inhibits every voluntary movement."⁹

The children, aside from working on their physical and mental development on the line are also working on learning the differences between movement and stillness.

The child loves silence in itself...that silence disposes the soul of the immobile being to something special. In other words, silence does not leave us as we were before."¹⁰ The silence game is the result of months of exercises for the children; it is a point of meditation that allows the child to come to know his own soul. Many children do not have any other place in their life where this inner soul can be heard and cherished.

Silence often brings us the knowledge we had not fully realized; we possess within ourselves an interior life. The child by means of silence sometimes becomes aware of this.

Children throughout history have created their own games to invite silence into their lives, and develop their will. Freeze Tag and Hide and Seek are two examples of child-initiated games that invite the child to be still. Building a fort to be in and hiding in a cupboard are also ways children find quiet. Many cultures promote silence through meditation, prayer, walk-a-bouts and spiritual journeys.

Silence exercises the three streams of the child's energy. Silence asks the child to refrain from physical movement. To do this, the child must have the skill to stay still. It is more

⁶ Standing, E. M. Maria Montessori, Her Life and Work. p 224

⁷ Montessori, Maria. Discovery of the Child. p.91

⁸ Montessori, Mario. "Meditation on Silence". AMI Communications. P. 21. 1967

⁹ Montessori, Maria. "About the Importance and the Nature of the Silence Game". AMI Communications. P. 2. 1976 lecture 1933.

¹⁰ Montessori, Maria. "About the Importance and the Nature of the Silence Game". AMI Communications. P. 3. 1976 lecture 1933.

difficult for a child's muscles to refrain from movement than to move in a controlled fashion. The child must have the will to stay in stillness, even when the body may want to move. The child must have enough physical control over his muscles to control them when he desires. The spirit is exercised in silence both in obtaining silence, and when the child is still enough to listen to her inner voices. The development of self control leads to clear mindedness, and serenity in one's self, and cooperation and tolerance towards others.¹¹

¹¹ Montessori, Mario. "Meditation on Silence". AMI Communications. P. 20. 1967