

REPORT FROM TANZANIA

During 1967 H.H. The Aga Khan's Educational Administrator invited me with the approval of the Association Montessori Internationale to go to Dar-es-Salaam to organize a Montessori International Course in Child Development and Education.

On arrival in January 1968, whilst I was met with great kindness, I found that a fantastic job faced me. I was given a large empty room in a girls' hostel but every table, chair and shelf had to be ordered not to mention the apparatus and all the other items required to run a course. The Nursery school itself was housed in a beautiful, if somewhat neglected building. It was staffed by pleasant, conscientious but untrained people. On my second day the assistant I had requested, appeared. Her help was very essential as I spoke neither Swahili nor the language of the community, Kutchi, and I did not know my way around town.

Anyway, we began our mammoth task and in April 1968 we opened the first International Montessori training course to be given in Africa. We had seventeen young girls with a variety of educational backgrounds. The course was tough going at the beginning. The whole idea of Dr. Montessori's approach was far outside the experience of the students. This, combined with a real language problem and a totally unfamiliar way of working made life difficult not only for them but also for me. They were used to authoritarian teaching

and acute competition with each other. Their fear of failure sometime even lead to cheating. However, I was living with them and this made it possible for me to share not only their studies but also to a certain degree their lives. And there are many things one can say and do when sitting in small groups in dressing gowns late in the evening, that one could not even attempt in the cool light of dawn.

Little by little we began to break through and they began to understand that this was in reality a new way of life, - not just a job - and slowly slowly attitudes to each other, to me and to the work began to change.

We lived and worked in what can only be called 'splendid isolation', which would no doubt be greatly scorned by modern educationalists. The students were told not to go near the Nursery school as none of them had teaching experience and I did not wish them to absorb a wrong approach to the handling of children. Also we had very little contact with the outside world. But now, in retrospect, I realize that these simple and accidental conditions contributed greatly to our success, for successful I honestly and humbly feel we can claim to be.

It makes sense, however, if one ponders on it. I was endeavouring to plant and incubate seeds of understanding of an approach that was totally new, and in most forms of life

the germinal cells need to be protected against what one might call the winds of life. Once the seeds of understanding had been firmly rooted we endeavoured to contact the world with all the means at our disposal. It was fascinating to watch these girls discovering new aspects of life, seeing the world with new eyes and growing and maturing with each new discovery.

One great discovery they made amongst the many was the joy and satisfaction of working with maximum effort, not for another but out of pure interest. This was a new and most revealing experience for them. It took them weeks to understand that whilst I might suggest that they did various work I would never insist nor even ask if it were done, although I was more than willing to help them if they requested aid. In this connection one should not forget that even in Europe and America there are many adult students who seem incapable of working or ordering their work without having some form of outside timetable or pressure imposed on them.

Every so often I had to return to Europe and the authorities were amazed that the students continued to work without any supervision and they were totally incredulous when the girls wrote requesting that one of their holiday periods be cancelled so that they could further their studies.

As the weeks turned into months we found that we had built a very united and harmonious little community. This peaceful and co-operative relationship continues now that they are working in school. During this time I made a safari up country to see what possibilities there were of gradually extending the work outside of Dar-es-Salaam.

As this first course drew to a close we made plans to transform the Nursery school into a Montessori school. This was no small undertaking as it consisted of ten classes and nearly 400 children. It was decided that the only possible course of action was to change completely the staff of the school; so all the old teachers were offered the chance of following the next course with a guarantee of future employment and the change over day was fixed for January 1969.

A week before "C" day the newly qualified teachers went into school to get to know some of the children and the routine. Unfortunately at this period I was unable to be in Africa and although plans were left to facilitate a smooth change over in fact they were not put into practice.

However, after a few slightly hectic days the school began to settle down and little by little the necessary changes were introduced. Before the change the children had little or no freedom except when allowed to play in the sand-pit; they were even taken at set times to the toilet and the idea that school meant sitting still seemed to be deeply ingrained in their little minds. So it was not easy to induce them to be active. During the first days we introduced free toileting but of course many of the children had to be reminded because they were not used to thinking for themselves and often left it too late.

Many toys and activities were put out for them, but in spite of gay and interesting presentations by the directresses most of the children either refused to take some-

thing or if they took it just sat with it in front of them. The poor young teachers were getting very depressed as after all the work they had put in to make the classrooms gay and attractive and all the efforts to provide activities most of the children just sat. And yet there were signs of progress; the children were beginning to be interested in stories and poems and little by little more of them would take part in group activities.

In these early days another great problem presented itself. I had been given to understand that most of the children understood English. This was soon found not to be the case and we discovered that in fact there was no language common to them all. This made this period even more difficult. Nevertheless within a few days we sorted out the situation and endeavoured to speak to each child in the language he understood. Now of course we use the two languages of the school Swahili and English.

After the first two or three weeks a number of the children had become reasonably active but the rest appeared to be anchored to their tables and chairs as if by an invisible chain and therefore I decided that the only way to set them free was to remove the anchor. So one morning, having warned the children the day before, we removed two thirds of the tables and chairs from each class and from that moment on, we never looked back. Once the children really understood not only that they were permitted to move but that we honestly wanted them to move

the inevitable happened: they started to run round and round, in and out, and it seemed they would never stop. But eventually they did and gradually they settled to free work.

Since then the directresses have done a marvellous job showing the children exact techniques, thus fostering the birth of self discipline and of exploration of many kinds.

The next great surprise we all had was the amount the children learnt in the ensuing few months. It seemed that their desire for new abilities and for knowledge was inexhaustible. At the end of six months the change was so great and the result so impressive that it was almost unbelievable.

In January 1969 the second Montessori International Course was started. This time there were twenty-seven girls including some from Kenya and Uganda. The course has now finished and two more classes have opened in Dar-es-Salaam, about ten are starting up country in Tanzania and I believe one or two in Uganda and Kenya. I have returned to Africa in 1970, not only to open the third International training course but also to go around in East Africa to help and advise these new ventures.

Before closing I must point out that the success of this undertaking is due in no small part to the educational policy of the Tanzanian Government and to the understanding, foresight, encouragement and hard work of H. H. the Aga Khan's Educational Administrator in Dar-es-Salaam.

Muriel J. Dwyer

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