

Development of the Child's Mind and Values of Solidarity

Alberto Oliverio

Professor Alberto Oliverio is a physician, biologist and psycho-biologist. He is currently professor of Psychology at the Sapienza University of Rome. He is the author or co-author of about 400 publications. He is author of about 30 chapters or general reviews in edited books or annual reviews. He has edited 6 books on animal behaviour and behavioural genetics and is the author of many books on memory, brain and behaviour. This article is a summary of a longer contribution to the Italian Montessori magazine Vita dell'Infanzia by Opera Nazionale Montessori (2005).

The subject of peace reflects Montessori's ideas on the impact that the "liberation" of the child can have on the formation of man: there can be no harmonious society without a harmonious development of the child. In order to understand the connection between education and peace, it is necessary to dwell on some fundamental aspects of Montessori's thought: the concept of human nature, of individual freedom and just society, of education of the emotions and empathy and, finally, the concept of solidarity.

NATURE AND SUPRANATURE

According to Montessori, human beings do not only adapt themselves to the environment but also transform it, thus creating a Supranature. In turn, this new dimension requires a more advanced form of adaptation, hence the need for education. Montessori stimulates 'man to become aware of his place in the universe as an intelligent creature, capable of overcoming the limits of space and time of his existence, taking responsibility': a concept expressed in its strictest form by the German philosopher Hans Jonas.¹ The concept of nature, which is both result and cause of human nature, anticipates 'the present ideas on the human

mind, about the so called "extensive mind".

Nowadays cognitive scientists do not test only the brain but also the technologies and means, such as pen, paper, computer, through which the brain learns, acts and by which it "downloads" memories. This increases the number of data that the brain is able to manage and modifies the type of logical operations that human beings are able to do. Technologies represent the extensive dimension of the mind: they are the product of the mind and something that acts on it 'giving it a form', as Montessori states when she underlines the concept of Supranature.

INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND SOCIETY

For Montessori, it is fundamental to help the child in developing its individual freedom and to favour the development of a personality that is able to participate in society and to contribute to its organization. This is in line with the concept of a "just society" proposed by the political philosopher John Rawls, who emphasized that individual values are at the root of a just society.

For Montessori the child's individuality and autonomy are not synonyms for egoism but a condition for growth. A just society

depends on this recognition; a just society is able to settle conflicts in a rational way, without resorting to a struggle between the strong and the weak, which mirrors the conflict between adult and child.

A culture of peace can be built through education aimed at independence, encouraging children to conduct direct formative experiences. Nowadays, this last aspect is fundamental: 'there is an increasing risk that in the present era dominated by audio visual media a too abstract and symbolic culture together with the lack of direct personal experiences create hetero-directed children and therefore hetero-directed adults'.

EDUCATION OF EMOTIONS

Nowadays children play more and more virtual games that require immediate responses disconnected from the concreteness of the real world; virtual games involve emotion (chases by car or motorbike, finding the way out of a labyrinth, etc.) but they don't develop emotional intelligence: the ability to read the emotions of others and to implement the appropriate responses. Emotional illiteracy leads to a self-centredness that stops the different aspects of social life and leads to an impoverishment of the language related to emotions. Finally an overload of imagination with a high emotional content may have antisocial effects on the behaviour of children and adolescents.

In contrast, some researches indicate that movement games produce substances, such as endorphins, associated with feelings of pleasure, and: 'in movement games the body feels better and, according to recent studies, the brain function improves'. Furthermore movement games play an essential role in the building of socialization and in understanding the consequences of one's own

actions on other people. Virtual reality is not the ideal environment to "favour the development of the child's mind which is concrete, based on direct interaction, on a series of attempts—even though unsuccessful—made by the child in a slow rather than a fast pace and not pre-arranged by a programme.

These characteristics of the child's mind were described by Montessori in *The Absorbent Mind*; even before the birth of neuroscience and cognitive psychology, she observed that direct experiences and the consequent impressions did not only penetrate the child's mind but formed it.

THE SCIENCE OF SOLIDARITY AND EDUCATION

Supranature also consists of small "poor" technologies adopted by developing countries that have different problems than those of rich societies. The solution of some of these problems affects the "liberation" of childhood. A fundamental problem is the one of food and food-preservation. A Nigerian teacher, Mohammed Bah, has produced an "alternative technology": knowing the principles of thermodynamics, he built a primitive but effective refrigerator with simple materials (earthenware pots, sand), which can easily be replicated by every farmer.

The consequence of this invention is that farmers can preserve agricultural products over a longer period of time and don't have to sell perishable goods below cost at the market. In addition, girls who traditionally had to walk every day to the village market to sell vegetables, can now make the journey to and from the market once a week. Having more free time the girls can attend school.

The dissemination of a "science of solidarity" catering to specific local needs is at the centre of many cooperation programmes

that have very important consequences for the lives of children, whose needs for maturity have to be satisfied in the right period, as Montessori states when writing about the sensitive periods.

translated from the Italian by
Maria Bambina Fusè

NOTES

- 1) Hans Jonas carried out historical researches in the religious field; he is the author of a small classic about theological thought in the twentieth century, *The Concept of God after Auschwitz* in which he raises queries about God and man after the tragedy of Shoah. He became popular among scholars for his “ethic of responsibility” conceived to face the worrying challenges of ecology in a technological society threatened by self-destruction. His original concept of “responsibility” conceived as moral and civil commitment towards human beings and also towards things, our Planet Earth included, echoed greatly in the ethical debate as well as in bioethics, in which Jonas imposed himself as one of the most acute and listened living philosophers (note by the editor).