Theory Paper: Social Development

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Humans are social beings by nature, spending a great deal of time cultivating their individuality and participating in social life. Therefore, social development in children is a topic of particular consequence. Children have the great work of constructing and becoming themselves. In order to do so, they must develop their personality and independence as they absorb the social norms and customs of the society into which they are born. Dr. Maria Montessori (1967) recognized the importance of this task when she wrote the following:

> But man has to prepare all this during the general unfolding of his social life; and so the child, after he is born, has to incorporate into his life all these practices of his social group. Instead of being born possessed of them, he has to absorb them from outside himself. The vital task of infancy is this work of adaptation, which takes the place of the hereditary "behavior patterns" present in the animal embryos (1967, p. 71).

Children incarnate the values of their culture, so their social development is affected by their culture and its ideas about a person's place in society. In a communist society, the individual has no value except as he serves the state. The individual becomes completely submerged in the identity of the group, and the idea of an individual's social development is not considered—there is no individual. The farmer and the newspaper delivery person get the same amount of money for serving the state, whether one works harder than the other or not. In modern or Western society, on the other hand, our capitalist economy has led to a culture of individualistic gratification and self-fulfillment while ignoring the needs of others. A person feels no social obligations, only a desire to fulfill her own needs and wishes without reference to the larger world. Farmers and delivery people earn what the market offers in this society, and if they work harder or longer they get more money. In a socialist society, emphasis is placed on an individual *and* his contribution to the common good. People pursue their own goals, but also

consider how those goals fit into the broader community. Montessori was concerned with children both as individuals and as members of their group, because she observed both characteristics in children and also because she was concerned about the question of social development and peace. So the Montessori philosophy addresses the social needs of both the individual and the group.

Several factors are significant in the social development of children. These nine factors are security, movement, language, independence, order, exploration, freedom, interaction with nature, and spiritual experiences. These factors affect children's development in all stages of life and in their experiences in the home, classroom, and society (Grant-Miller, 2006).

Movement is one factor in children's social development (Grant-Miller, 2006). Because movement is essential in the development of the brain, movement is important in children's general development. As Montessori wrote, "But movement is part of man's very personality. The man who does not move is injured in his very being and is an outcast from life" (1996, p. 96). Children need to explore all environments.

One of the basic tendencies of all humans is that of order. It drives humans to make sense of the world by categorizing it and searching for organization. As Montessori (1996) wrote:

> Order--things in their place. It means a knowledge of the arrangement of objects in the child's surroundings, a recollection of the place where each belongs. And this means that he can orient himself in his environment, possess it in all its details. We mentally possess an environment when we know it so as to find our way with our eyes shut, and find all we want within hands' reach. Such a place is essential for the tranquility and happiness of life. (p. 51)

Not surprisingly, order is another factor that impacts social development in children. Sufficient order in the environment leads to security (another factor in social development) and mental order. Security is a factor in social development because children must feel protected and wanted

(Grant-Miller, 2008). In the early years, this security can be attained through having a single caregiver.

Language is another factor, and it is every child's heritage (Grant-Miller, 2008). From the moment a child is born, she begins absorbing the language she hears (Montessori, 1967). From birth to the age of 6, children are in a sensitive period for language (Montessori, 1967). However, the most essential language concepts cannot be taught; they must be learned by the child through experience (Montessori, 1967). Therefore, the primary role of adults is to provide an environment that is rich in language (Montessori, 1967).

We want children to grow up to be independent, able to care for themselves and meet their needs. Therefore, nothing should be done for the child that the child can do for herself. Otherwise, the adult is hindering the child's development. Montessori states this well:

> The philosophical concept which underlies these successive conquests of independence is this: that man achieves his independence by making efforts. To be able to do a thing without help from any others: this is independence. If it exists, the child can progress rapidly; if it does not, his progress will be slow. With these ideas in mind, we can see how the child must be treated: they give us a useful guide in our handling of him. Although our natural inclinations are all toward helping him in his endeavors, this philosophy teaches is never to give more help than is absolutely necessary. (1967, p. 155).

Children also want to be able to do things for themselves; it makes them feel good about themselves. They feel a sense of pride about their accomplishments. Along with this sense of pride comes a delicate sense of others' self-pride. Montessori observed that children often instinctively understand when to offer help to others and when to let them be.

Although children need security to develop socially, they also need freedom (Grant-Miller, 2006). Children must be allowed to make choices within safe limits. They can also experience freedom by interacting with nature and varied environments.

The final factor in children's social development is spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences are not limited to religion. Rather, children need to experience love, generosity, patience, and compassion (Grant-Miller, 2006). "There is thus a secret in the soul of the child, impossible to penetrate unless he himself reveals it as little by little he builds up his being" (Montessori, 1996, p. 16).

A child's first social life begins at birth, with his family and especially his mother or primary caregiver. Like many other traits, the social capacity of the infant exists in what Montessori called an embryonic state, dependent on experience in order to develop fully. "It seems clear enough that nature lays down a plan for the construction both of personality and social life, but this plan becomes realized only through the children's activity when they are placed in circumstances favorable to its fulfillment" (Montessori, 1995, p. 233).

According to Montessori, the two most important factors in social development are the development of individuality and the participation of the individual in social life. Even in the very beginning of life, when the infant has little sense of self or other, she is developing socially through the formation of a secure attachment to her mother or another caregiver. Nature has designed ways in which the child begins to form a bond with her mother, such as the fixed focus of her gaze, which at about 20-25 centimeters is perfect for watching her mother's face while the infant is breastfeeding. The infant begins to smile at about six weeks, and to laugh and respond to others at three months of age, all signs of a developing social sense of give-and-take with others.

The environment of the home, including the family's social values, becomes incarnated in the young child. Through interaction, the child "takes on the social characters and customs which make him a man belonging to his particular part of the world," Montessori says (1995, p.

79). But in addition to absorbing the specific rules and expectations of the child's culture, the infant of any culture requires certain needs met in order to develop a secure individuality. The factors of social development in the home include security, a consistent caregiver, a consistent meeting of the child's needs, order including a predictable schedule, and the spiritual experiences of love, generosity, kindness, patience, and compassion. The child needs to have the freedom to make choices and to move around and explore his environment, including the rich experiences found in nature, and he should be granted the independence to care for himself and his environment as he is able. All of these factors work together to help the very young child learn the physical and mental extent of her own personality without the fear of abandonment.

Communication is another important factor in social development. Language is important enough in human society that it is both a need and a tendency, and from the very beginning an infant is driven to acquire language, which is fundamental to social life. Montessori says, "Words are bonds between men, and the language they use develops and ramifies according to the needs of their minds" (1995, p. 109). The language skills of an infant develop most fully when the infant's caregivers talk and converse with the baby, use proper grammar and names, sing, and otherwise encourage the first dialogue of a child's life.

If the child has experienced love and security at home, as well as the freedom to move about and explore, then signs of independence appear during the second year of life. The child will toddle into another room, then rush back to make sure that his mother has not vanished. The toddler will insist on doing things for herself.

> He tends always to enlarge his independence. He wants to act of his own accord, to carry things, to dress and undress himself...he becomes ever less dependent on the persons about him; till the time comes when he wants also to be mentally independent. Then he shows a liking to develop his mind by his own experiences, and not by the experiences of others (Montessori, 1995, p. 89).

A good attachment, in the beginning of life, means a good detachment when the child is ready for more independence. When the child has reached this point, usually sometime in the third year of life, then he is ready for the Children's House environment, with more social stimulation and interaction with other children beyond what the home offers.

Montessori intentionally created many aspects of the Children's House environment to support the social development of preschoolers. She observed,

> It seems clear enough that nature lays down a plan for the construction both of personality and of social life, but this plan becomes realized only through the children's activity when they are placed in circumstances favorable to its fulfillment. (Montessori, 1995, p. 233).

In the Children's House, many circumstances work to help the child construct a social life. These features are mixed ages and a large number of children; a variety of activities, choice, and limited materials; individual activity and structure; purposeful activity; the freedom to engage in social action; a limited number of adults and the adult as role model; and the construction of language skills.

Montessori observed that children have a natural curiosity about the greater world and community, and they exhibit the desire to teach, help, and care for others and for their environment. She designed the Children's House environment to offer structured experiences leading children to knowledge of social interaction. For example, the children move freely around the room, choose their own work, negotiate with others when the work is in use, work together to care for their environment, and can choose whether to work together or alone. The idea of freedom within limits means that children make their own decisions about how to interact, but are also taught how their actions affect the others in the community. Grace and Courtesy lessons allow children to experience and practice customs, and give them the vocabulary and tools to handle new situations.

> We must teach the children the elements of social behavior so that their interest is aroused; and as a consequence their attention directed to these aspects of life. In this way these little people who, before, only knew vaguely and half consciously what to do in any particular social situation, now have a clear and vivid idea how to react when the particular occasion arises (Standing, 1998, p. 217).

At around the age of six, the child develops a new social personality. "Of all their characteristics the herd instinct is one of the most dominant," says Standing. "Whatever they do at this stage they tend to do it in groups" (1998, p. 114). Montessori also observed that children at this age "subordinate themselves to children older than themselves as if they were driven by an instinct" (Montessori, 1995, p. 235). Children at this stage grow more independent of parents and caregivers. They develop greater powers of reasoning, which causes them to examine the fairness of everything they encounter in the world. Montessori also saw that children who are neglected at this age often form themselves into gangs in rebellion against authority and regulations, or as Standing says, they begin to skip school to go hunting for birds' nests or damming streams, "escape from a manner of life which in some ways has become intolerably dull and restricted" (1998, p. 354).

So what does Montessori propose to do with these impatient explorers? She proposes opening the elementary classroom to the world, letting the children "go out" to conduct their research and their adventures, after they have shown themselves capable of the responsibility. She believed that only by working with the child's natural urge to leave the adult-created environment could the children's rebelliousness be turned into healthy independence. Paula Polk Lillard describes the process of earning this independence,

> When individual children have shown that they are responsible in maintaining the classroom environment, choosing their work with care, and working in harmony with others, they are each given a new freedom. This freedom comes as a surprise to adults, and it is difficult for us to comprehend its full import for the children. It involves freedom beyond their classroom environment and is referred to as "going out" (1996, p. 102).

The children earn the right to "go out" in phases, first within the school building, then to the school grounds, and finally into the community, first within walking distance, then anywhere they can commute. They make their own arrangements, set up appointments or transportation by telephone or correspondence, plan their route and schedule, make the trip, and write thank you notes after they are done. Lillard quotes Montessori as saying that elementary children have a need "to establish social relationships in a larger society" (Lillard, 1996, p. 104).

It's hard for many teachers today to imagine offering elementary children this kind of freedom; if only because of the potential liability should something go wrong. And even in Lillard's example of a group of children who visit a downtown museum, they are accompanied by a parent.

> Compromises…have to be made in schools in inner cities or other communities that are considered unsafe for children, even when accompanied by an adult. On the other hand, [without 'going out'] children are deprived of opportunities in social development that are rightfully theirs (Lillard, 1996, p. 111).

Finally, it is important to note that Montessori felt that engagement with the wider social community was a must for adolescents as well. Her notes on the education of adolescents, or "Erdkinder," as she called them, call for them to live away from home in their own school community, and to run some kind of business such as a farm or a hotel together. In this plan we see the culmination of the social development of the children, who are now capable of running a viable economic enterprise together, pursuing their own goals and independence while working for the benefit of the group. Lillard's school emphasizes community service in the upper elementary years as a different path to social growth. Lillard says Montessori believed that these years are "the natural time for the children to realize that they do not have to wait until they are adults to help others" (1996, p. 111).

Montessori was very concerned about the lack of peace between people on earth. Her curriculum for the social development of children takes into account the need she saw for human society to change, for people to begin to live together in a more harmonious society. She hoped that by helping children to form a classroom microcosm of society, in which individuals grow and develop both as people and as members of their group, she could send children out into the world with a better vision of how things could be. As individuals, members of our school community, members of our city and nation, world and cosmos, Montessori students still carry out her hope for the world.

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