

# *Movement in the Young Child's Life*

*By Suneeta Madnani*

Montessori lived in a time when the world was in turmoil. The effects of the recent industrial revolution were being felt in all spheres of human life. In the economic sphere, the ability to harness power allowed humanity to use the earth's resources in a way that history had never before seen.

Industries were set up and this changed the way we lived; the two bases of economics both demand and supply grew to unprecedented scales. Socially there was a shift in an age old value systems with people leaving behind their agrarian lives to move to cities where the problems of unplanned urbanisation took a toll. Women joined in the work force, labour laws were legislated and slums with degradation of human existence became a reality. Politically most of the world had been colonised. The resources needed for industrial production were sourced from the colonies; British rule spread to a large part of the world. Science was at its peak. Intellectual development in all areas of human life is what fuelled change. Many great minds were Montessori's contemporaries, Gandhi, Tagore, Darwin, Freud, Jung, Piaget etc., personalities that were giants in their own right, and she was conversant with the narrative of her times. Her genius lies in the fact that her philosophy was informed by the intellectual ethos.

Humanity was at its most divided but at the same time was voicing its protest in many ways. People were organizing for various issues - abolition of slavery, human rights, equal pay for women, independence, being some of them. Italy had just been unified when Montessori was born. It was a time of ferment. The world went to war not once but twice.

In the midst of all this, Montessori's experiment with the children at San Lorenzo echoed humanity's search for a better world.

Today we live in a world that is still at war. A war that is pervasive, not time bound but continuous. It is not just the air, water and land that has been polluted, the human mind grapples with toxicity day in day out.

The solution as Montessori discovered was not to address each problem individually. For all problems she saw one solution, in the Child, this was her genius. She redefined the role of education in human life. She pleaded for us to look beyond creating individuals suited to work the vast

machinery of war and industry. She pleaded that we stop to search within, to discover the human potential.

How does the topic movement fit in all of this?

The idea of Movement in the young child's Life sits at the core of the Montessori philosophy. Hers is probably one of the few philosophies that doesn't remain in the domain of pedagogy. It moves into the field of science and can be applied every day because the focus shifts from sitting at a desk to study, to living life as human beings do. To live life, we must move. What is human movement? How can education mobilize what she called the human potential?

Let us look at movement in the context of life. Life evolved on the planet because of its urge to live which can only be expressed in movement. It began in the oceans, single-celled creatures moving to survive, to find nutrition from the environment. This dance of life created the planet. It is movement that puts life in connection with the environment, links it to the environment, from which it takes nourishment. Behaviour is this interaction with the environment.

Movement is what characterizes behaviour. A snake will slither, a cheetah will hunt, the deer has speed, birds fly – their movements characterize behaviour. The interesting point that Montessori makes is that the function of the movement is what shapes the form. The tiger has a sleek body and claws because its role in the web of life is to hunt. The vulture is designed to scavenge, the humming bird to pollinate flowers etc.

The marvellous idea that emerges from this is that life has a beautifully crafted structure within which all life forms play a role that is vital to all other life forms. There is interdependence, what we refer to as the web of life. Every life form is beautifully adapted to its environment; not just for its own survival but so that its life, its behaviour, its movement - supports in a vital way, all other life!!

This harmony that is at the root of the way in which life is designed.

Thus there is a close connection between every life form and its environment; a fundamental one. Montessori calls this the link of love, the intelligence of life. This connection is what has led to adaptation. Because life adapts, it evolves.

Adaptation is to change one's form to fit the environment. This is the first principle of the design of life.

This adaptation, over centuries got built in; in most life forms we see it at birth. We find it in their form as fur or claws, or padded hooves or in the form of instincts. The flamingos arrive at Sewri every December, the hatchlings on the beaches of Orissa will move towards the sea as soon as they are born, the Koel will look for a host nest to lay her eggs.

In human beings, this adaptation, this programmed behaviour is not there at birth. Building this adaptation, Montessori discovered, is the function of childhood. Over 24 years, the individual changes his form to fit into the environment.

Human movement must remain an expression of this adaptation.

The newborn has no behaviour, he must form it. He must shape himself to fit the environment, an environment which in the case of human beings is not just a physical one but much more.

Today our needs are met without us making the least effort. We enjoy tea without giving a thought to how it was grown, harvested, processed, packaged, transported and distributed. Montessori saw this as the work of the human intelligence on the environment to modify it to suit human needs. This modification has built a layer over the natural world. Montessori calls this supranature. The tea is a part of this.

So the environment that the child must adapt to is not natural. It is manmade; created by the adult. Not by one adult but by the collaboration of many humans. The famous saying that we stand on the shoulders of giants signifies this idea. Groups of humans transact to live their lives together and this is another more significant dimension of supranature, the social aspect of the environment. Communities which have common goals thrive together. And the concept of mixed ages offers this to the child in any Montessori environment.

Human beings Montessori said have a heart that loves, a head that thinks and hands that work.

This love is what we see the child clothed in. This love must find a hook in the environment for the mind to form itself; an unborn mind, an embryo, must latch onto the environment to take nourishment; to create; to

incarnate, and this can happen only through the child's own work which is expressed in MOVEMENT.

The child's movement then, must be driven not by us, but by life's urge towards expansion and then towards integration; by the inner urge to adapt; to create a form to fit the environment.

The mind and spirit is what will take shape and this is the work of the child – formation, self-creation, a bringing into being.

If function determines form, then what is our function? If the tiger must hunt and the plant must create oxygen then what is the role that humanity must play? What is the Human Potential?

Montessori found the answer in the WORK of the children. She saw what she calls NORMAL behaviour – kindness, compassion, love, generosity, order, obedience, discipline and intelligence.

Peace in society according to Montessori can only arrive if every child finds deep nurture in the environment. If his attachment can be deep rooted then he can detach and move out with knowledge and confidence and. The love that humans are capable of can then manifest in the creation of the intelligence and through its expression in the work of the hand.

Let us now look at Movement in the Child.

What is the child adapting to? Where is the environment? Montessori's idea of education as aid to life needs to be understood. How can we educate the child from birth? This question put in other words can be, how can we help the mind to create itself?

The answer is complex. What is the mind? It has no physical existence; it is not accessible to us. What we do have access to, is to its expression in the child's movement.

Nature has made this difficult work of creation that the child must perform easy and vital by giving the newborn a special orientation to his environment. We have already said that life has a special link of love with the environment, in the child we see this in his orientation to the world he is born into. We see in him the capacity for absorption of the whole environment, a drinking in, a continuous taking in which creates the mind. The embryo forms itself thorough a continuous taking in of nutrients from

the physical and social environment it lives in. The power of the human potential can manifest only when this special magical orientation is recognised and protected by the adult.

Without contact with the environment, which can be established only through movement, the child cannot do this very important work to which he is driven from within – of the formation of the future adult.

What establishes the connection? Let's go back to look at movement in the first life forms. It helped them survive; it helped them satisfy the basic need of hunger. From the environment sustenance could be found, but the striving was important – the jelly fish knows what it needs and goes and gets it.

The human child also needs to take the environment guided by strong inner attractions to satisfy deep seated needs; needs that when satisfied, lead to formation of human faculties. The mind creates itself in the first 2 years of life and then from 3 – 6 all the faculties that have been created need to be allowed to function together and this can happen only when the mind guides movement – when the inner life of the child can find expression in his movement.

Any creative process presupposes two things: firstly a design and then effort.

Nature equips life with this design. There is a timetable within every life form according to which development unfolds. The life cycle of the butterfly; procreation; from seed to a giant banyan; everywhere we see this magic – we see order and discipline. A tight format into which life must fit; a plan that aligns itself to a master plan; this is mirrored in the harmony of the natural world. There emerges from this development, a balance; a delicate one as we are discovering now.

Human beings, the babies of the planet, through their behaviour have destroyed many vital links in this delicate balance and we see ahead of us, looming self-destruction.

Why?

Montessori puts it very poetically. She says the machine has become the master of the man. The largeness of the human potential does not see the

light of day; humanity is crushed under the weight of what we call development.

When the whole is not nurtured, many parts begin to wither and rot and we see this all around us - wasted fields. The head that thinks has been disconnected from the heart that loves and the work of the hands has no inner guidance. Every time someone throws garbage on the wayside or spits out on the pavement or wall or the rocks on the beach, we have proof of movement that is not connected with the inner intelligence of life. When the intelligence grows without rooting itself in the love that life has equipped us with it becomes a destructive intelligence.

Where did this connection break? Was it there at all?

The newborn comes clothed in love, protected by the intelligence of life. Its orientation has no judgement. The absorbent mind is the seat of a vast generous love, a love which we see all around us; in the banyan by the wayside, in the sun, in the abundance of the blooming gulmohar. This love needs to be nurtured and it is when the newborn arrives. As parents we sacrifice everything to nurture the new life that is suddenly in our midst. What begins to happen gradually and so slowly that we don't even notice it, is that the life of the child becomes disconnected from that of the adult.

This is where the movement of the young child comes in. Movement as we have already seen, defines behaviour; movement that expresses the child's effort towards self-creation.

The infant is never still, he is always effortful and alert, open to the environment, connected by a mind that is non-discriminatory. For the child, everything as Montessori says has a halo around it – the child loves it. He wants it. He must make the environment his own.

If we pause for a minute and link back to the idea that evolution sits on this fact of adaptation. Life and the environment are in tandem to create more and more development – one in which there is balance.

Every creature moves towards independence and in doing so works towards his responsibility. The vulture must eventually scavenge for itself to survive and in doing so he performs the important task of clearing the dead carcass and preventing decay and disease for other life forms – care for the environment it seems is embodied in the design of life.

The capability which comes naturally to the animal world must be built by the child through his own effort. No one can do this for him. Nature provides powerful sensitivities and a specially absorbent mind to help with this immense task. But where will this effort expend itself? Without an environment on which the mind can work and from which the mind can form itself, the child is left at the high risk of losing the opportunity to make the vital connection between the mind and the body.

And this is the central tenet of Montessori philosophy; supporting the effort of the child; an effort that must always be linked to the inner push keeping the integrity of the personality at its centre.

Aid to the urge that life has towards expansion is what education is all about. Montessori pleads – ‘follow the child’.

But how can we follow the newborn? By becoming as she says his interpreter, by watching his movement and understanding his needs; by waiting for him to show us his needs.

Offering food instead of feeding him; waiting for the mouth to latch onto the breast. The child then begins to feel he can satisfy his own needs; when hungry latching onto the breast brings nourishment. Movement allows the child to form a relationship with the environment. Not only does it make him aware of the environment but also of his own needs and of his ability to satisfy them.

As a scientist who is conducting an experiment would do, Montessori demands the adult waits and watches to see where the child's interest leads him and what he can next be connected to through a presentation. Not ours to fix the movement of the child or to correct error; this the materials do very harshly and mercilessly. If the jug falls it will break; a final consequence; an irrevocable consequence; it draws attention immediately to my own movement and as always to the environment. Awakened is the sentiment of care – a beautiful jug, now broken!!

No guilt, no negativity ensues, only strength, from the truth that unfolds - clumsy movement, broken objects. Who will clean up? The community; much empathy ensues; the children go back to work. What develops is camaraderie, togetherness, a sense of cohesion which can come only thorough work.

A small society bound by work; a peaceful disciplined community where the reward is inner satisfaction of work well done. Where there is no competition or envy only the joy of effort and constant discovery.

The adult is the assistant and the one who holds clear boundaries that allow the community to function effectively.

When children find this support they become calm, oriented, rooted, patient, self-motivated, happy individuals who are on the way.

The future of humanity can only be safe when we turn our eyes on the movement of this young child. Peace results from work well done, from independent capable individuals who care for their community and environment.



*Suneeta Madnani, is currently Co-Director of the AMI 3-6 Course at the Montessori Institute of Bangalore and is member of the China training faculty in Hangzhou, China. She was also on the training team of the Navadisha Montessori Foundation in Thrissur and Bangalore. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Literature, Economics and Psychology.*

*Suneeta is currently the Editor of Montessori Matters, the annual journal published by the Indian Montessori Foundation. She is an avid bird watcher and lover of nature and enjoys sharing her love for the Montessori philosophy.*