

Two Questions Answered - Maria Montessori, 1924

Q: If the children in a Montessori school work individually rather than collectively, how will they be able to prepare themselves for social life?

A: Social life does not consist of a group of individuals remaining close together, side by side, nor in their advancing en masse under the command of a captain like a regiment on the march, nor like an ordinary class of school children.

The social life of man is founded upon work, harmoniously organized and upon social virtues -- and these are the attitudes which develop to an exceptional degree amongst our children. Constancy in their work, patience when having to wait, the power of adapting themselves to the innumerable circumstances which present themselves in their daily contact with each other, reciprocal helpfulness and so on, are all exercises which represent a real and practical social life and which we see, for the first time, being organized amongst the children in a school. In fact, whereas schools used to be equipped only so as to accommodate children, seated passively side by side, who were expected to receive from the teacher (we might almost say in a parasitic manner), our schools, on the contrary, have an equipment which is adapted to all those forms of work which are necessary in an active and independent little community.

The individual work in which the child is able to isolate himself and to concentrate, serves to protect his individuality and the nearer man gets to perfection, the better he is able to associate harmoniously with others. A strong social movement cannot exist without prepared individuals, just as the members of an orchestra cannot play together harmoniously unless each individual has been thoroughly trained by repeated exercise when alone.

Q: In Montessori schools the work is chosen by the pupil himself who seeks the most interesting occupation and, therefore, the one which is most agreeable to him. How can such a preparation fit him to take his place in social life where duty imposes tasks not always pleasant, in fact often quite contrary to the personal taste?

A: He who struggles, overcoming difficulties though his task may not be a pleasant one, or, in other words, he who sacrifices himself must, above all, be strong. This question, therefore, presupposes a condition which is of fundamental importance: 'sine qua non' -- to be strong. The spontaneous exercises which the little children do in our schools, choosing the work which they like and remaining absorbed in it for a long time, in an atmosphere of calm, fortify them, and in this way they are, although indirectly, preparing themselves for the unpleasant eventualities of their future social life. In the same way, the child who is nourished during the first year of his life on milk alone is thus preparing to be able to eat different kinds of food later on. If infants nourishment has been such to permit a healthy and robust physical development, then the grown man will be strong enough to digest heavy food, but not if he has been fed on heavy and unsuitable food as a child.

He who has acquired perfect equilibrium of his body can bend to the right and to the left, and take difficult steps without falling. The acquisition of equilibrium, therefore, is a necessary preparation for difficult movements. The same is true with regard to the psychic life. The child who does spontaneous exercises which lead to a healthy mental equilibrium will be able to adapt himself without losing his own individuality. Is it through illness and disease that we prepare ourselves to be strong? Did heroes prepare

themselves gradually for acts of heroism from childhood on? No -- their life is one great incognito as regards the future. That which must be prepared through the present is strength, equilibrium, and health. Those children who have gained inner strength in their work, and by exercising themselves, as men will be better able than we to adapt themselves to an effort which they do not find pleasant.