

On the way to Africa – Extracts from VISION WORKS, 2008, Peter Hesse – p. 314 to 325

To seriously "give children a starting chance in life", some kind of more individualized early care and development would certainly be needed in many parts of our world – but most certainly in poor regions of Africa. But, why should Montessori didactics be particularly useful to improve Early Childhood Development in Africa ? After all, Maria Montessori developed her method mainly in Europe. Is this a new camouflaged attempt to "colonize" Africa?

Well, if Africa could maintain some traditional values where children are brought up by the whole village, where they are carried on their mother's body tightly and lovingly, where grandmothers play a loving experienced part in the early education of children, a European methodical import may be questioned. However, Africa is part of our globalised world. Healthy traditions can only survive in isolation. Such romantic isolation does less and less exist in our global reality. Since what matters after all is a decent starting chance in life for all children, we might as well look for what works.

Montessori – the trainable method

Certainly, the Montessori method does not necessarily need to be the one and only method. Any didactical system, which puts children truly in the center of attention and which allows them to learn together in mixed aged groups is basically suitable. All that matters is the best possible development of the child. There are also other child-centered didactical approaches for that delicate and vital age before six.

Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf schools also put the child into the center. Other organizations have adapted Maria Montessori's basic developments and created their own system, like the U.S.-based "High-Scope" company. In Italy, the region Reggio Emilia has created child-centered pre-schools which are praised by demanding educators. The "Step-by-Step" initiative, financed by George Soros, also follows those lines. There are more good approaches to overcome the old teacher-centered methods mainly memorizing some text – with or without cognitive "drill-components".

To teach in a Waldorf school would, however, be rather difficult for someone, who does not share the anthroposophical way of thinking. "High-Scope" is a commercial company. Would they work in most moderate conditions with rather little possibilities to make money? Reggio Emilia needs an expensive child/teacher ratio – mostly unaffordable in less fortunate situations. Montessori is also a demanding method – if fully understood in all its complexity – but Montessori can be adopted in steps, so that children can benefit from the beginning.

What makes Montessori so particularly suited also in deprived situations, has been learned and proven in Haiti. Here, the situation is somehow comparable to where Maria Montessori made her first observations: with children who are less fortunate than average children. The reasons for those less fortunate preconditions are certainly different. But what counts is that even children who are less well nourished or who live in less caring families with less early stimulation have a natural learning capability and mostly like learning – provided the learning environment is suitable. My major argument for Montessori is very simple and practical: The *Montessori method can be trained* – even by teacher-students from less favored backgrounds with little scholastic preparation. This is the reality in most parts of Haiti – as in many parts of Africa.

Two opposing prejudices against Montessori are equally wrong:

*The method is only (or at least: especially) for children with learning problems – and the other extreme:

*The method is expensive; it is for children of rich parents.

The truth is simply:

All children benefit from being able to choose their own learning speed. Learning follows the observing guidance of teachers to lead a child in an orderly environment from more simple to more sophisticated learning steps, from touching to understanding, from concrete to abstract. Even with teachers, who do not (yet) fully integrate Maria Montessori's holistic philosophy in their minds and souls, the children will benefit. Teachers (in the beginning) merely have to know how to handle the didactical material and to observe the child's advancement with the material. They have to maintain order in the classroom in a quiet way – without shouting or beating. There, the children will feel safe to learn by themselves with the didactical material. They also learn to share their acquired new skills with smaller children, acquire an attitude of solidarity towards the weaker, the younger. The children thereby "learn to learn" for life. What could be more important?

Besides the vital aspect of self-learning in the Montessori method with the help of the well conceived Montessori material, there is also room for more conventional learning through "being taught something" like in art and music classes, in nature or in group lessons. Montessori can help to bridge existing social gaps and to help the less fortunate to catch up. This is the Haitian reality: Children coming out of our project pre-schools are mostly "doing better" in primary schools compared to children from an "upper-class" conventional pre-school. The reality in Haiti's most problematic environment is simply convincing.

Reaching for Africa – and beyond

20 years ago, the "Association for the Development of Education in Africa – ADEA" had been formed by African ministers south of the Sahara. The former general-secretary of ADEA, Monsieur Mamadou N'Doye, had already invited me to a consultation-meeting with leading ADEA-Africans near Paris a few years ago. He had heard me pleading for more and better Early Childhood Development in a conference in Germany. This did "fit" to what ADEA wanted to promote and so finally led to an invitation to join the "ADEA-Biennale" in Libreville, Gabon, in March 2006. The subject in this African ministerial meeting was divided in three equally important parts:

Early Childhood Development, Primary School and Adult Literacy.

The official guiding question of this conference with 40 African ministers and over 500 educational specialists was: *"What makes Effective Learning in Schools and in Literacy and Early Childhood Development programs?"*

This (to my knowledge) was the first time that Early Childhood played such an important part in an African conference of this importance. In the six "Education for All (EfA) goals", Early Childhood was already referred to, but not yet in this prominent form like in the 2006 ADEA-Biennale. There was new hope – especially now in Africa. Unfortunately, there were no Ministers of Finance from those African countries in that big conference in Gabon – but still, it looked like a new beginning.

Therefore, I accepted the invitation to join the ADEA Biennale in Gabon as a civil society member of the German delegation – at my own expense, of course. In the initial plenary session, I used the possible three minutes for an appeal to the delegations and advertised our "Haiti model". The message simply was that good quality pre-school for deprived children between the age of three and six is a proven possibility. After this short plenary intervention, several of the most dynamic African Education Ministers – all strong women – approached me for more information. This resulted in 35 relevant addresses of potentially interested African educational officials.

In 2007, there was another opportunity to advertise for the "Haiti model for Africa": in the World Social Forum (WSF) 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya. I had participated in this event by offering various workshops – like in all former WSF since 2003. In the African WSF in January 2007, one of the workshop subjects was: *"High quality Early Childhood Development for all through child-centered Montessori quality pre-schools (age 3 - 6) also in Africa – as successfully proven to be possible in Haiti by the Peter-Hesse-Foundation since over 20 years"*. 75 WSF-participants, all of them connected to African civil society initiatives for children in various ways, came to this workshop. About 40 addresses were retained.

Later in 2007, when our new Montessori teacher-training manuals in French and English were printed, I followed up all those leads in a mailing, introducing the manuals "Atelier Montessori" and "Montessori Workshop". Only a few responded from both groups, the educational officials and the African civil society, but the wake-up process is still alive in Africa. Even though the immediate reaction to my initial mailing to Africa was not satisfying, I felt DENNOCH the need to pursue the goal to introduce our Montessori teacher-training manuals in Africa.

The participation in the ADEA-Biennale in 2006 had been encouraging and motivating. Therefore, I tried to get invited again to the next Biennale in May 2008 in Maputo, Mozambique. Initially there was no response from the organizers. The DENNOCH-principle does, however, not allow to give up so quickly. Finally I did get invited. I had asked the German Ministry for Development to put me on the list of the official German delegation as a private "NGO-appendix". That worked well. The DENNOCH-principle had functioned again.

On ADEA's twentieth birthday in 2008, the Biennale in Mozambique even included North-African states and was therefore getting even more relevant for the development of education in Africa. The subject was to be *"Beyond Primary Education in Africa"*. The need to expand education in Africa beyond primary school was reaffirmed widely in Maputo. In many contributions, the focus was, however, still on primary school. Early Childhood Education did not really fit into this working agenda. I had hoped that the training of rural teachers as one desirable aspect of further education after primary school could be acceptable to be discussed. Our Haiti experience had shown that young men and women, who only had finished primary school, could become good Montessori pre-school teachers. They only needed an open heart for children – and an intensive one- to two-year training like Carol had developed in Haiti. This practical experience did, however, not at all fit into the prevailing mind-set of African education officials. It seemingly was too basic. The value of Early Childhood Development was still not rooted enough in the minds of the official educational structures in Africa.

African Education Ministers were rightly concerned about the urgently needed strengthening of some kind of general or vocational further education. Teacher-training was considered to be most important – but as a higher, next step in educational development after secondary

school. This view certainly can be justified, but it leaves out the most disadvantaged rural populations who have (as of now) practically no chance to benefit from some structured Early Childhood Development system. In the program of the 5-day event of Maputo, I did not find any "niche" where I could "sneak in" with my basic view.

There was only one new concept, which offered the possibility to bring into discussion the age group of 3 to 6. It was the idea to consider 9 to 10 years of school as "basic education" in the framework of the "Dakar Education for All (EfA) goals" (as mentioned before). Considering a total schooling-time of 9 or 10 years could fit perfectly into the central Montessori concept of child-centered education, starting at the age of 3 and going on to the age of 12 (or 13). In this view, I felt strongly supported in Maputo.

After having met the new dynamic president of the Association Montessori International (AMI), André Roberfroid, and having appreciated his open-minded ways of thinking, I thought that his thinking would fit into the goals of the ADEA-Biennale – and that Africa would benefit from his engagement. So I asked him, whether – if invited – he would accept an invitation to the Biennale. He responded positively to that question. Since I had finally found my way into the Biennale through the German delegation, it was easy enough to convince ADEA of the importance of the new AMI-president for the future development of education in Africa. All it took was one telephone-call – and he got invited. We arranged to be assigned to the same hotel for easier communication.

During the whole conference, I learned to appreciate Mr. Roberfroid's diplomatic sensitivity. We both pleaded for ECD whenever possible during the discussions. André Roberfroid avoided to mention Montessori – except when he had to introduce himself in the discussion. Directly pleading for Montessori as an ideal model for the age of 3 years onwards could have created resistance. It might have provoked negative feelings among some education professionals from the African states and international organizations. As mentioned before, Montessori is frequently considered to be "something for the elite". This holds true for Africa, too. Mr. Roberfroid therefore "only" pleaded for the universal human right to learn and suggested to remain open and to continue discussing separately, at which age the new basic-education concept of 9 or 10 years could or should start. Without respecting and following his careful diplomatic formulations in my own formulations in the discussion, I might have created even more resistance than there already was to accept the usefulness of our Haiti experience.

Early Childhood was clearly one of the three ADEA-topics during the last Biennale in 2006 in Libreville, Gabon. There, I had found a strong positive resonance by ministers and other officials after presenting the Haiti model in a short 3-minute-intervention in a plenary session. In 2006, to my own amazement I had, however, found resistance from a small working group on ECD, who even banned my Montessori leaflets from a corner of the ECD-table by hiding them below the table. Our practical achievements in Haiti seemed to disturb their views of the status quo of ECD. I was sad and angry. Then again, in 2008, they even "forgot" to invite me to a side-meeting on ECD at the Biennale in Maputo. This example of a turf war, of protecting one's "playing-ground", instead of seeing it as common ground, instead of constructively working together, needs a strong DENNOCH-principle to continue "even though" (or "anyway")!

There were, however, some strong positive personalities in Maputo who hopefully will join André Roberfroid and myself in our vision to spread the Montessori method and philosophy

in Africa, too and especially for deprived sections of the population. There are already a few countries and projects, where the relevance of the method is being recognized. In Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania, Montessori is already working successfully. Our Haiti model can now demonstrate the possibility to make use of Maria Montessori's valuable findings for the benefit of children even in unfortunate situations. Here, Carol's teacher-training manuals in French and in English can provide the needed assistance. They can facilitate training for the age group from 3 to 6 in a way, which is well adapted to comparable situations – especially in deprived rural areas of Africa.

A dynamic lady from UNESCO, Ann Therese Ndong-Jatta, a former Education Minister from Africa whom I had met in Gabon in 2006, was newly installed to be the responsible person for education in Africa. Her constructive contributions gave us hope for the future. More valuable contacts were made by the AMI-president and by me, which made our self-financed trips to Mozambique look well worth the effort.

For me, this was also an occasion to continue my own learning process – at least in the subject of international diplomacy – but also concerning the multiple problems in Africa. During the ADEA-week in May of 2008 it became obvious that the educational situation in Africa is extremely diverse – to put it mildly. There are many human, political and financial restraints making it extremely difficult to at least reach the educational compromise goals two and three of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (please see previous main chapter) – and even more so the six Dakar *Education for All (EfA) goals* – excepted by 164 countries in 2000:

1. *Expand early childhood care and education*
2. *Provide free and compulsory primary education for all*
3. *Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults*
4. *Increase adult literacy by 50 % by 2015*
5. *Achieve gender parity by 2005, gender equality by 2015*
6. *Improve the quality of education*

In the ADEA-Biennale in Maputo in 2008, the first EfA goal seemed to be forgotten during plenary sessions. It was simply brushed aside by the actual problems in fulfilling the other goals. Closing or at least narrowing the educational gap between Africa and those parts of the world, which are economically further developed will need much more efforts in Africa itself – and from hopefully growing solidarity-movements for a better balanced world. The growing global acceptance of an Early Childhood Development model, which gives children a chance to develop themselves, their communities and countries, however, remains a vision which can and must work.

Early learning – a basic solution

As a first step, it must be firmly recognized beyond the educational sector that human beings learn best in their first six to seven years of life. As a next step, it must become mainstream knowledge that a method is most effective to allow children to develop to their full potential if those basic criteria are respected and put into practice:

- mixed age groups
- free choice of what a child wants to learn at a given moment – and
- a teacher's attitude to serve the child, to put the individual child in the center.

A precondition for this is the love for children. This love will flow back from them. Looking beyond my personal and the Foundation's commitments, the need to "grow/develop through learning" must be seen also in a truly all-encompassing world-wide dimension:

Beyond the need to learn for a fulfilled individual life, our global village community must learn to live together as part of our natural environment. There are climatic changes, which cannot be influenced. But beyond those natural changes, our complex biosphere is in danger to be destroyed by humanity. To at least seriously try everything possible to solve that super-macro level problem, all human beings, at least those who are in powerful positions, first need to develop a true global (or even cosmic) consciousness.

On that basis, humanity needs a global vision to at least reduce future global disasters as much as possible. Rising sea-levels will most certainly create misery first in lowlands, especially for less favorite dense populations like in Bangladesh, but also in other coastal areas in the world. This will add to social misery due to unjust framework-conditions on our planet and lead to total disaster – if we do not manage to heal our global unsustainable structures. The earth will recover in future planetary time dimensions, but humanity is in serious danger of losing its soul.

This potential danger is known to all thinking and feeling people, who do not close their eyes to the facts. Additional words like these here may not change anything, but they still must be written to avoid the impression that better solutions on micro-levels alone may be sufficient to solve our global problems.

With this in mind – micro-level problem solving must DENNOCH be pursued.