

The magic world of a child

By Zubeida Mustafa

Edm

IT is a familiar sight. Little children loaded with heavy schoolbags being forced to 'acquire' knowledge. We are supposed to know best what is good for them. We may be the parents, the teachers or policymakers who set the paradigms for elementary education.

But have we ever tried to ask the child what he wants? However, visit the Montessori Teachers Training Centre (MTTC) in Karachi and there you will discover the magic world of the child.

I did that on Sunday at the MTTC's 41st diploma-awarding ceremony. It was an inspiring occasion. The 53 young women who graduated had been trained to understand the child's needs better than all our policymakers put together. They have to "bring out the best" in the child as they were exhorted to do as true Montessorians.

The real good fortune of these directresses, as they will now be called in Montessori parlance, was that they did not land up in one of the pseudo Montessori training institutes that have mushroomed in Karachi — after all we do have the uncanny ability to produce cheap imitations as soon as something catches on.

Sunday's ceremony came as a reminder of how we — those not too familiar with Maria Montessori's methods — tend to impose ourselves on the child and do not provide him the space he needs to grow. Kudos to the MTTC which is run efficiently by a small but dedicated staff under the able guidance of its director, Farida Akbar. Quietly and unobtrusively the centre is striving to make an invaluable contribution to child development in Pakistan by producing teachers who understand the child and facilitate his/her development.

More than a century ago, Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and scholar of anthropology and philosophy, studied the development of the child's mind and formulated what has now become known as the Montessori method. Working with 60 children of working-class parents in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, Dr Montessori observed that children have what she termed "an absorbent mind"

teachers' training centre in Karachi.

Is MTTC's good work making an impact on elementary education in Pakistan? Unfortunately no. Its philosophy is not shared by the powers that be in the education sector. The proud diploma holders I met on Sunday who have put in 10 months of extremely hard work will soon learn to their horror that they will have to unlearn what they have been taught at the MTTC to fit into the system we have created in the name of education in Pakistan.

The sight of Montessori schools everywhere can be quite deceptive. Most of them put the prefix of Montessori before their names as it sounds impressive and fetches them a clientele. Many do not even know who Maria Montessori was. The others, who know about the method, prefer to adopt the law of necessity by devising a halfway house to meet the needs of the parents who are slaves of the system that is in place.

These institutions admit children at an early age, but much before they reach the age of six, when they would derive the optimum advantage from Maria Montessori's teaching methods, the child is already on his way to a regular school to be loaded with work. The Montessori institutions are virtually serving as preparatory coaching centres for toddlers seeking admission to expensive schools. They wilfully flout the principles of their founder.

Instead of letting the child learn at his own pace, in his own language, they literally push him into reading and writing in a strange foreign language before he is ready for it. He has to learn to hold a pencil even before his young muscles and motor nerves are sufficiently developed to execute the task. When he is exploring his skills with speech he is silenced into total submission. The child gets a taste of the competitive life awaiting him when he is barely three and goes for an admission test to one of the schools in high demand.

This is a pity because in the process the potential of the child is destroyed even before it has

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class parents in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, Dr Montessori observed that children have what she termed "an absorbent mind" and that they learn effortlessly from their environment and material if these are responsive to their natural self-teaching abilities.

She worked hard to identify these abilities so that a child is not forced into a learning process that goes against the grain.

To carry her work forward, Maria Montessori established the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in Amsterdam in 1929. Eighty years later, AMI continues to preserve and perpetuate worldwide the pedagogy of its founder which it has carefully guarded by not compromising on its high standards. Only training centres that meet its rigid criteria — the main one being that it must be headed by a master trainer who has qualified from AMI — are granted accreditation.

Consequently, not too many qualify — there being only 59 training centres (in 20 countries) that are affiliated with the AMI and the MITC is a member of this prestigious club. For this we have to thank the foresight of a Parsi educationist, Mrs Gool Minwalla, who was trained by Maria Montessori herself and proceeded to share her expertise with others desirous of working with the child by setting up the

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flowered. Talking to Asmi Fatima Rizvi, one of the successful candidates at the diploma ceremony, I asked what she had learnt from the course. She is the mother of three children attending regular schools. She told me that she had learnt to respect children. "We have to learn to bend down to their level to understand their needs rather than decide for them what they should do and force them to do it," she said. As for her course, she found her best teachers were her own children.

But Asmi's next remarks were disturbing and her observation has been reaffirmed by other MITC graduates. Our education system is such that there is no room for Maria Montessori here.

How does Farida Akbar feel about this? "Parents are trapped in the whirlwind of competing forces that leave them with few options. But some are quite ignorant about what is good for a child. In the process they are harming their own children," she observes. ■

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