

The Montessori development in Haiti

– an overview – a short summary of the Montessori development since our first training year in 1986/87 – and a letter from a former preschool child, now a student in France – from the book VISION WORKS..., 2008, by Peter Hesse, pages 122 to 132:

"Well over 700 young Haitians (predominantly women) have been trained in one-year (nine-month) courses. About half of them were what we call "project students", which means that they did not pay a tuition fee. The other half were "private" students. They paid a full tuition fee, which was adjusted to comparable training offers in Haiti – but always much cheaper than Montessori training in the USA or somewhere else in the world. Carefully chosen "project students" always had and still have priority. With the years and with growing experience, we became more and more selective and even started to ask for a small inscription fee as a "motivation filter".

Soon after Carol had started the yearly training in 1986, information in Haiti traveled quickly that there was this new possibility to learn a profession, which could be used in various ways to create an income. We were soon more and more crowded with demands for training. Many Haitians, who applied for free training, invented some project for deprived children. Haitians can be very creative and convincing in inventing stories, as I mentioned before. It took us a few years to develop a feeling for recognizing who really was concerned about poor children and who just wanted to freely benefit from our offer. To shortly summarize the 21 years of training and their results, I just want to give the general picture first.

Over 50 Montessori pre-schools for predominantly deprived children, what we call "our" project schools, resulted directly from our training of "project students". In reality, such schools are not "our" schools. Only during the first years we maintained our own training pre-school for the needed practical training of our teacher-students with children in a Montessori pre-school class. Later, we had the possibility to offer practical training in project pre-schools. All project pre-schools belong to various Haitian groups or organizations. Those are church groups, parents' initiatives or Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGOs). A list of all project schools which resulted from this work is in the annex of this book.

Teacher-students have to organize their own living and food. We merely pay for the training of the accepted teachers. Those, who are successful and obtain a teacher or a director/directress diploma, receive one complete set of Montessori didactical material as a donation. Most of those didactical Montessori materials are purchased by us from the Dutch quality manufacturer "Nienhuis-Montessori". In addition, successful students or their sending projects receive some financial help in various individual ways to open up "bottlenecks" for new schools or classes to get started. Those initial contributions as "help to help themselves" never cover the total cost for opening a pre-school. Sometimes we pay for the wood for the local manufacturing of adequate furniture, sometimes for the material to cover the roof. Only in the beginning did we also pay a part of some modest salaries in the most needy situations.

All partner initiatives had and have to provide some proof of their true engagement. Besides the fact that we cannot afford more than initial help, this very restrictive method of "only" helping to get started and to open initial bottlenecks has proven to

be one of the open secrets of our system's success. In this way, running expenses for project pre-schools remain very low. We never build a complete school for our partners. They set up what they can afford, which is mostly very simple. There is rarely running water or electricity. Parents of the children often have to be directly engaged, for example in doing repair work in the buildings. But there is no compromise for the didactical child-centered quality of the teaching.

Since we normally do not pay any salaries, the trained teachers have to be supported in various unconventional ways by those, who own the project schools. Teachers usually get some modest salary from paying parents, but not all parents can pay what amounts to about one US dollar per month. In most cases, parents are asked to pay a tiny school fee for the participation of their children, since this is according to local culture. In Haiti, anything totally free is not considered valuable. In reality, however, many of the parents cannot afford even the smallest tuition fee. In those cases children are accepted anyway. The usually highly motivated teachers and their supporting groups are proud of their achievements and get permanent confirmation through the good development of their children. The system supports itself in all simplicity through quality, ownership – and pride of accomplishment.

But what about the "private" students?

We do not even always know what they are doing after getting their diplomas as Montessori directors/directresses, teachers or assistants. Some open up Montessori pre-schools for children whose parents are more fortunate, others get paid jobs in such money-earning schools, some others manage to go abroad. We have no possibility of interfering in whatever way with our former "private" students. Unfortunately, we also have no control over the Montessori quality in such private schools. In view of the many MONTESSORI signs in Port-au-Prince (there are less outside the capital), we strongly doubt that they can really all be considered quality pre-schools. Only recently we regained hope that we have found a way of supporting the quality of all pre-schools through Carol's new Montessori training manual in French, "Atelier Montessori", published by the Peter-Hesse-Foundation in 2007 (please see descriptions of these teacher-training manuals in the last chapter of this book, "From Haiti to Africa – and onward").

Project pre-schools receive the new training manual at a strongly reduced price, private schools will have to pay the full price of € 59 (about US \$ 85 in 2008). Only in exceptional cases we will fully donate those valuable books to project students or project pre-schools. We certainly cannot and do not intend to "make money" on those manuals. Carol's work and the production cost of those books could never be even halfway recovered in reality. The reason why we are so restrictive is simple – and has already been mentioned before in another context: What is given for free, is not considered valuable in Haiti!

To maintain the quality of Montessori didactics of at least "our" partners' project pre-schools is one of our main concerns. In relatively peaceful years between various political turbulences, Carol used to invite "our" former project students to training camps during the long summer vacations in Haiti. Usually this took place in one of our partner schools – modestly supported by the Foundation. Summer camps in a simple form do not only serve to permanently retrain quality aspects, but are also

used for the production of new, locally adapted Montessori teaching material, for example for language teaching. This also furthers bonding between teachers and gives them the moral support for their not always easy situation. During all those turbulent years which we witnessed in Haiti since the beginning of our engagement, the Montessori pre-school system has slowly, but steadily grown and established itself as a successful and well-recognized model.

But there were setbacks as well to be witnessed. A few schools became victims of political change. In one case, the school's initiating teacher, who had been one of our rare male project students, decided that he wanted to earn money as a "private" Montessori pre-school. He had started as a "project school" for deprived children with a group of parents who wanted this school. He simply stole all the didactical material and opened up a "private" school in a different region of Haiti.

In the case of our very first Kindergarten in Ste. Suzanne, which had been transformed to a Montessori pre-school, the system failed because we had not yet fully learned our lesson of the first years: In Ste. Suzanne, where the villagers had led the way to our work for children ("something for the children" had been their wish), the support had not been growing out of their own local initiative. Later we had to learn what cannot be repeated often enough: Local initiative is a "must" for success. We, Miot and I, came here in 1981 to start that first Kindergarten merely on the basis of the general request under the village tree. But this generated not enough motivation to endure. Looking back, Ste. Suzanne was a relatively costly, but valuable learning occasion on how development does not work in a sustainable way.

In general it can be said that wherever personal motivation and initiative had grown "from below" (like in about 65 % of all cases), the Montessori pre-schools developed in a very good way. The best schools continue to grow rapidly from inside out. They need more and more trained teachers. They will continue successfully – like the whole Montessori system in Haiti.

Problems, which are directly connected to the success, are normal – and have to be solved. Some deceptions are also normal – and have to be "digested" in the learning process. Uplifting and encouraging are the stories of some of the children from our early pre-schools in Haiti. Here is a nice example.

A Montessori pre-school child, Anais Exil, writing from Paris:

I had spent my first pre-school year in a traditional Haitian establishment with overloaded classes, when the Montessori pre-school opened its doors in our area. Later, we moved but I still didn't have to change pre-school.

There was an open house day, and since my parents lived close by, they visited the school, and, surprise, they were flabbergasted by the décor, the order, the material, and everything. They enrolled me. I stayed four years in this school.

My most beautiful memories are linked to this school. Indeed, I say "school," but it was more like a family than a school. There was no barrier between the children. Big children and small children were side by side. We did the same lessons at different levels. Each student teacher had to prepare practical tasks, a song, a poem, a story, or a lesson on a given subject. Like this, the children learned many things.

I loved the practical life exercises because of the coffee grinding device, the pouring exercises, to serve the others, or to clean the dishes.... I adored the sensorial material because of the pink tower, the color boxes (arranging the colors to form a rainbow), and the sound boxes.... The mathematics for the golden pearls and the spindle boxes. The reading material for its illustrated alphabet, the sandpaper letters, and also for its secret bags.

The material serves also as an instrument to get on-board a language, writing, mathematics, sciences, music, geography, art, and history. It's an incomparable opening to the human universe and its environment.

What I have retained from those four years is to know, learn, and apply, and to be able to wait one's turn; mainly to respect others, and not to disturb them. For example, one looks at one child to do a lesson several times, even when you would really like to work with this material yourself. One has to wait until the other child is finished and has returned the material back to its place. And mainly, one may only help the other child, if the other child wishes it.

This method is strongly based on observation, it encourages the child to touch, to discover by himself; the child is autonomous, free to move around, explore by himself.... Afterwards comes the phase of application, this is good, one can restart alone if one has made an error until one has finished the exercise well. The material is self-corrective and since one has the possibility to do the exercise as often as one wishes, one masters it and one will never forget it again.

This school is part of my most valuable memories. Additionally, during the embargo, during the Coup d' État in Haiti in 1991, I spent one year sleeping in the school. The reason is there were not many possibilities for transport, as gasoline was scarce. The gasoline was also very expensive. Due to the Coup, my parents had the choice to take me back from the school, to place me somewhere else near them, or to let me stay at the school. Well, they have given me the choice, and I choose to live at the school. I didn't miss my parents, I could manipulate the materials as I desired, and to read as many books as I wished, this compensated. I learned to observe, to appreciate these things, the good things. During my stay in this school, I devoured the books, books for learning to read, but for me, they were storybooks. Storytellers were brought in who familiarized us with the stories of the country. I adored it!

Still today, my best friends are those from this school. Some are considered like brothers and sisters. Firm ties remain between us. We maintain permanent and cordial contact.

I will never forget the Christmas celebrations since Mister Peter Hesse not only limited himself to financing the school, but invested himself. Once he disguised himself as Father Christmas and distributed gifts to all of us. For the Easter holidays, one of the teachers disguised herself as the Easter Bunny with a basket full of eggs. The children were to look for the eggs that the Easter Bunny's helper had hidden in the courtyard. And, it was comparable in Carnival in February, and during the children's festival in June.

What are also unforgettable are the field trips. After each field trip, the children had to write about what they had seen, to make a book together with the photos which were taken. Sometimes we made a recipe, and all the children participated in the cooking: some set the tables, others served, some cleared the table, and finally some cleaned the dishes and put them away.

I still remember the paintings on the walls of the school. All the children participated. And, each time one came to the school, or if one left again, the drawings reminded us that they were our works. There were also paintings on the calabashes. Each child had decorated his calabash. This was pretty and very motivating. Indeed all these activities were made to motivate us and to enhance our self-worth. Like me, the other children must have kept a pleasant memory of the school, of Mister Peter Hesse, of Carol, of the teachers, of the student teachers, the materials, the décor, where everything was well arranged in its place.

The only shadow on that picture was the closure of this school. I felt badly about this separation. And it later proved difficult to me to function in other universes than that school where I spent four marvelous years. It should continue to provide another image of school. A school made by solid learning, of human warmth, comprehension, and cooperation. It should continue to give children a well-ordered education, where learning is a real pleasure.

From this experience, I have retained the taste for reading, for the style of learning with rigor and method. I read fast and with comprehension. I am also very observant. And, this I owe to this method. I can only congratulate these people to have made available this type of learning.

Many parents were afraid that their children may become individualists and egoists, because of this method rooted in individual learning. This fear has proven to be ungrounded, since there is nothing more helpful and generous than a Montessori child. Since the child has learned from a very early age to help others, this is something one cannot take away easily. Therefore, inevitably, one utilizes this in one's daily life also.

What else can one say but to wish a long life to Mister Peter Hesse, to Carol Guy-James Barratt, and to the project! A lively thank you to these people who knew how to guide my first steps in life!

Anais is the daughter of Lolotte, one of our early teacher students and one of our most valuable partners in Haiti. Her daughter Anais was a pre-school student in the first Montessori pre-school, which we set up mainly as a training facility for student teachers. At the same time it was in this small school, where we attempted to include the first years of Montessori primary school in the system. This attempt failed simply due to the fact that we were lacking resources and personal capacity to proceed on that path, due to the increasing demand for Montessori pre-schools. Today, one of our remaining dreams is to extend our successful pre-school system to Montessori primary school in Haiti."