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Getting out of the box! Keynote speech delivered during the Annual Montessori Europe Congress, Gdańsk, Poland, 2023

Editorial note

This keynote speech was delivered by André Roberfroid during the Annual Montessori Europe Congress in Gdańsk (University of Gdańsk, Social Sciences Faculty, 30 September 2023). The editor of this volume decided to publish the speech in an unmodified form to keep the message original and in order not to lose its powerful potential that contributed to the title of this special issue as well as to the motto of the next Montessori Europe Annual Congress 2025, which will take place in Oslo, Norway, from 9 to 11 May. The theme of the Congress is “Montessori: Out of the Box”. The only edits include linguistic and grammar details and punctuation.

André Roberfroid is AMI’s Global Ambassador. He was UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for programme and strategic planning, in charge of developing the overall UNICEF strategies in the field of child health, education, nutrition, and child protection until his retirement in 2003. His past work involved work for children in Congo, Gabon, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon. In 1984 he became senior planning officer in the UNICEF regional office for the Middle East and North Africa, and advised governments on policies for children in all the countries of the Middle East (from Morocco to Iran). André was President of AMI from 2005 to 2014. André Roberfroid has been committed to child rights for most of his life, having worked for UNICEF for more than 30 years, which then led him to connect with AMI and the global Montessori community. Often referred to as a child rights militant, André also contributed to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. André continues to support AMI in his role as Global Ambassador.

We educators need to get out of the box!

We need to get out of the Montessori method box!

Lech Wałęsa said:

The sole and basic source of our strength is the solidarity of the workers, the peasants and the intelligentsia, the solidarity of the nation, the solidarity of people who seek to live in dignity, truth, and in harmony with their conscience.

Nelson Mandela said:

One of the challenges of our times is to re-instil in the consciousness of our people the sense of human solidarity, of being in the world for one another.

**Let us first remind ourselves that Montessori is much more
than a pedagogy, more than a method!**

We like to call ourselves a social movement. I believe that our mission for a new world is precisely to launch that social movement. It does not exist yet. A social movement is made of people who get together because they share a set of values, a common wisdom, and a corpus of knowledge. Our values proclaim the primacy of the child, and his or her role as a transformative actor of humanity. Our wisdom demands that we observe and follow the child. The knowledge is the product of Maria Montessori's scientific work and the lessons we have learned over one hundred years.

We, Montessorians, are the recipients of this heritage. We have the obligation to preserve and develop it. Our first challenge is therefore to be the very strict promoters of excellence in its implementation. However, we did not achieve the impact necessary to make a social change. Notably we did not reach the critical number of followers to create a movement, and we did not initiate the paradigm change in the role of children as agent of change.

As Maria Montessori said in a New York Times article of May 7, 1933:

a world without illusions and dominated by fear of the future must rely to rebuild itself, not on technology, nor on social conquests, nor even on the liberation of women, but on the emancipated child. The child, finally freed from adult domination and free to fully realize his or her own personality, is the real hope for rebuilding society and creating a new world.

These words define our mission for the new world.

**We are talking about the fundamental role of education
in shaping the future of the planet.**

What is this new world, this new world that we are confronted with?

Let's first reflect on ourselves. The essential characteristic of the human species is an irresistible need to progress, made possible by a unique capacity to learn from the past to create a future that will be driven by our constant will to improve our living conditions through observation and understanding. Yet our world appears to be in shamble, dominated by doubts and anxiety.

Our organized societies fail to offer to their citizen a political, social, and administrative structure that allows individual freedom and promotes the possibility for each member of society to develop and practise his or her personal talents, a clean and sustainable environment, economic conditions necessary for decent life, an effective health infrastructure, and particularly an education opportunity to allow children to develop the talents needed

for an improved future, and, above all, a lasting peace among all human beings, without which none of the above would be possible. The prominent role of education to meet these challenges is obvious and not disputed, although not always given the needed attention.

Most enlightened observers tell us that the world is affected by profound and complex transformations. This is true, but it is not new. Since its origin, *homo sapiens* has been constantly evolving. Humans have been motivated by the will to secure access to the resources needed to survive, and to protect themselves from the dangers of an often-hostile world.

With its intelligent powers of observation, mankind was able to free itself from the accidents of an unpredictable nature. Notably by discovering the domestication of fire, plants, and animals. This was undeniable progress, which led to the improvements in food safety and quality.

**Yet, with every liberating advance comes
a new responsibility for those who benefit from it.**

This new freedom requires discipline in its use, to minimize the unintended, but potentially dangerous, effects of uncontrolled or excessive use. The current state of our way of life shows us how liberating progress can sometimes turn into a self-destructive practice. The progressive concentration of larger populations in villages or urban setting supported by a common territory makes joint management of the group concerned necessary. Land management, water management, management of the cropping calendar, management of the conservation, processing and distribution of produce, management of the safety of people and property.

In other words:

We have to get organized!

We have to make collective decisions!

**We have to make choices from among options that are necessarily varied and
sometimes contradictory!**

**We have to devise a mechanism that would enable a decision to be taken that would
be binding on everyone!**

We have to define power and the conditions for acquiring and exercising it!

We should observe here that the necessity to define power immediately triggers the need to define freedom, or *vice versa*. This quest for the Holy Grail has marked the history of our species from the Bronze Age to the present day.

Many solutions, whether authoritarian, populist, democratic, utopian, revolutionary, or reformist, have been tried. They have stemmed from often respectable reflections on the nature of human societies, ranging from divine right to human rights. Some attempts were based on the recognition of the diversity of the members of the species, divided into sexes, races, castes, or social classes. Others proclaimed the fundamental uniqueness of the species, making equality the absolute value. History shows that many of these theories have

been applied, often with some success. But all of them eventually failed, either as victims of their internal contradictions or destroyed by outside intervention.

The truth is that the quest continues and will continue for as long as our species exists, because – as Laozi said, **this is not the end of the road that counts, but the road itself.**

As it was often the case during our long history, our time is going through a difficult new period of profound change. For the first time in its history, humanity is living in a finite world. With the exception of a few tribes surviving in the equatorial forests, **interdependence has become the common rule.**

Withdrawal into oneself is no longer an option. No country can ignore the constraints caused by its reciprocal dependence on the rest of the world. For the first time, the human species occupies almost the whole of planetary space. In the past, we could try to solve our problems by occupying open spaces, emigrating to under-populated areas, or even by conquest. In reality, we are at the dawn of a new transformation that will challenge us to assume our condition as a universal species and implement mechanisms to manage a larger, more complex world. That is our new world. Such a transformation is particularly difficult as we have progressively developed a tendency to identify ourselves by highlighting the differences among cultures, races, religions.

**Identities of all kinds have become instruments of separation,
mutual fears, and aggressivity.**

As in the past, there will be many attempts, failures, setbacks, and ephemeral successes.

We have to be prepared to live with uncertainty, and that scares us!

And yet, the long history of our species has been one of victory over uncertainty. So, let's not lose faith: we'll get through this crisis like all the others. As I speak, our planet and the humanity that occupies it seem to be victims of a kind of vertigo. Anguish, fear, and confusion are the most widespread feelings.

The past lures us, the present eludes us, the future recedes.

The past lures us like a distorting mirror. For conservatives, it brings up images of a time when life was organized around simple, generally accepted social systems and human values. We know, of course, that this perception of the past is nothing but a myth, that this "golden age" never existed. However, this image of a happy, harmonious past continues to serve as a foundation for conservatism, which idealizes the past and sees change as inevitably catastrophic.

The present eludes us. Globalization is not the result of the political will of a temporarily dominant player who would find it in his interest to assert his empire or his hold on the world. Nor is globalization the result of elaborate plots hatched by economic and financial predators who see it as an opportunity to assert their domination over the world. Globalization is the result of the evolution of history, of science and technology, of man's natural propensity to seek and discover. As soon as mankind invented agriculture, and thus

enabled the generation of surpluses, it became necessary to exchange, first goods and then services. This need for exchange forced people to meet, get to know and negotiate with people outside their immediate circle.

That's why the future is slipping away. The difficulty of reading the present prevents us from imagining the future. This situation is unprecedented and extremely complex. Until now, exchanges between clans, tribes, countries, and empires have been based on a logic of power relations. The multiplication of encounters and exchanges in a finite world has rendered this logic inoperative. And yet, international relations continue to be essentially governed by power games and conflicting strategies. The illusion remains that the use of force can help solve problems by imposing a solution from outside. How many failures will it take for us to understand the dramatic ineffectiveness of this strategy?

The world has lost its bearings, and the values that should guide our personal lives, our social constructs and our international relations are increasingly perceived as blurred, confused and even old-fashioned. This is a major challenge.

Today we give the image of a society blinded by fear and paralysed by hatred!

We see the future only in the distorting mirror of a misunderstood past!

We reject the contribution of multiple talents!

Are we overwhelmed by a morbid depression? Do we want to build a present without a future? Do we want to suffer the deadly boredom of a world without diversity, where everyone is locked into a narrow identity? Are we resigned to living in a culture-free society where tomorrow will forever be a repetition of yesterday? Do we want to die of boredom rather than face uncertainty, rather than welcome the creative differences? Do we have to accept that our species is living through the end of hope?

Certainly not. Let's not forget that for millennia, the multiple talents of men and women all over the world have overcome conflicts and built cultures. They have dreamt of a world where the future is nourished by the successes of the present, where diversity favours creation.

A world in which freedom is founded on respect for nature and other human beings, and spreads through active solidarity among all!

We are "the product" of millions of years of slow, sometimes destructive, but always positive evolution. The world's youth has never been so committed, so creative, so innovative. The remedy to our worries and anxieties lies in the confidence we have on these new generations. Our responsibility is to assist them in creating the most stimulating environment, in allowing them to discover their talents and make the best use of them.

I am, and we are, confident that they will succeed in projecting humanity into a new age. Let's observe our children with humility, and not seek to protect them, but to strengthen them, as we face the ultimate challenge of our species:

Resolve the contradiction between individual freedom and collective organization.

Our role and responsibility as Montessorians is to give the children a chance to face this challenge. It is a terrifying task. It will demand all of us to... **leave our comfort zone within which we feel free from fear and surprises!**

Maria Montessori discovered initially that the education system was operating inside a box and that box was the factor limiting the development of the talents of children. She quickly realized that the liberation of children could not be achieved inside the boxes.

So not only did she create a revolutionary method, but also offered a new opportunity to practise it “outside the boxes.”

She created a loose structure that made it possible to open schools practising the methods and offered training opportunities. She did it outside all the existing boxes. And it worked. She strongly refused to restrict the use of her name; she was concerned that protecting the name would limit the free spread of the message.

She believed in the emergence of a movement that would fundamentally change the relationship between adult and children. Children would finally be given the possibility to acquire the true freedom to realize their personality and develop their talents. Such a change would help humanity to move into a new age that some scientists call the Anthropocene, the age of humans. Maria Montessori tried many times to challenge the world to face that change.

Let us recognize that it has not worked yet!

We, Montessorians, could not resist the appeal of the boxes and... **we created new boxes to retrieve our comfort.**

Inside our new comfortable boxes, we recreated a safe environment in which we could develop the new model of schools away from challenges and criticism. The good news is that inside our boxes the model has worked. Children in the boxes do develop their talents and capacities. Our model has been certified by modern science, particularly brain neurology.

Should we celebrate? Unfortunately, not!

Not only are we still inside boxes with little impact on the outside world, but the various Montessori boxes rarely cooperate and indeed often are in a conflicting relationship.

Should we despair? Fortunately, not!

The time we have spent in boxes was probably necessary to consolidate the practice created by Maria Montessori, to test it with a good number of children in many different areas, to put in place an effective training process and so on. Most likely, we could not have done it without the protection of the box in a world of education dominated by competition and sometimes hostility. The good news today is that, supported by our experience, **we are now ready to face the world and to become a true international movement.**

A movement opened to all educators and parents who have observed the effectiveness of the method, but even more importantly share one universal basic principle and three founding values:

The basic principle is that the child is recognized as the builder of the future.

And possess in an embryonic form the capacities to play an effective role in the continuation of the permanent progress of the human species. Only the child can develop their capacities in a stimulating environment, free from the adult's domination. Such recognition is indispensable for the implementation of a successful education process. The three founding values are:

Freedom is a concept that is usually misunderstood.

Freedom is not a state of affairs, freedom is not given, nor gained from someone else. Freedom is a practice that requires the capacity to make the best use of our talents to make decisions while respecting the world around us, human and nature. Freedom exists potentially within every individual and must be nurtured during the education process. Freedom is a building block of human societies, and the ultimate indicator of permanent progress. It cannot succeed without the next value.

Respect is a condition for freedom to exist and survive.

No society can survive if its members do not respect each other. The human community cannot survive if its different components do not respect each other. Life will not survive on earth if different species do not respect each other and jointly respect our common nature. We observe in our Montessori classes that respect is easily practised. Children have a natural respect for each other until such time that adults teach them differently. The third value is solidarity.

Solidarity: a recognition that when obstacles occur, they cannot be overcome by one individual. The need to respond to new challenges requires creativity and joined efforts.

The practice of this value is not necessarily natural. It requires training and observation. I do believe that the time has come to face the challenge. I suggest we start with a global reflexion on the principle and the values.

Let us dare to leave our box and allow the world to hear our message!

Let us join the global conversation on the future!

Let's get out of the boxes and recognize openly that the future is in the hands, the brain and the genius of the children that we contribute to liberate!

Let us recognize that the Montessori pedagogy is not an end, but an instrument that we offer to the children!

We are an instrument to open the gates for the children to create the new world.

Let us liberate our creativity!

Let us be opened to each other efforts!

Let us practise the solidarity that we all preach!

Let us overcome our egos for the sake of children!

We received a treasure from Maria Montessori. We have been keeping it in a safe box. It is time to offer it to the world. I believe that the time has come for a new movement. Not a movement for children, but a movement with and by children.

Edited by: Jaroslaw Jendza