

The Revival of the Montessori-Method

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The Revival of the Montessori Method

***The author studied under Dr. Montessori,
and had her own school in Vienna which was
closed by the Nazis in 1938***

There is growing interest in reviving the educational concepts and methods developed by Madame Maria Montessori half a century ago. Her theories are again arousing interest and controversy in view of current reanalysis of educational practices. Madame Montessori was the first woman to earn an M.D. from an Italian University. Before developing her system of education she made scientific contributions in the fields of anthropology and child development. This system initially was found to be highly effective in work with mentally retarded children.

HOW DID THE MONTESSORI method fare in this country? It was enthusiastically welcomed before World War I. Apart from translations of

Montessori's own books, at least eight books on the method (with the name Montessori in the title) were published between 1912 and 1915—but in contrast to England, Holland, and other European countries, where the method was further experimented with and is still highly accredited, no growth or development of the method took place in the United States. While European countries were articulate in their appraisal or critique of the method in the 1920's, nothing of significance is found in the American educational literature of that period.

What possible explanation can be offered for the reaction of the American educators? The enthusiasm with which new ideas are accepted and propagated in this country carries

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an inherent destructive element within it: there is a similar disposition to be as quick in discarding or forgetting as in accepting and to move forward again. There also seems to be no climate for continuing "movements."

Montessori's Roman grandeur, her almost religious belief in the child and his inherent power for self-education, her ideas of making childhood the focus of a world reform, as expressed in her "Partito del Bambino" and her "Bill of Rights for Children," are far removed from American scientific attitudes.

The center of our interest in child study has moved in two entirely different directions: on the one hand towards social and emotional development and relationships, and toward studies trying to determine the dynamic forces at work there; on the other hand, to a multitude of statistical and methodological studies of details, without consideration of the "whole" child.

Neither Montessori's mystical adoration of the child nor her stress on the rational side of personality (her concept of psychologic development consisting essentially of sensory growth and its intellectual counterpart) are easily fitted into either of these patterns. Due to the ensuing attitude of depreciation of her work, the most constructive and original parts of Montessori's contribution to child development and education were overlooked and not further investigated. One of the rare remarks about the method—found in the *Current Biography* (1940)—is characteristic

in its irrelevance:

"There are many educators who feel that the Montessori method has passed its heyday and is now overshadowed by the system of Froebel and the Dalton Plan. There are many educators, too, who feel that it lays too much stress on manual training to the neglect of the intellect and the imagination."

It is rather difficult to state Montessori's principles concisely. In spite of her great dedication to science and her conviction that she utilizes scientific methods, her educational work shows little evidence of what today would be called scientific procedure. It is rather an intuitive and creative way of seeing and describing developmental needs of children and observing which tools help them best in their growth.

"Here is a great enthusiast, great as Pestalozzi; here is a great reformer who sees that science alone can give us true conceptions of education; here is a great woman who loves children, of whom she has amazing intuitive and experimental knowledge; here, too, is a great teacher: But she is not a scientist and does not think and write as one."¹

It is not easy to warm up to Montessori's theoretical writings today, particularly if read in translation. We are apt to find many rhetorical generalizations and charmingly described episodes, but few explicitly stated principles. However, her notes on techniques for using her teaching material are as fresh as ever.

What brought the change in atti-

tudes that made a revival possible? Since the day of the first sputnik, the American public was shaken and asked questions about our system of education. Did our children have the persistence and discipline in learning which our perplexing world requires? Did we teach children to think clearly and work hard? Obviously, many people answered No, and educators started to remedy this situation. The Montessori method offered a possibility.

We should consider Montessori's way of teaching not only from the point of view of the nursery school educator but also as encompassing the elementary school age. Since my personal experience was mainly with children five to ten years of age, I will refer to learning of five- and six-year-olds.

Nursery school teachers are of course right if they worry about the rigidity in following strict rules in the use of materials. But we have neglected to consider the young child's need for structure in his environment to make him truly independent. It is the teacher's task to know when to use structure and when to discard it.

Creativity is not stopped if children have skills. For instance, painting becomes more meaningful if children know how to use a brush without dripping. There are some children who can only be creative if they are sure of a technique. There-

fore, the teaching of skills, when children reach out for them spontaneously may lead to creativity and not away from it.

Other educators are concerned because they cannot reconcile a structured approach with their psychological insights. Through psychoanalysis we have learned to understand the seriousness with which children go about finding their sex role and their place in the family. We don't think that the trials and tribulations during the Oedipal phase are playful interludes—they are serious and at times painful learning experiences. The same seriousness was recognized and encouraged by Montessori in the urge for learning—if self-chosen—during the same phase of development. She showed us the joy that comes from mastery and knowledge. A child has to accept that he can not replace father or mother in relation to the other parent, but he certainly can narrow the gap between his wishes and reality if his learning is taken seriously. Dramatic play materials help console a child about his short comings by building up his status in a make-believe world (being father, mother—or an astronaut), but they don't give the satisfaction that comes from new achievement and independence.

The activities of daily living in a Montessori class are real—just as woodworking in our nursery schools is real and not dramatic play. Children scrub, wash, and cook, and see (or eat) the results of their efforts. As in woodworking, the tools are real, and they work. They require at-

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tention, but children can use them well because they are created to their size and strength.

We miss these principles in the household corner of today's nursery school. My "pet peeves" are the child sized play refrigerator that looks real enough but lacks the one characteristic that would make it a refrigerator, namely to keep things cold, and the faucet on the sink through which no water comes.

Toy-sized house equipment, people, vehicles, or animals, for dramatic play have of course a different function and clearly let the child know that he is playing. I like these toys best when they are quite small.

The great stress on purposeful activity at an early age, seemingly precocious achievement, orderliness, and obedience, that characterizes today's American image of Montessori schools, makes some educators uneasy. What concerns me, though, about the emphasis on early academic learning in today's presentation of the Montessori method to the public is that it may mislead parents. They may organize a school or send their children to one, not out of genuine understanding of the method or respect for their children's needs, but out of their own need to see precocious results in learning rather than to enjoy the child's growth. Such parents may push for tangible achievements and be anxious and disillusioned if they don't occur as propagandized.

Statements like the heading of the article in the *Saturday Evening Post* that the method "teaches three-year-

olds reading, writing and arithmetic," or another statement that ten-year-olds are familiar with Latin, confuse the issue. These pronouncements sound as if every child raised in a Montessori school would or should talk two languages and be familiar with Latin at age ten, disregarding both the environment in which the child grows up, and his personal potential. Children in a country like Holland will be exposed to other languages and would learn them early in any school system there, because there is an incentive and a necessity for it.

Catholic children who learn to understand and to participate in the liturgy of their religion may be interested in Latin. But I doubt that an interest in antiquity, particularly in mythology, which so many nine-year and ten-year-olds have, would be enhanced by reading a text in the original language. Children's interests are highly influenced by personal questions to which they want answers that they often look for through avid reading. But the problem as well as the interest may soon subside, and in such a case a study such as Latin may become a useless and early burden.

Montessori never suggested that three-year-olds should do this and four-year-olds that, but she trained us to recognize "sensitive periods" in individual development and to nurture them. These sensitive periods are characterized by the ease and delight in specific learning and by the real abandonment of the child in a chosen task. If these periods are

missed, or if a child was held back from learning when he was eager to go ahead, difficulties such as in reading or in number concepts can occur. Again, this sensory sensitivity, like interest in forms and shapes, finds its counterpart in the eagerness of observation of relationships in the family, where nothing goes unobserved.

Some differences which distinguish the Montessori system from methods more accepted in America come to mind:

1. Montessori lays less stress on interaction of children and interaction between teacher and child.

2. Montessori lays less stress on creativity in the arts, but more on creativity in learning.

3. Montessori emphasizes the stronger structure of the environment and the teaching equipment with specific learning tasks in mind.

The change in values is interesting. When I taught children by the Montessori method some twenty-five years ago, the question was raised by the public whether our children would learn enough, since there were so many activities in our classrooms to distract them and there was no formal drill. Today we worry about the opposite.

Some educators may also question the philosophical origins of the method. The present revival comes from Roman Catholic laymen. Montessori as a Catholic was deeply interested in bringing the ritual of her church closer to the child. She was equally interested, though, in planting the seeds of her system in different soil.

She worked intensively with Indian Theosophists and Europeans of all faiths and persuasions.

I feel that I can say, both from my own development as a teacher and from objective study of Montessori's system, that there is no need to claim that the Montessori method offers only the choice of accepting it as a whole with all its parts intact, or of rejecting it altogether. It has to be fused with a system of psychology to give assistance to the teacher if individual development does not proceed "according to the book." Parts of the method can also find their places in an eclectic system of education, particularly if used with exceptionally gifted children or with children who have difficulties in learning or a sensory deficit. The respect and understanding for spontaneity as well as for order, are essential prerequisites.

Montessori's teachings can be interpreted as doctrines or dogmas. For me they are statements for which scientific validity is claimed, or precepts for doing things in ways for which efficacy is claimed. The criterion of a purported scientific statement is whether research proves it to be true. And the criterion of a precept is whether it yields the promised results. Neither depends in the least on religion, ideology, or any beliefs that their practitioners happen to hold.

A legitimate question is, how to fit a "system" of education into the educator's psychological framework. For those who come from Freudian psychology, it may be interesting to read

a letter Sigmund Freud wrote to Dr. Montessori:

"It gave me great pleasure to receive a letter from you. Since I have been preoccupied for years with the study of the child's psyche, I am in deep sympathy with your humanitarian and understanding endeavors, and my daughter, who is an analytical pedagogue, considers herself one of your disciples.

I would be very pleased to sign my name beside yours on the appeal for the foundation of a little institute. ...The resistance my name may arouse among the public will have to be conquered by the brilliance that radiates from yours."²

Freudian psychology never recommended nursery school settings with hazy limits or with unchanneled outlets for aggression. It has potentially more in common with the Montessori system than is generally realized, and the mutual beneficial influence of an attempted synthesis of the two approaches to child rearing was demonstrated in the practices of the Vienna Montessori schools.

I would like to draw on some of my personal memories as a Montessori teacher to say which materials I would use again without reserve and to give you a taste of how children use their early skills. The material that teaches number concepts and, at school age, arithmetic and geometry, is untouched by time. It combines clarity with spontaneous creative activity. Also the beginnings of reading, where silent reading is immediately used for identification or labeling of objects or for communication

with others, can be much more individualized than in other methods.

Indeed, many of the materials developed in recent years to help children in the Three R's borrow heavily from Montessori's approach, without ever acknowledging their debt.

Accomplishments do not need to be commented upon by the teacher or the other children to give satisfaction. Therefore, the atmosphere in a Montessori class can be non-competitive, which I think is important for young children. The friendships of children that developed in such groups have in my experience survived war and displacement. This indicates that recognizing individuality in an environment conducive to work does not create egotists.

I would like to quote from a letter of a young woman who as a child in Vienna was for several years my pupil. My young friend had just had her first baby, and I asked her whether she would like me to bring her from a trip to Europe, some materials for the baby's room. She answered:

"European 'material' would certainly be very nice to receive. I love to sew. But when you said 'material,' I thought you meant play tools along the Montessori learning lines. Are these still available? I shall never forget the various ones used—the learning of the alphabet on the felt board with pretty colored felt letters which suck to it...colored silks to arrange for color sense, playing store with the abacus, pouring poppy seeds from a little pitchers to another to learn controls I believe

my intellectual curiosity and avidity to keep learning was aroused and guided then in a way that drills prevent. I would like to help my child have the same experience. So if you can help me with this kind of material, I would be most grateful."

I don't believe many schools for young children in the United States will completely use Dr. Montessori's method. New knowledge, and new problems demand new adaptations. Also, a good Montessori teacher needs careful training. She has to know the principles and techniques of the method and should be especially schooled in observation (we learned it via biology, particularly microbiology). She also has to recognize the meaning of behavior, to know when she should change her role from observer and helper to a more active one. Even the best methods of education cannot prevent difficulties in emotional functioning or in

learning, and teachers have to be prepared for that.

Nursery schools all over the country may well profit from recognizing concentration and serious efforts in young children. This would necessitate a rethinking of space and well as of the grouping of children and of scheduling. Though I don't practice the Montessori method as such in our hospital, because adjustment in hospitalization requires varied approaches, I gratefully draw on what I have learned about individuals, their grouping, and about children's needs in living and learning. I would consider it a tribute to Montessori's contribution to education if such words as learning, teaching, and work might again be used without apology in the nursery school.

REFERENCE

- 1 Fynne, R. F. *Montessori and Her Inspirers*. New York: Longman, Green, 1924. p. 321.
- 2 Freud, Ernest L., ed. *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Basic Books 1960. p. 319.

Emotions In Learning

The Most Frequent Reason for bringing children to child guidance clinics today is not delinquency, but learning difficulties. Often a non-learner is having his difficulty not because he is lacking in intelligence or lacking in learning potentials, but because emotions come into play, or because there are cultural influences which interfere with his learning. For example, even in the North we have cultural influences around segregation. It is not just a Southern problem, it is a Northern problem as well.

Milton J. E. Senn, M.D. *Public Health News*.

