

University of Dayton Review

Volume 4
Number 2 *Summer*

Article 7

1967

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Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, John R. (1967) "Maria Montessori," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 7.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol4/iss2/7>

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Maria Montessori

by John R. O'Donnell

Dr. Maria Montessori was born in Italy in 1870. At the age of 24 she became the first woman to receive a medical degree from the University of Rome. As assistant physician in the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome, she became interested in the learning ability of mentally and physically atypical children. Her interest in this field was furthered by her reading of the success of Dr. Edward Sequin, a French physician, who was doing extensive work with the education of idiots.

Dr. Montessori founded the Orthophrenic School in Rome in 1898 and carried on much of her early work in this school. She also lectured at the University of Rome on pedagogical anthropology. In 1922 she was named inspector general of all schools in Italy. Her work was interrupted in 1933 because she was not able to accept the type of training the Mussolini regime was imposing on children. She left Italy in 1933 and did not return until 1947.

Madame Montessori spent the last of her life speaking and writing about the Montessori method in Spain, India, England, and the Netherlands. Her work was by now accepted for the normal child as well as the mentally handicapped. Dr. Maria Montessori died in 1952 while visiting the Netherlands.

“Infancy is the eternal Messiah, which continuously comes back to the arms of degraded humanity in order to entice it back to heaven.”¹

Dr. Montessori had a sincere desire to reconstruct the system of education used in most elementary schools. The teacher-centered recitation-filled classroom and adult-imposed standards were under constant attack by her. The spontaneous actions of children were too often seen to disappear — or at least abate — in the normal elementary school as they proceeded through the grades. She believed that children are born free of inhibitions and by nature highly curious. It seemed to her that children could be encouraged to continue using this curiosity if given the proper environment. The scientific training Dr. Montessori received while in medical school was a source of some of the beliefs she had concerning the learning and developmental processes of children. The fact that children may have a strong desire for candy did not bother Dr. Montessori as it would many parents and some teachers. Her feelings were expressed on this topic when she said, “The poisons of common consumption, alcohol and nicotine, must be withheld from the adolescent; in their place sweets may be allowed, for sugar is a very important food, as it is in the case of small children.”²

It was Madame Montessori’s belief that few teachers ever considered the laws which govern the total growth of children. Adults do not permit the full development of the child when so many of the rules and much of the curriculum in schools is based on desires of adults for children rather than the natural developmental desires of the children. Since the universe is subject to a set of natural laws, and the reproduction process in living things is a constant repetition of laws of reproduction, it would seem that children must also develop by a set of laws. When an adult society imposes limitations or attempts to circumvent the natural developmental laws, then a child is being denied his natural right to grow in an orderly way. The laws which govern the motions of our planets are not subject to the ratification of teachers. The arrangement of the genes which will determine various characteristics are not submitted to parents prior to a child’s conception for their approval.

Dr. Montessori could not understand why adults accept the natural laws which govern plant growth, human reproduction or planetary relationships, but would almost completely ignore the laws which govern the development of children.

Because you know if the child can teach us something it is not really just the child, but it is the power of Love that constructs the man, and this Love is placed there by God. The child has this power directly from God, and again and again and again I have seen it demonstrated that it is not only a physical power, but also an intellectual power, so that in the intellectual field also we can learn from the child something of the laws that govern us, that are very important to know, because we have from him the revelation of the manner in which God has created every personality, the revelation of the manner in which the incarnation of a soul takes place. We see the genesis of personality, for from the

child comes a man with a certain language, a certain race, with certain sentiments, etc. From him comes the personality of the man. We see in the child also a universal personality, universal because it is the foundation of every man, universal because common to every human being. It is marvellous to know in what way the child constructs the man, because if we understand this secret we can help the man, we can know something that is very useful to know, which we do not realize now because we are confused in our mind.³

In her attempt to reform the educational world, Dr. Montessori made the same error which is committed by most reformers. They become so preoccupied with their own idea that all other ideas appear to be valueless. A sincere but too often blind belief in their own reform is so close to them that contradictions begin to appear in their reasoning. Maria Montessori became so absorbed in the special training required of the teachers in the Montessori method that she blindly denied the value of any teachers other than her own special-trained group. Her feelings are expressed when she discusses her procedure for teaching letters, words and reading to children by using a set of letters cut out of paper.

Then the teachers of primary schools tried the experiment with the alphabet but they could arouse no enthusiasm nor “explosion” either. The only thing that happened was that a freer form of study slipped into the ordinary schools and that individual occupations and objects were given.

The “miracle” was officially relegated to oblivion. It did not succeed in attracting the interest of modern psychology. It was thus left to me to investigate the secrets of child-psychology which this experiment revealed. Nobody better than I could “isolate” these real facts from any educational influence capable of evoking them. It was clear to me that some “energy” peculiar to children at that age had become manifest and consequently existed.⁴

In her enthusiasm for the Montessori approach to developing character in children and their ability to acquire culture, she summed up her ideas of the efforts of other teachers by saying, “They were wrong because they thought that it was the adult who had to influence the character of the young; and to turn evil into good is an eternal problem.”⁵

Dr. Montessori certainly had a strong desire to have children develop to their maximum so as to assist in the forming of a society which would be better than any previous society. She was constantly working to do away with any teaching situations or school practices which stressed adult standards and imposed adult ideas

on children. While her basic idea was admirable, she was sometimes confusing (if not confused) to her listeners or readers because of certain apparent conflicts of ideas. One rather obvious conflict comes to mind when we think of Dr. Montessori's "Casa dei bambini." Her famous "Houses of Children" were established in Rome in 1907. She established many of these houses in the crowded, rather poor tenement areas of Rome. The fact that young children in these tenements often lacked the advantages of proper care, sufficient love from parents, and educational opportunity, was the prime reason for these establishments coming into existence. Madame Montessori was able to do much of her early work and experimental teaching in these Casa dei bambini. It is interesting, however, to note that while these schools developed to a large extent because of home and parent deficiency, Dr. Montessori expressed an apparent contradiction in her writing.

Nature furnishes special protection for the young. For instance, the child is born amidst love; his very origin is by love, and once born he is surrounded by the love of father and mother, a love which is not artificial or enforced by reason, such as the sentiment of brotherhood that all thoughtful people are trying to arouse. It is in the field of the child's life that can alone be found the type of love which is the ideal of human morality, the love which inspires self-sacrifice, the dedication of oneself to the service of others. Now this sacrifice that the parents make is something natural, that gives joy, and so is not felt to be a sacrifice; it is life itself.⁶

It may be well at this point to refresh the reader's memory on the life of Maria Montessori. In reviewing the writings of Dr. Montessori, it is rather evident that she followed a pattern which appears to be part of her stated natural laws of development. There is reason to believe, however, that she was not aware of the stages of development her own thoughts passed through.

In 1907 when Maria Montessori opened her first Casa dei Bambini, she was a reasonably young woman of 37 years. Her idea was quite fresh and her enthusiasm for making a better world unequalled. The ideas expressed by her in these early years are more positive and less tolerant of other views. In her later works she begins to show evidence of the type of growth which is usually associated with a more sophisticated type of thinking.

In her early work she quite often speaks of the value of independent thinking on the part of children. She believed that too many adults would not give the children opportunities to express the many good ideas they had. The later writings of Dr. Montessori start to show the sad yet almost inevitable desire of all older people to mistrust youth. The Madame, herself, who was so unhappy in her early life with adults who would not give credit to youth, speaks as a typical oldster in her later writing: "Who goes to a doctor only just qualified? Who trusts the design of a fac-

tory to a young engineer, or engages a lawyer only just allowed to practice? And how do we explain this lack of confidence? The reason is that these young men have spent years in listening to words, and listening does not make a man. Only practical work and experiences leads the young to maturity.”⁷

Any discourse concerning Dr. Montessori would not be complete without some mention of her actual teaching ideas. At the risk of over-simplifying the approach advocated by Montessori, the following three concepts are offered as being basic to her approach:

- a. Every child is born with a God-given capacity to learn more than adults have ever attempted to teach to children. Learning begins at birth.
- b. A stimulating environment which provides a variety of didactic materials is essential to wholesome learning.
- c. Teachers should always be present but not as checkers or pushers but as a person ready to provide a new set of materials when a child tires of the materials he has been using.

In the early years of the Montessori work, there is little doubt that few teachers were willing to operate classes in accordance with the three ideas expressed above. The recent years, however, have shown much more concern on the part of the educators with the thoughts held by Dr. Montessori. An increase in the number of kindergartens is one example of this. Dr. Montessori undoubtedly took many of her basic ideas from the father of the kindergarten movement, Froebel. Early experiences in kindergarten provide the child with verbal, social and certain academic experiences which aid the student in his development.

The preparation of teachers has included more study of psychology and child development. The average teacher of today is not as unaware of the basic needs of children as the average teacher might have been in the early years of Dr. Montessori's work.

Commercial companies have seen to it that didactic materials are available in all areas of school curriculum. The many materials employed by the Montessori teacher are available in one form or another to most teachers. In addition to these materials, various new teaching machines and individual study aids are appearing in the educational scene every year.

The most important part of the educational program is still the same today as it was in the early years of Dr. Montessori or the ancient days of Plato. This important aspect is *the teacher*. The study of psychology, use of materials or classroom management can help to make a good teacher better.

There is nothing, however, in the Montessori method or in any other system which will make a poor teacher good. Dr. Montessori has given the teaching profession many signs to follow.

Dr. Montessori has undoubtedly made an impression in the world of education. Her work has been sufficiently well entrenched throughout the various parts of the

world that her name will live on for many generations to come. As years go on, her work will become subject to interpretation by different people. There is already evidence of various factors forming in the family of Montessori followers. There is the pure Montessori group. There are those who have Montessori ideas sprinkled among other techniques and still others who refer to any effort at using didactic materials as a Montessori approach. While Dr. Montessori will most probably be remembered for many years, her basic ideas will become more difficult to identify as years pass. Regardless of how confused her ideas may be transmitted by others, it was from Dr. Montessori herself that we have heard the most simple as well as a rather vague and nebulous explanation of her desires for the education of children.

Her simple statement was simply, "What purpose would education serve in our days unless it helped man to a knowledge of the environment to which he has to adapt himself!"⁸ Her vague statement of objectives was expressed thusly: "Finally, the problems of education must be solved on the basis of the laws of cosmic economy. These laws are represented, on the one hand, by the eternal laws governing the psychic construction of human life, and on the other, by the changing laws which have led society along the road of evolution."⁹

These two quotes can serve as a symbol to the efforts of Dr. Maria Montessori. Her simple statement is an echo of her basic theme that children are created by God and are potential saviors of a fumbling society. Her vague statement is the summation of the difficulties which have always accompanied civilized people. We know we are not doing the right thing, but where is the power which gives us the desire to improve? Man is willing to accept most laws which apply to non-personal behavior; but each generation, regardless of its level of education, renews the ageless contempt for the basic law which can save the world.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Maria Montessori, *The Child*, Adyar, Madras 20, (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), p. 10.
- 2 Maria Montessori, The "Erkinder" and the Functions of the University, The Montessori Society in England, (no date), p. 17.
- 3 Maria Montessori, *Reconstruction in Education*, Adyar, Madras 20, (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), pp. 5-6.
- 4 Maria Montessori, *The Formation of Man*, Adyar, Madras 20, (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1955), p. 31.
- 5 Maria Montessori, *Education for a New World*, Adyar, Madras 20, (India: Kalakshetra Publications, 1959), p. 71.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 7 Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, Adyar, Madras 20, (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), pp. 20-21.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, *Formation of Man*, p. 14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

