

# Emma Plank - Vortrag zu ihrem Leben mit der Montessori-Pädagogik

Plank, Emma: Vortrag „Speech at the Montessori Centennial“ (?), 1970

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We are here today to honor the memory of a genius, the foremost advocate during the first half of this century of the needs and rights of children.

Maria Montessori and her contribution has been looked at and discussed from various points of view during this centennial. Let me add another, quite personal facet: How has the Montessorian point of view formed the first 16 years of my working life when I was a Montessori teacher, mostly of children ages five to ten, and then how was I able to use the Montessori philosophy for two times 16 years - since I have come to live in this country - in an indirect way?

Let me start at the beginning.



After returning from the training course in London, Lili Roubiczek, trained as a biologist, started the "Haus der Kinder" - the Vienna Montessori School - and the ~~Arbeitsgemeinschaft~~ commune of five of us, then 16 to 18 years old, who helped in running it.

This was a peculiar beginning of an educational movement - in one of the drabest working class districts of the city impoverished by World War I, but full of the hope for the young republic which Austria had become. It was for us a time of serious dedication, but also of hilarious incidents.

A day care center built during the war for children whose mothers worked in nearby factories had been remodeled by an English couple, who - as so often with relief workers after a war - fell in love with Vienna and its potentialities. They and Lili Roubiczek had attended the Montessori course in London and planned to open the new school together.

Not only in my eyes, but for anybody who cared to look, this new school was a most unusual setting. The large classroom was skillfully decorated and furnished, not only with Montessori materials but with everything that children needed to manage their lives independently during an 11 hour day. Plates and bowls for the meals had been ordered in Dresden, in the right size, to be added to, a few years later by cups from the famous Bauhaus, a gift from our sister school in Jena. The furniture had been superbly built by a neighborhood carpenter in his small basement shop.

These perfect surroundings opened for 25 children, but the British ~~people~~ had returned to England and left no money for the operation of the school. I don't know whether the idea of the commune would have developed, had there been money to pay salaries to workers; but it emerged as the plan that those of us who wanted to train as Montessori teachers would first have a year of practice in some area needed to maintain the school. I started in the kitchen, with the children working along side with me.

We all lived at the school. We slept on the children's cots and had everything put away to open an immaculate school by seven in the morning. Within a year we graduated to a small apartment. Water and toilet were of course outside in the hallway, as typical in a proletarian neighborhood at that time - a far cry from the comforts most of us had known at home.

The way we lived, and our dedication, is very reminiscent of some peace corps workers of today - the same hope that what we did really mattered and would help build a better world. Evenings, we studied Montessori's books, learned Italian, so we would be prepared to understand her lectures when our turn came to go to one of the international training courses.

Dr. Montessori came to visit us about two years after work began. She trusted Lili Roubiczek explicitly - I think she was the only one of her students who could experiment freely with significant contributions of others and broaden the system.

Within two years, the group of us young people had grown to 8; later to 14; but something even more important had occurred: Educators and social workers in Vienna had taken notice of our work, seminars began for kindergarten teachers working in the day care centers of the city. A year or two later they were formalized into a two-year training course in the Montessori method which culminated in 4 months study with Dr. Montessori. Students came from many parts of Europe. It may be of interest to this audience that Erik Erikson was one of our students. Our director became a consultant to the Child Welfare Department of the City of Vienna, which planned for more than 10,000 children. The same group invited me to return after World War II. The Montessori Enterprises, producing equipment and furniture, manning exhibitions, and finally publishing a translation of articles of Dr. Montessori in book form as well as pamphlets of our own, came into existence.

An even more helpful sign of recognition came when the City Welfare Department gave us a subsidy to operate the school. It is almost incomprehensible how we achieved the recognition and active support from public sources within such a short time. I think the method spoke for itself. None of us had any of the official credentials then. As a matter of fact, we despised the formality of prescribed training but grudgingly complied. But the exposure to learning, though outside an accredited institution, was tremendous. Biology, dance, graphic art, as well as architectural planning, and finally psychoanalysis, were integrated into our learning. Vienna in the late 20's and early 30's had some outstanding teachers in these fields who shared their enthusiasm with us.

How much remained of the efforts of those European years? 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 stuck to it. . . . colored silks to arrange for color sense, playing store with the abacus, pouring poppy seeds from a little pitcher 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 had the opportunity to return to Vienna shortly after ~~the~~ <sup>World II</sup> War and to help

re-establish some of our old educational practices. One day the director of a day care center called me to say that a young man had just enrolled his two preschoolers and that she had found out he had been one of the first group at the "Haus der Kinder". To make a long story short, this "little boy" of 1922 was now a railroad worker. He established contact with me and organized a reunion of about 20 of the youngsters of those early years. He tracked them down, though our old neighborhood (including the old school) had been bombed out. Some were missing - death and destruction had reached them on the front, in a concentration camp, or of TB at home. The intensity of these young people's memories was overwhelming and touching. I've kept in contact with the young man, who, as is customary for children from the working class, stopped school at age 14, and I would like to read you, in translation, parts of a letter he wrote to me to commemorate Lili, <sup>when I wrote him of her death</sup> *R*. He addressed the letter to her:

"Dear Lili,

I was deeply shaken by the sad news that you are no longer among us. Though it is about 40 years since I last saw you, my memory of you is so alive that I could have found you in a large crowd.

I see you still often in my thoughts when I think back of my early childhood: You and Dr. Montessori in our garden in the Hardtmuthgasse.

The memories of the Montessori School are much more vivid in my mind than the rest of my school years. I still remember joyfully the places we went to in school camp. You had planned and organized all of this to give us some happy days during our childhood which was often quite sad.

But I also think that you all laid the foundation in me, as in the other children, for our attitude towards life. You edu-

cated us with the hope that we would grow up to be honest people, who could grasp the spirit of Internationalism, understand democracy, and carry the banner and propagate the responsibility for others and for an ideal socialism. I think you really gave us that.

I, as one in the first group of children you encountered, want to thank you heartily for your pioneer work, may your spirit propagate itself all over the world, then you have not lived in vain. I, one of your most grateful students feel deeply that this is so. "

*then.*  
What, in looking back, do I find missing *in the M. method?*

As in so many innovators, there are - and have to be - blind spots in some areas.

I feel that particularly in our troubled times an educational system has to try to fill the needs of the society we live in (as Dr. Montessori so superbly did in the original Casa dei Bambini), and also has to be fused with a system of psychology to assist the teacher in assessing the functioning of individual children, but particularly to help her when there are difficulties in a child's development. Even the best methods of education cannot prevent difficulties in emotional functioning or in learning, and teachers have to be prepared for that. The latter Dr. Montessori did not concern herself with.

You may be interested in this letter which Sigmund Freud wrote Dottorressa 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.

The mutual respect remained, but Dr. Montessori never took an active interest in depth psychology. This remained for her grandson. It was with real satisfaction that I just read a paper by Dr. M.M. Montessori which he gave at the Second Montessori Study Conference, in July, 1966, in Washington, entitled "The Role of Developmental Education in a Changing World." Dr. Montessori, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, says:



Not the method in itself is of particular importance, but the realization that education plays a fundamental role in the development of personality, as an essential aid to give form, content, and direction to personal existence. This function of education can only then be realized in a significant manner if education is guided by the knowledge of the inner needs determining human development, and if the influence of "unconscious education" is taken into account.

He would have understood what we tried to achieve in Vienna forty years ago.

I would now like to show you some slides and to read you several stories and poems - old, even ancient ones, and some new ones. I think they bring out what I consider the most important legacy of Dr. Montessori's <sup>work;</sup> The capability of children to get absorbed in a task and to react with love and respect to the things and people around them.

### S L I D E S

phrases describing an action 7-1/2 year old *girl*.

- 1) Go open the window so that the sun can shine in and that I can hear the birds.
- 2) Go to the sink fill a glass with water and bring it to me.
- 3) Go into the next room think up a song and sing it to me.
- 4) Go into the yard, climb up a tree and shout: "Look, look how high I am."
- 5) Close the curtain and say: "I have to close the curtain because the sun blinds me."

