Some Thoughts on the Montessori Method

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MONTESSORI METHOD

By EMMA N. PLANK

In the last decade, mothers interested in the education of their young children have become well aware of the name of Maria Montessori and of her educational system.

I would like to spell out what mothers can and what they cannot expect from this method and also, why I believe that cooperative nursery schools are not a good place to use it.

I have great personal gratitude to Dr. Montessori and the Vienna Montessori School who in the 1920's taught me to observe children and to recognize their needs on many levels: to stimulate their search for knowledge and to facilitate it by providing an environment where questions can be raised and answers found and where interaction in a warm personal way could take place between children and adults.

To get started, here is a short historical background. Maria Montessori, the first woman to receive a M. D. at the University of Rome was born almost 100 years ago. After graduation she specialized in child development, lectured in psychiatry and became very interested in institutionalized retarded children of the educable range. To her surprise and delight these children could learn and progressed on a much higher level than anyone had demonstrated before her. Montessori was inspired by two French physicians, Itard and Séguin. Itard worked around 1800 in an institution for the deaf and gave a fascinating report of his painstaking work with "The Wild Boy of Aveyrou," a man-animal whom he tried to humanize.

Following Itard and Séguin's lead, Montessori used all senses in the learning process, included large and small motor activities. She abolished the sitting still and listening approach. Size and weight, sensations and gradations of sound or of texture, and color could be experienced. But more important, Dr. Montessori believed in an inherent ability of children to look for and gain new knowledge if the environment stimulated and facilitated this process. Soon after her experience with the retarded children, in 1907 she had the opportunity to test her ideas with normal children in

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what we would now call a day care center in the slums of Rome.

Dr. Montessori's main philosophical approach was a deep belief that children had strong powers of self-construction, of building order out of chaos within themselves. What they needed most was an environment where this could take place and the freedom to use it. Her success electrified people and Montessori schools sprang up all over the world in countries as different as Ireland and the U. S. S. R. or Central Europe and India. There was a short flourishing in the United States mainly during World War I. Then the method disappeared in America.

To give you a feeling of how Dr. Montessori looked at children, let me give you in her words a description of the beginning of life:

> I have been told of a man who had lived in the deepest darkness; his eyes had never seen the faintest glimmer, as though he were in the depths of an abyss.
> I have been told of a man who had lived in silence; not even the faintest sound had ever reached his ears...
> I heard of a man who had really lived always under water, a water of strange warmth, and who all at once was plunged into an icy stream.
> And he unfolded his lungs that had never breathed. The air all at once distended his lungs, which had been folded from the beginning, and the man cried out...
> And a quivering noise was heard on the earth. It had never been heard before. It came from a throat that had never stirred before.
> He was the man who had rested.
> Who can imagine such absolute rest?
> The rest of one who has not had even the trouble of eating, for another ate for him. All his fibers were relaxed, for other tissues created the heat necessary to his life. Even his inmost had not to work to defend themselves from poisons and microbes, for other tissues worked for him. And oxygen was given him without his breathing--a privilege unique among living creatures.
> His only labor was that of the heart, which beat before he existed. Yes, even when he did not yet exist, his heart was beating, at twice the rate of any other heart. It was the heart of man.
> And now...he comes forward. He takes upon himself all labor. He is wounded by the light and by sound travailed in the inmost of his being, and as he advances he gives the great cry:
> "Why hast Thou forsaken me?"

These lines characterize Montessori's approach so well. Here is the almost mystical adoration of the child; we can also sense her great empathy and understanding which, though sixty years have passed, is as valid as when it was first expressed. Dr. Montessori was a woman of the turn of the century with an ardent belief in progress and an inherent dedication to the scientific method. Ways and tools of science have changed since then to such a degree that we feel a little condescendent and are hesitant today to call Dr. Montessori's descriptions scientific. I would

rather call her a highly intuitive woman, a splendid observer and a great teacher who used her knowledge wisely as an experimenter. But today we could not use her methods of observations as scientific tools. Perhaps her greatest contribution is the recognition of spontaneity in the child.

What I am missing in her description of children are the inner driving forces and conflicts that can promote or hamper individual development. This psychological foundation has to be borrowed from others.

What besides sensory experiences does the Montessori system offer? First of all, an environment for self-education, highly stimulating to concept formation, particularly in the area of symbols, i.e., the preparation for and the development of reading. Her system allows children usually to read earlier than first grade and it gives them a feeling of discovery and mastery. How does this come about? One piece of the Montessori material is a set of thirty-six wooden geometric figures which can be matched with identical cards demonstrating that a symbol can represent an object. Also, large letters cut from sandpaper and pasted on a piece of colorful cardboard not only can be looked at and its sound pronounced--but the kinesthetic sense is a major part of the learning process as the child traces these letters with his fingers. This method has been used lately for remedial reading at an age when the child has already experienced failure rather than between ages four and five and one-half when the urge to learn the name of letters is great and when Montessori's concept of a "sensitive period" (we may call this today a time for imprinting) through kinesthetic stimuli seems to fit so well.

Another aspect of this system is to help children to become independent and to take care of their needs themselves. Every mother knows the eagerness of her young one to feed himself; of a slightly older one to dress himself; or of the three year old to carry breakable things or to wash dishes. She also knows the anger if the child cannot do it yet or if she cannot tolerate the slowness or the mess connected with it. The pride and delight of children who say "I can do it all by myself" is certainly touching.

There are a number of pieces of equipment to facilitate learning these activities. Again, at the right age these are fascinating objects. There is equipment of all sorts for learning how to dress oneself, to cut an apple, mix or bake a simple dish, to set

a table, serve, wash dishes, clean the floor, plant or water flowers. These can be most enjoyable and useful activities which require sequence and which bring order into chaos. In these activities an important psychological component toward growth can take place: namely, identification with the adult through mastery of his skills.

Another way of doing this would be in dramatic play. I personally think that children 3-6 years old gain more if they can master in reality certain skills which make them feel mature and apply them in a group of children or at home rather than imitate them in dramatic play. The only area, and a very important one, where this cannot be done is taking care of a baby. Therefore, I would equip a nursery school room with a sink, an ironing board with a real iron, blunted real knives to cut vegetables or fruit--rather than a sink without water, setting a tea table without food or, my pet ennui, a refrigerator that does not cool. But a doll bed or buggy with a doll and all the items to bathe or dress her would certainly fit in. If a child loves to pretend, the make-believe things should be part of his play equipment at home. I would choose them smaller than the ones that work to make it clear that this is make-believe.

One other aspect of the Montessori method is timeless, children of varying ages are together to stimulate each other and to work in harmony. Since there are few group activities and no competitive ones, a mixture of a range of two-three years works out very well. To mix children of different ages seems increasingly important as families get smaller.

The reaction to the revival of the Montessori method in this country has been interesting. Parents are really the ones who pushed for the establishment of Montessori schools in their communities. Once the system was reintroduced and highly propagandized, the incentives to see children in such a school or the publicity for it were not always in the spirit in which Dr. Montessori started her work. Parents wanted their children to start learning early because they knew the amount of knowledge, constantly increasing, that has to be mastered if one wants to succeed in the last quarter of the 20th Century. They were attracted by the promise of early academic achievement. This emphasis brought a strong negative reaction from the established nursery school educators which was somewhat mitigated recently through more emphasis on learning in the Head Start programs. Dr. Montessori did not plan for outside achievement but for the inner satisfaction and the mastery the children gained in using their potentials.

The time for imprinting or in Montessori's words "the sensitive periods" are unique for each individual and unique for different modes of learning. If such a sensitive period has not been utilized for specific learning, the incentive cannot be retrieved or the same method used with equal success later. For example, sandpaper letters or numbers have great appeal for the 4-5 year old; to start using them in the first grade would not bring the joy

of discovery and of success but would be a cumbersome unnecessary bypass.

Another critique of the Montessori system is its high amount of structure and orderliness and the lack of using children's imagination. This criticism is partly correct. Besides, the system has attracted some teachers who are compulsive and function better with more distance to children. But I have seen other Montessori teachers where this is not so. The main difference between the two types of approach is that in the Montessori class, the major emphasis is on learning and mastery; in the regular nursery school, on interaction and socialization. Dedicated teachers who can recognize individual needs should be able to give their children both the opportunity for learning along with the chance to experience the "thou" and to form relations with teachers and other children so that they may enter the world of the public school well prepared from both sides.

Let me now spell out my reasons why I think that cooperative nursery schools would not lend themselves to the use of the Montessori method.

One of the ideas behind co-ops is to allow mothers to participate in the school's program and while learning about children by working with them, contribute their woman power to the running of the school. If special teaching techniques are to be used as in a Montessori School, they have to be thoroughly understood and used in the same way daily. This would eliminate mothers as assistants if they only come one day a week. Preliminary intensive training of mothers would be necessary if a co-op would want to use this method. In addition, it is very expensive to equip a Montessori School. But without the proper equipment, one could not test the method's validity and may not get good results.

Also, co-ops often meet only two or three mornings a week for about two and one-half hours. In contrast, Montessori Schools meet five days a week for at least three and one-half hours. I think a longer day, including the noon meal, would be even better as there would be enough time for creative and outdoor activities as well.

But there is another way to incorporate some of Montessori's ideas into co-ops by giving more attention to a truly stimulating and well organized environment where children's powers to concentrate and to stay with a given activity are recognized, and their self direction is respected. I think we can be thankful to Dr. Montessori for her vision, her empathy and her great respect for young children without having to use her didactic method if it does not fit.

Several years ago I concluded an article in "Young Children" with the hope that "...such words as learning, teaching and work might again be used without apology in the Nursery School." I think we have moved considerably in this direction and I hope we will continue to do so by taking our cues from children rather than from pressures from the outside world for achievement.