Montessori Education: Interactive Idea for Human Understanding

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Human understanding finds an ally in the Montessori philosophy—the Montessori idea. The idea is not abstract and fixed. Rather, the Montessori principles in action are growing and expanding, incorporating a wider and wider practice. The Montessori idea is moving first generation to third generation, from philosophical vision to school implementation, from an inspirational beginning to an operational future. The more one interacts with an idea—its origins, its impetus, its derivation from the life of the child—the more human understanding there is to see. The idea is in perpetual motion, and by viewing the evolution of the Montessori principles from the beginning, the drama of increasing human understanding unfolds.

Montessori is an educational idea. It was fully conceived in the mind of its inventor as a complex interior structure, an order of parts with related meanings and diverse positions. The idea emerged from a peak "creative" discovery which Montessori describes in ecstatic terms in *The Secret of Childhood* around the opening of the first Casa Dei Bambini:

> I set to work like a peasant woman who having set aside a good store of seed corn, has found a fertile field in which she may freely sow it. But I was wrong. I had hardly turned over the clods of my field, when I found gold instead of wheat, the clods concealed a precious treasure. I am no longer the peasant I had thought myself. Rather I was like foolish Aladdin, who, without knowing it, had in his hand a key that would open hidden treasures.

Foolish Aladdin she was not. Montessori was quite aware of the evolution of child-centered education. She had read Rousseau, who campaigned for the rights of the child from birth. She had studied Pestalozzi's viewpoint regarding nature and the training of the whole child. She echoed Froebel's interior view of education—the

mind evolves from within. She quoted Herbart who placed emphasis on the proper presentations with precise steps dictated by external object lessons. Hers was the making of an idea in the last stages—an educational mosaic projecting "a new constellation" for a new century. The "century of the child" had finally arrived, beginning with a few simple perceptions by a medical doctor and anthropologist who found herself in the company of a group of children under six. She recalled the experience in these words:

> The quiet in the class when the children were at work was complete and moving. No one had enforced it; and what is more, no one could have obtained it by external means. Had these children, maybe, found the orbit of their cycle, like the stars that circle tirelessly and which, without departing from their order, shine through eternity?

Montessori was a scientist who spoke in unfolding metaphors. The child is "like a star orbiting according to fixed laws!" The "mind of the child is a precious treasure concealed by clumps of fertile land." These images unite opposite points of view; the importance of structure (Herbart) and the value of self-motivated activity (Froebel) were melded by an intuitive, poetic perception of self, environment, and interaction. Indeed most educational issues come down to the question of the child doing by his own choice, or the child responding to the initiative of the adult. What work should arise from the direction of the adult, and what work emerges from the child's inner motivation? This is the daily conundrum of every Montessori teacher who must ask the ponderous question over and over again: to direct or not to direct. Too much direction means a loss of vitality and joy. Too little direction results in lethargy and confusion. It is a delicate balance in practice and in the literature.

The Montessori idea allows for the dialectic. It produces community among teachers in a common quest for a reconciliation between freedom and discipline, structure and motivation, choice and limit. Such are the creative tensions which make the teacher a decision-maker and Montessori pedagogy an applied art.

For example, with the question of motivation and structure, there are divergent positions within the Montessori philosophy. Margaret Stephenson has emphasized in her lectures:

> All methods of education based on centers of interest chosen by adults are wrong. Moreover, these centers of interest are superfluous. The child is interested in everything.

Miss Stephenson makes an unequivocal statement that interest is central to the elementary child's work. But E.M. Standing suggests another perspective with regard to structure.

> Every subject, such as reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, geometry, grammar, history-forms one of these prepared paths which are waiting for children to explore. They proceed along the path spontaneously, each going at his own pace, making their own individual discoveries as they go.

In Stephenson's selection we have a statement of pure motivation arising from the child's own interest and knowledge. In the second statement we have freedom limited by adult-prepared centers of activity— "pathways to culture." Structure floats as the child explores.

The originality of the Montessori method is its unifying function of linking the oppositions within a philosophy—a philosophy that includes the widest range of principles and doctrines put forth by various psychologists and educators. Every philosophical education movement—progressivism, essentialism, perennialism, and social reconstructionism—all find a place in Montessori. Her educational movement defied categorization. With the interlocking of different perspectives, the teacher, educator, and parent are kept alive by the force of a vision which provides *synthesis* to *thesis and antithesis* and thereby recapitulates the history of education.

There is vitality to this inner tension of ideas under the Montessori umbrella. (That is why Montessori teachers talk to themselves. How can I make my class more independent? How can I handle my five-year-olds? How can I get my children to extend their research without copying? How can I find new meaning in Montessori ideas? How can I make another correlation? An inner voice pushes and pushes. It clamors, you must go deeper, you must deepen your world view. Take risks.) It is the inner dialogue which keeps the professional alive, the Montessori idea alive. Once the dialogue is repressed, lazy habits dominate and the teacher stops seeing the joy and freshness of trial and error. John McDermott, in a brilliant

essay introducing E.M. Standing's book, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work*, sounds the death knell for those who stop questioning:

> Certainly, the varied exercises of Montessori's pedagogy form a remarkably coherent and unified lattice work of theory and practice. Yet she herself regarded that splendid creation as *un tentativo*: the person who ceases to be experimental ceases to follow her example.

Therefore, Montessori principles must be tested by every generation of Montessorian. Teachers and teacher trainers must talk. Teacher trainers must talk to each other. The Montessori idea must be discussed and debated, the reality of the personal and individual must be interpreted. Where there is interpretation, there is more than one right answer. The keys which unlock the secret of childhood are held by many hands and represent a lineage of ideas that begins with the ancients and accrues over three thousand years of educational wisdom.

And yet the Montessori idea must be integral in structure, it must provide the stability of a great work of art-constant in its form, unchanging in its portrayal of the universal.

Therefore interpretation within the common understanding of the Montessori works can produce greater insight while remaining experimental. There needs to be a constancy and appreciation of Montessori standards and values in order to have a Montessori interpretation.

What do I mean by common understanding? You can spot common understanding in Montessori teachers by their incessant shop talk.

They converse at length about the size of a polishing cloth, the beauty of a pouring pitcher, the exhibition of the sensorial materials, the nature of a fossil—each of the exercises triggers a vision of passages and detail. The prepared environment, the successive stages of child development, the observation of the child within these contexts-Montessori teachers historically sometimes cannot stop their dialogue. It took Anna Freud to convince the community of Lili Peller and her colleagues at the 1922 *Haus Der Kinder* that they should put restrictions on their Montessori preoccupations and

relax. Therefore, a Montessori conversation can be quite satisfying and easily engineered but should be conducted in moderation.

What stimulates the Montessori conversation-teacher to teacher, directress to directress? One could utilize the Great Questions—questions which go to the heart of a Montessori school. Hilla Patell has created a list of interpretive questions built around the Montessori idea of the prepared environment (Phoenix, 1989).

> Is the focus within the prepared environment on the development of the whole personality, taking into account the child's physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs, or is it on gaining skills and acquiring knowledge?
>
> Do the children have the freedom to be able to fulfill their developmental needs?
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> Are the opportunities provided which allow the growing child to achieve successive levels of independence in thought and action?
>
> Does the environment afford a place where the child can act for himself, direct his own life and thereby become conscious of his own growing powers and abilities?
>
> Are the children given the responsibility to contribute to the care of the environment, so that the child feels a sense of belonging—a sense of self worth?
>
> Do the children have the opportunity of acquiring social skills through the constant interaction within a community situation?
>
> Do we keep in mind the principles of moving from simple to more complex experiences with an added challenge at each stage?

Good questions initiate purposeful talk. Purposeful talk can resolve the tensions of a staff and can provide a restful moment where collaborative thinking of a diversified group can control opposite points of view. A Montessori conversation may proceed by simply

raising a problem and then opening up the conversation to divergent solutions. Imagine this conversation:

> Lois: There is a huge range of ability in my elementary class. I cannot deal with every child's needs. The range is too great.
>
> Leader: What approaches can we use to deal with a wide range of ability that is overwhelming for the moment? (Elicits the collaboration of the group).
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> Sarah: Individualizing. Lois, have you tried individualizing?
>
> Lois: No. I would be chasing kids around giving lessons all day if I did individual presentations for everybody.
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> Beverly: Lois, perhaps small ability grouping might make things more efficient. Whenever I am in doubt, I create more specialized and smaller groups which can accommodate a wide range.
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> Lois: That's not a bad idea, but then kids who are in the slow groups always feel so inferior.
>
> Penny: I bring in parents to help the children with special needs. The parents are trained by me and they work with all the children as not to single out the slow children.
>
> Lois: Well. Maybe I'll try that. But parents can sometimes violate the privacy of the class. I have such bad luck with parents.
>
> John: You might try more lessons that can incorporate a wide range of skills. For instance, biology, geography, and history can be researched by the children at different levels. Put emphasis on those lessons which can be pursued by the children at different levels.
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> Lois: That's a nice thought, but I have children who can't read.

> Penny: You sound like you're blaming yourself. Remember, the child must take some responsibility for dealing with his needs. The solution has to come from the children, in part.

So within the confines of an intimate faculty lounge, each teacher is drawn into making a series of contributions. Lois may see a solution made up of a combination of insights. That is the power of conversation—it integrates a variety of ideas and a sense of companionship in dealing with troubles. They came, they empathized, they discussed, they conquered. The interactive Montessori idea provides a means of communication.

The same is true for parents and teachers engaging in dialogue. *Montessori Talks To Parents* has sold close to 30,000 copies, signifying that parent discussion groups are still meeting. The mode is interactive. The Montessori idea of discipline—*the child follows out of love; the child is a "disciple" of the adult*—is a principle that can be used for every instance of domestic strife. For the mother that could not get her child to bed, there was the Mr. Nimbly solution—get into your pajamas, brush your teeth, wash your face, and get into bed with your child and go to sleep. After all, the child wants to be with the adult. Or Mrs. Kurasawa, of Toronto, suggested to a mother anguishing over her twins not getting ready for school, that she dress them the night before. Or most recently in Portland, Oregon, a father discusses fear regarding the San Francisco earthquake—his children will not return to their bedroom. They do not want to leave their parents. The group recognizes that the fear is also that of the father; it is a fear of being helpless in the face of disaster—helpless to protect one's children-and again the child always wishes to be near the adult.

The humor, the pathos, the empathy, the collective wisdom of dialogue makes every conversation a source of community. The educator gets educated. The parent and teacher find a bond that comes with human understanding as the basis for seeing the Montessori idea. It is an idea that interacts with the battles of bedtime, dinner, and waking, an idea which mediates the basic attraction of the child for the adult. Montessori principles indeed provide an understanding for family life, and the functioning of the whole child in a communal setting-home or school. Parents need to talk to other human beings about childrearing. They need to hear directly from someone else, "Oh, I've been through this. I have a four-year-old too. I know the

ages and stages." This is a kind of knowledge that cannot be found in books nor in the pediatrician's office. The parents negotiate Montessori principles by describing their day and empathizing with each other regarding the child's point of view. It is Montessori's full understanding and receptivity to the child's point of view that can show parents a new way of life.

The home and school do not originate the Montessori idea; it is born again in the teacher training course. In the making of teachers, the teacher trainer presents Montessori as an interactive idea that bonds the teacher to his/her mission. In a goodbye speech to her trainees, Maria Montessori spoke these words *ex tempore*:

> We have been together several months and we have become conscious of a bond uniting us, which has grown stronger and which I believe will never break. I am a pilgrim and you are pilgrims towards an idea. I voyage and you voyage and we unite ourselves together, almost as spiritual pilgrims, to work for the triumph of a principle which does not concern ourselves—but the child for whom we are working and wish to work.
>
> You and I have been, as it were, seduced by something attractive and deep in the child. Not only in those beautiful individual creatures whom we all love, but also in an almost symbolic being—one who holds in himself a secret, a secret we can never wholly fathom, and one which will therefore always attract us. . . . we have come together in this way because we have touched a point which is common to all cultures, nations, societies, religions—the child.

The interactive power of the idea is rooted in the human understanding of the child. It is a human understanding which has evolved through ages, eulogized by the philosopher, the novelist, and the poet. Emerson writes:

> The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and only he holds the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may

> be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. Respect the child. Wait and see the new product of Nature. Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude.

To respect the child is to encounter the child. It is a sympathy that the adult must cultivate with childhood. It is a knowledge and an appreciation of child-nature. It implies genuine interest in the child's interests, because the genuine interest of the adult produces interest in the child. It implies seeing ourselves the way the child sees us, hearing ourselves as the child hears us, judging ourselves with the keen perceptiveness of a child. Montessori exhorts, "We must take the beam out of our eye."

To respect the child implies "paying attention" to a being that is remote to adult culture, remote to adult preoccupations with "more important" concerns.

How to talk to a child is a precious skill—the skill of asking questions, the skill of answering questions. We must find out with our power of observation how the child thinks, how the child shares knowledge with his peers and with us. Prejudices must be set aside. It is not unlike the World War II story published in Margaret Mead's *People and Places*, a book written for children.

Mead describes jungle fighters who are trained to respond sensitively to different cultures:

> The fliers were warned how differently people communicate with each other. A nod of the head might mean No instead of Yes; a shake of the head might mean Yes; raised eyebrows mean only a simple question. Being patted all over by men of the tribe might mean a gesture of great friendliness and not, as one might suspect, an attempt to find out if a person was fat enough to be eaten.

The Montessori idea shows the adult and child immersed in a task of understanding human culture. The child is an anthropologist who, like the jungle fliers, must learn what every human being must understand as a necessary part of being human. The teacher also must learn what humans must understand in order to teach. It is a mutual engagement. The teacher observes what every human

child must understand while at the same time the child is studying what every human adult must understand. For example, the child studies human needs; needs which are dependent on nature: transportation, clothing, defense, food and habitation. The child also studies spiritual needs derived from human culture: music, art, and religion. When viewing culture as a resolution of the same needs, a new idea manifests itself to the child—the concept of universal need. A Christian and a Moslem have different world views, but both have the same universal need to express a spiritual dimension, to dress, to eat, to defend, etc. If the child is exposed to the resolution of universal needs throughout history and throughout the world, he/she will be able to connect information to what is uniquely human, reconciling cultural differences with what is universal. The desired outcome for looking at universal needs is a more universal human understanding.

The issue of human understanding is the very basis of Montessori education, the very basis of interdisciplinary pursuit, an inspired view of the how, what, why, and when of creating an educational vision. The adult and child are both concerned with these aspects of learning; both adult and child converge on the fundamental task of making sense out of one's world and making a culture which reflects and imitates this perceived order—the classification of plants and animals, the measurement of time, the recording of history, the expression of the arts, etc.

Earlier this year, in a private letter, Jerome Bruner wrote about learning and culture:

> Obviously, the most human thing about human beings is their capacity to live in a symbolic world of culture, not only to live in such a world but to create and recreate it constantly by their own efforts. There is nothing more important in that process of creation and recreation than the literature and philosophy that mankind creates in its effort to discover what is that which is humanly possible.

Montessori had a profound empathy for the early peoples (the first culture makers) and the rugged imagination they were required to build, to ever increase their understanding of the environment, to understand more with each generation what is the nature of their

contribution to an evolving human condition. Montessori writes about the motivation of the transhistoric, creative urge:

> Pioneers always depend on the help of those who have gone before them; the present stands on the past, as a house on its foundation. Man has gone far beyond nature in the work of creation, and he could not have done so unless he had accepted and felt a God with no hands or feet, who yet walks through the length and breadth of the universe, fashioned and still being wrought by Him, through human and other agents.

Thus to find within the collective unconscious what is meant by a God with no hands or feet in 1989—it comes back to the Montessori idea: The Montessori idea is an unfinished idea. There is no chronology of workbooks, there is no definitive set of teacher manuals, the presentations are merely the instigations of work. There is no packaging of Montessori theory and practice. The Montessori idea has no hands or feet, and yet it continues to thrive from place to place, generation to generation. Like "a flaming ball of human consciousness" it touches us and bounces away, even beyond the dynamic of the Montessori profession. And with every human contact, the idea gathers energy, dimension, and human usefulness. The Montessori movement is the vehicle for the idea, but the idea is part of a heritage of ideas which has a life apart from Montessori.

The Montessori idea is unfinished by design. Some complain that the curriculum presented in Montessori training is incomplete. What they do not understand is the nature of the "unfinished curriculum." Every teacher and every new class must renew the idea; they become the culture-makers—they must struggle for an inventive spirit where each group of children creates a new interpretation building on the heritage of the three-year cycle. "Our goal is to leave the student with the unfinished business of man's evolution!" (Bruner). Perhaps the Montessori teacher trainer should say, "Our goal is to leave the trainee with the unfinished business of Montessori education." That is why human understanding as a self-perpetuating ideal is so powerful. It begs to be completed by each generation. It calls for respect for the capacity of mind to explore and to discover itself. Human understanding clamors for simpler ways to perceive the social world in which we live and the human condition which pre-

vails in relation to the environment. Each teacher and child should have the right to pioneer their Montessori educational experience.

The child, the parent, the teacher all enter the Montessori world with the intention to make it better. The scope of the idea is gigantic because it probes the mystery of human nature, the nature of growth, the nature of belief, the limits of science, the power of narrative thinking. The idea is a vital challenge to American philosophy and science because Montessori knew the developmental nature of humans in the context of biological evolution. She looked both backwards to the origin of culture, and forward to the growth of human understanding, the genuine growth of human life which is the process of the Montessori idea manifest in the Montessori school, as part of raising children.

The Montessori idea is always expandable, and therefore it is alive and pulsating. To understand more, but not all, is the best we can do, to understand the child and the child's human predicament vitalizes thought and culture—in fact, the spirit of the child may be a very good reason for thought and culture to continue its great conversation which opens our minds and enhances our love of the world and its people.