

The Educational Principles of Maria Montessori

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In her works, Maria Montessori cites several principles on which her methodology is founded. These principles are the elements which make her approach to early childhood education vastly different from the typical approaches of her day. The way in which she views children and childhood, the role of the teacher and even the set-up and functions of the classroom and educational materials were revolutionary when she first presented them to the world. Through her books *The Montessori Method* and *The Secret of Childhood*, she gives the background and practical experience through which she uncovered these principles. Through the real life examples with her pupils that she shares in these books, she proves their effectiveness. She also shows how these principles were applied to children of different social and ethnic backgrounds. She also proved that these principles would produce phenomenal results with her students such as self-directed learning, a quiet and productive classroom environment, quick obedience, development of self-control, love for learning and quicker attainment of reading and math skills. She summarizes all this for us when she states, “The extraordinary rapidity with which this system of education has been adopted for children of every race and every social condition has provided us with an abundance of experimental data and enabled us to identify common features and universal tendencies and thus to determine the natural laws upon which the education of children should be based.” (The Secret of Childhood 140)

The first and by far most important principle which Montessori promotes is that of the liberty of the child. All other principles and methods spring from this original one. If the liberty of the child is not respected at every turn, the rest of her methodology will collapse. In both of these works, she emphasizes again and again that this principle undergirds all others. “The

fundamental principle of scientific pedagogy must be, indeed, the *liberty of the pupil*—such liberty as shall permit a development of individual, spontaneous manifestations of the child’s nature.” (The Montessori Method 42) She also states that, “The new education has as its primary aim the discovery and freeing of the child.” (The Secret of Childhood 110)

With the freedom of the child as the key component of learning, an environment is then prepared which supports and aids the child to grow in his personal liberty. “The solution...is to be found in preparing a suitable environment for the child where he may manifest his higher tendencies.” (The Secret of Childhood 86) This is the second principle of Montessori’s method. Through it she honors completely her first principle of the liberty of the child.

The prepared environment Montessori created has the child in mind in every respect. There are no desks, only tables fitted to the size of the child. Small, light-weight chairs which the child can manipulate at will fill the classroom. The environment is kept clean and orderly. It is also supplied with educational materials through which the child can engage in what Montessori calls “auto-education.” These educational tools are left open and available to the children at all times so that they can choose for themselves which they would like to use and be able to manipulate them at will. These materials are self-correcting and lend themselves to the repetition so often practiced by the children. In this environment, the student enters the classroom, seats himself comfortably, chooses to learn what he would like to learn, chooses his learning materials, works with them freely for as long as he desires and returns them, when he has completed his self-appointed task, to their rightful place. This auto-education is directed by the child, not the teacher, as he determines for himself what he would like to learn and for how long he would like to focus on learning it.

Although this approach seemed radical to many educators in her day, Montessori encouraged them to trust her and to trust children, because, as she explained, “For adults, a child’s mind is an unfathomable riddle. It is puzzling to them because they judge it by its outward manifestations rather than by its inner psychic energies. We should try to understand that there is an intelligible reason behind a child’s activities. He does nothing without some reason, some motive.” (The Secret of Childhood 68) Knowing this principle and trusting it, she allowed her pupils the freedom they desired and watched as they *did* spontaneously educate themselves.

The prepared environment is more than just the classroom and its tools, though, it includes the preparation of the teacher. In this principle, Montessori expects much. First of all, the teacher must be an individual of high moral character. Someone who is willing to “prepare himself interiorly by systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most deeply rooted defects, those in fact which impede his relations with children.” (The Secret of Childhood 149) Extensive self-evaluation is a pre-requisite of good teaching in Montessori’s eyes. She wants someone who is humble, who loves children and has a high respect for them, their freedom and their self-development. The very nature of the teacher will set the emotional tone of the classroom. “...there is here a question of a deeper calm, an empty, or better, unencumbered state that is a source of inner clarity. This calm consists in a spiritual humility and intellectual purity necessary for the understanding of a child, and which, as a consequence, must be found in a teacher.” (The Secret of Childhood 137) In fact, for Montessori, “the educator must be as one inspired by a deep *worship of life*.” (The Montessori Method 90). This perspective of

“worshipping life” is a key characteristic of a teacher who is able to honor the liberty and auto-education of the child.

Once an instructor, or a director as Montessori has renamed the teacher, of lofty enough character has been found, they are trained to work in a passive capacity in the classroom. In fact, as Montessori explains, they must become comfortable with a virtual role reversal. “This new system of education has been widely discussed, particularly with respect to the reversed roles of child and adult—the teacher without a desk, without authority, and almost without teaching, and the child, the center of activity, free to move about as he wills and to choose his own occupations.” (The Secret of Childhood 111) In addition, “The teacher must understand and *feel* her position of observer.” (The Montessori Method 79) In this capacity, the director oversees the classroom, aids any child in need, ensures that mutual respect is honored and allows the students to partake of their environment in their own way, trusting them to know what they need and engage in those activities that are best for their next phase of development.

The immense trust placed in the child’s intuitive self-knowledge is a principle evident in this method. For Montessori, respect for the child and his or her psychological and spiritual development is paramount. Montessori knows she is pushing people beyond their comfort level with her expectations for the classroom and the teacher. “A further characteristic of our system of teaching is respect for the child’s personality carried to a point never reached before.” (The Secret of Childhood 111) But, she maintains, “A child’s psychic life should develop naturally and reveal its inner secret. Unless this principle is maintained, all later attempts at education will only lead one more deeply into an endless maze.” (The Secret of Childhood 110) She believes this with good reason—she has seen tremendous results. She reports repeatedly that not only do the

children learn more quickly, feel greater happiness and contentment and mature more naturally, but she has seen these results not just at one school but at dozens around the world.

With the pupil now in charge of seeking out his or her desired learning tools and tasks and the teacher put in the position of passive observer, the Montessori classroom takes on a whole new look and feeling from almost anything practiced in schools of her day. This approach, while seeming to turn education on its head, was undeniably attractive because of the results Montessori consistently reported. These educational principles seemed to produce outcomes that every educator longed to see, especially another principle Montessori taught—spontaneous self-discipline. She persistently proclaimed, “Discipline must come through liberty.” (The Montessori Method 78) She could see that discipline was a major issue in schools at that time, with students constantly disrupting the classroom with their inattention and lack of self-control. She knew this was a problem that needed to be solved. Her educational experiments taught her something she never expected to discover when she first began—that when children are given the freedom to pursue their education in their own way and at their own pace, self-discipline is the natural result. Time after time she witnessed that same scene: “When a normal child is attracted by an object he fixes his whole attention intently upon it and continues to work without a break in a remarkable state of concentration. After the child has finished his work, he appears satisfied, rested, and happy.” (The Secret of Childhood 114) This is why she could proclaim that her method brought about an orderly, quiet, happy feeling in the classroom. As the children directed their own learning and the teacher allowed them to do so, they engaged in the tasks that attracted them, repeated the activity until they had mastered it and then they experienced the natural rewards of accomplishment and self-confidence. These positive feelings kept them in an optimistic state of

mind and contributed to the overall happy school environment. This in turn spurred the children on to more learning and discovery.

Through these few, but in Maria Montessori's day, grossly underutilized educational principles, she effected a revolution in the way people thought about children, childhood and education. By strongly emphasizing the liberty of the student, teaching the importance of a properly prepared environment, massively decreasing the role of the teacher in the classroom and demonstrating the principle of spontaneous self-discipline, Montessori was able to show the world that these principles could create overwhelmingly positive changes in how children are educated. Through her books, she showed over and over again that these principles not only work in education but had the possibility of generating beneficial societal advances as well.

Unfortunately, our modern schools are greatly lacking in these educational principles. We have not embraced these principles as she would have liked and have not reaped the benefits they hold for us and our children. If we hope to see the results these principles could generate in the education of our children, we would do well to return to them, understand them on a deeper level and look for ways in which we can better honor them.

Works Cited

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