

# **MONTESORI: A SPIRITUAL PARADIGM FOR THE NEW AGE**

**By**

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2004**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The recent fascination with economic success has permeated the educational milieu and has created a situation where product of the enterprise dominates process. A prominent result has been a standardization of educational practice as reflected in curriculum design and teaching methods.

The central objective of this thesis is to show that while the nature and reliability of the teaching methods is critical, what is equally important for the efficiency of the educational process are the personal qualities, both moral and spiritual, of the student. In this regard, it is suggested that the Montessori model of pedagogy offers a fresh perspective through its recognition of the child's unique capacities and motivations. It is argued that the Montessori philosophy of education represents a well-balanced, child-centred learning tool which effectively avoids imposing an adult frame of reference on the child.

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Dr. Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952)

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## **Chapter One**

### **Child's Reality versus Adult's Vision – The Educational Discord**

We live in an era, which may be characterized as almost acutely education-conscious. Articles pertaining to different aspects of the educational process can be found in our local newspapers nearly on a daily basis. And while it seems to be widely recognized that substantial amounts of not only money, but also time and energy are being channeled into education, the outcomes are nowhere to being proportionately identifiable.

Professional businesses, for instance, report deficiencies in reading, writing, arithmetic, and overall knowledge displayed by the highschool and university graduates they employ. Approximately four times as many children as in 1870 are now in school, but we spend more than ninety times as much on their education (Bestor, 1985).

Evidence suggests, however, that the achievement on standardized tests of a student today is only a little greater than his predecessor's. Absenteeism and truancy are reported to be on the increase in the schools of many Western countries. In many large cities, the percentage of children staying away from school each day is as high as 30% ,Allan 1989).

How significant a role education plays in our Canadian society can be attested to by the extent, to which governments have become involved in the educational process organizationally as well as financially. In January of last year, for instance, the British Columbia government allocated \$150 million to the education system with a focus on

classroom services. In 2006, the education budget rose to \$200 million with priority given to areas such as class size, class composition, and special-needs students. Similarly, later in 2006, Finance Minister Carol Taylor announced on June 30, 2006 a five-year agreement had been reached giving B.C. teachers another incentives and a 12-percent general wage increase (The Fraser Institute Report, 1996). These organizational and financial strategies may be said to reflect the degree and variety of criticisms put forward by teachers, parents and school administrators. Some within the educational profession believe, for instance, that sound educational reform should address such issues as class size and the design of school buildings. Yet others view the root of the problem in the very methods that are applied to resolve perceived problems. For example, on the one hand, we have those who are strong advocates of free discipline for the sake of self-expression, and on the other hand, we have those who caution against bringing so-called “soft psychology” to the classroom urging us instead to adopt a stronger stance in regards to class discipline based solely on the teacher’s authority and discretion. The latter group is also likely to advocate the importance of more rigorous examinations to assure proper classification of different types of children according to their intellectual capacity. There are also those who argue that we should never elevate the benchmark of education until we raise the salaries of the teachers. All of these concerns, although potentially remedial and many of them good in themselves, are issues dealing with the organization and design of the educational process and, by and large, external to the child’s needs.

One may then question whether such institutionalization of education with an intense level of governmental involvement aims for the betterment of the student or otherwise. I doubt it that these remedies, although well-intentioned, can in themselves

improve the situation. The root of the problem, as I see it, does not reside in education per se, but rather in by-now-strongly-established social relations between children and adults, pupils and teachers. Reflecting on my own experience as a student and later on as a teacher, I realize now that adults generally fail to view a child as a unique human being gifted with reason and logic and capable of self-directed intellectual development. As Callan puts it: "One of our assumptions about children and adolescents is that authority is something we cannot entrust to them because they will not use it competently" (Bailin and Portelli, 1993, p. 151).

This presupposition, so deeply held by parents and educators alike, is grounded in the apparent trust in accumulated knowledge and experience. Children are considered lacking on both of these accounts and, consequently, denied the right to participate in educational decision-making. And so the question remains – should autonomy be an important goal for young children?

Theorist Erick Erickson contended, for instance, that each stage of life has its own task, a developmental stage. According to Erickson, the first stage of development is trust. The second stage, at about two years of age, autonomy, is built on trust (Mayers, 1999). As argued in this paper, to refine their sense of self, children must come to believe that faith in themselves and their environment will not be destroyed by adults who are too demanding and refuse to let them make choices for themselves.

Similarly, Erickson believed that children, even at age two, must be entrusted to learn to exercise will and do things for themselves, or they will doubt their abilities. When we look at Erickson's fourth stage of psychological development from around age six to puberty, right at the onset of elementary schooling, healthy development becomes a

matter of competence versus inferiority. Hence, children learn the pleasure of applying themselves to tasks at hand or, according to Erickson (1963) they will feel incompetent and inferior. If one is to consider Erickson's theory of psychological development, one must conclude that we as adults, whether in the position of a parent or a teacher, must absolutely make a commitment to respect children's autonomy and help them achieve a healthy level of self-assurance. Erickson characterizes this important aspect of children's development as "I am what I can imagine to be" (Ibid., p.112).

We in the Western tradition tend to view human condition including the development of human mind and body as hierarchical. Within such a conceptual framework, we naturally consider it imperative that children be aided and directed as much as possible in achieving their greatest potential as quickly as possible. In fact, by doing so, we somewhat subconsciously impose on the child our own adult frame of reference. The average adult sees no reason why the child should not conform to his point of view, his arrangements, his environment. The adult has typically no understanding of the inner workings of the child's mind and, often, no practical appreciation of the child's work. One may perhaps go as far as to say that this unconscious and, therefore, unintentional exercise of constantly aiding and directing the child's development is a form of control seriously hindering his/her curious and creative nature. To put it briefly, the child's natural curiosity and spontaneity is suffocated by the unnecessary, if not outright damaging, and constant interventions of adults. One of the main reasons for this is our tendency to see the child as an inferior human being. Such attitude, of course, implies distrust in the value of the child's self-regulation and self-achievement when it comes to his learning endeavours.

This general attitude toward the child is, no doubt, reflected in the manner society tries to solve educational dilemmas. Teachers often find themselves in the position of mediators and act from the position of authority. Consequently, proposed solutions are tainted by a tendency to emphasize the need for the child to adjust to school, curriculum, parent, society. This is what we then label as a well-adjusted child. The underlying assumption is that adults, in contrast to the child, always know what is best for the child and that the child cannot be trusted. The child is looked upon as a plastic material to be molded to correspond to the adult's concept of the world. If the child questions his environment and refuses to "jump through the loops", so to speak, he is immediately perceived as maladjusted.

We may also wish to ask why we find it so difficult to hold back from rushing in and taking over the child's activity in order to finish it quickly and to our satisfaction. Why is it that we feel so tempted to guide our children to repeat the patterns we have previously experienced rather than considering new avenues the child can freely explore? I think, apart from the fact we see the child as not fully capable of directing himself, it is partly due to the differences in the rhythm and tempo of our lives. Consequently, the disharmony between children and adults may at least partly be due to the misrepresentation of each other's motives.

From the psychological point of view, I would say we adults are wired differently. The adult is socialized to be practical. We are constantly reminded that things need to be done in a certain time frame. The child's business, on the other hand, is to grow and develop. This is, of course, an unconscious aim on the part of the child, nevertheless an important one to achieve. Repeating the same activity over and over or helping with a

simple task in the kitchen, no matter how tedious it may seem to us adults, assists him in learning and growing.

Nowadays, all the time we strive to reach goals and satisfy a variety of personal as well as societal ideals. Needless to say, we try to do this as quickly and as economically as possible. We plan days and weeks ahead in this way. But this is not the case with the child. He functions on a completely different plane. For children, future goals are abstract, and by their virtue, incomprehensible concepts. Children typically do not rush toward the end of an action or task. This is because his goal is the action itself. To the child, it is the preference of process over product that governs the rhythm and tempo of his life. Therefore, one of the first tasks for any adult working with young children should be to free himself from his own life dynamics. We adults need to learn to respect the different beat of the child's life instead of trying to speed it up in the hope of synchronizing it with our own. As a result, we may become increasingly aware that children are not just miniature although less wise adults, but distinctive beings with rather unique methods of approaching reality. New evidence derived from developmental studies supports this notion and it is nowadays widely accepted that even babies have a natural appetite for learning. It is indicated further that if they are allowed to learn freely, they will learn far more than they normally do when assisted by the adult (Buzan, 1978).

This traditional way of viewing the child as somewhat inadequate as a self-directing entity, so central to contemporary educational thought, strongly influences the methods employed in our schools and diverts our attention away from values pivotal to the genuine and unique experience of the child. To illustrate how adults' erroneous perception of the child may reflect on the educational practice, I wish to offer two

examples. In the not so distanced past, a number of educational interventions were grounded on the assumption that it is beneficial and, in fact, necessary to introduce an instructional format of teaching to children at a very early age, preferably before the commencing of mandatory schooling. This belief seemed to have arisen from a common desire to correct their errors in speech and to remedy a variety of other language deficits including accent and dialect (Chomsky, 1972). Essentially, a connection had been established between language deficit and one's capacity to learn. Under this doctrine, as long as a deficit was considered inconsistent with standard English, it was viewed as inferior and subject to correction. One may only presume what the consequences of such intervention were. I have a feeling that such practice was most likely hindering children's ability not only in the assimilation of instruction, but also in the acquiring of reading and writing skills later in their school years. Perhaps due to the recognition of the impact of such misleading efforts based on mere assumption rather than on solid empirical evidence, a growing awareness of the coercive nature of this model has been realized and, to the best of my knowledge, is no longer used in our schools.

More recently, a similarly troublesome measure made its way to the North American educational setting. In order to encourage the participation and co-operation of the more poorly functioning children in the traditional school setting and, perhaps for the sake of political correctness, children with a variety of cognitive difficulties now share classroom with their more intellectually advantaged peers. In my experience as a teacher, such inclusion, although well intended, frequently elicits labeling responses toward the disadvantaged child, further damaging his self-perception. Assuming that this measure

was intended to assimilate the child and consequently bring the child's learning potentialities closer to the rest of the class, my direct observations lead me to a finding contrary to this rationale. Particularly in a group situation, the poorly functioning child, even if he manages to partake in the activities, is not capable to contribute for any extended period of time to activities of even a far lesser complexity than the rest of the group. This, of course, leads to boredom and disturbances on the part of the child and causes distraction to the teacher's instructional effort. Considering the circumstances, one may question the educational as well as personal value of such shared experience.

Given the highly structured nature of the learning process in the traditional school coupled with the adults' insistence on continually guiding the child directly, one cannot help but wonder whether the personality of the child can unfold freely as it would under less-governed circumstances. In short, this discord between the adult and the child is due to the erroneous view of the child's capacity as a self-guiding learner. Having said that, I do realize that our Western society has gone a tremendously long way to meet the needs of our children and to accept their rights as socially valuable entities. In part, this is most likely due to advancements in social sciences such as those found in sociology and psychology. With the conceptual tools offered by psychology, we now can, for instance, more readily investigate the effects of mistreatment on children's development.

My concern regarding the general disharmony of the relationship between adult and child stems from the awareness that we adults have the inclination to view the child as grossly inadequate. In our misguided efforts to help them, we downplay the significance of what the children themselves find applicable or attractive to their interests during their formative years. To do the adult in all of us justice, most of us do not



intentionally infringe upon the rights of children. By and large, we do this out of ignorance, misapprehension, or simply lack of patience. Such attitude, of course, implies distrust in the value of the child's self-regulation of the learning process. This general attitude inevitably percolates through elementary educational structures, potentially reducing education to a mere utilitarian tool concerned primarily with societal rather than the child's needs. The central theme of the debate then emerges to be the purpose of education. The point I wish to raise in this section of my thesis is that a learning process that sacrifices children's unique capacity and universal ability to discover and learn spontaneously violates the healthy development of a creative, competent mind. What this means in practical terms, and how we can overcome these perceived inadequacies of the educational system, is a matter I would like to turn my attention to in the following section.

## Chapter Two

### Conception of Education as a Real-life Experience

Education is often conceptualized as preparation for adult life. Although this aspect of education is important, it must be viewed in the right perspective. As expressed in *The Republic*, Plato's primary conception of human endeavour and, therefore happiness, is that each individual does what he or she is best suited by innate nature to do (Carr and Haldane, 2003). Aristotle, on the other hand, stresses virtue as the driving force behind one's satisfaction with life (Ibid.). In both of these instances perhaps, education may be formulated as an opportunity to be actualized in a personally meaningful manner. From this it follows that the teacher's role is to show each child his or her potential.

I think both of these explanations are plausible as they consider education to be governed primarily by the learner's needs and potentials. At the same time, it can be assumed that the well-being of each individual is understood as contributory to the well-being of the society, or *The Republic* in Plato's case. This is because once an individual finds his own satisfying position in society, he manifests his worth not only for his own benefit in terms of pleasure, but also for the benefit of the society in terms of productivity.

Personally, I am deeply troubled by the simplistic and nearsighted view of the purpose of education as preparation for adult life. It is because it lends itself to a variety of interpretations and thus can be easily tailored to a particular mood or societal

trend of the day. Many of these interpretations are one-sided and stress only what is perceived to be useful after the children leave school and enter the real world. Essentially, this is a view that somewhat artificially perpetuates the publicly accepted status quo. Hence teachers in traditional schools, carrying in mind this utilitarian principle, feed their students information that has no connection or real meaning to their current life experiences.

As a teacher, I often felt discouraged to see children disinterested in most of the material presented. At the same time, I was quite limited in my ability to alter the compulsory curriculum presented to me. Yet, I was acutely aware that what I was preaching may very well be concrete in goals and content, but seriously inadequate in methods. This is not to suggest that educational goals and content are somewhat secondary to the method being applied. Rather, as I see it, content is necessary for knowledge and experience to be effectively acquired, but not a sufficient condition on its own. In my view, it is goal-directed content coupled with age-appropriate method which takes into account individual differences, interests and drives that can unravel spontaneity, creativeness, and autonomy of critical thought in children. Under this doctrine, both the individual learner and the school or the society, are the focal point of the educational process.

I think many of our current problems in pedagogy or otherwise arise from the type of disjunctive thinking, which leads us to believe that it is one or the other; the individual or society. One must predominate, we assume, at the expense of the other. I would suspect, however, that it is quite logical to presume that the success of the former entails the success of the latter

At times, I think school principles try to adapt the curriculum so that it is centered more on the student and his characteristic. I noticed, however, that this frequently results in the artificial creation of hierarchy based on academic achievement of the student rather than his interests and unique capabilities. The main concern becomes whether the “right” students receive the “right” opportunity. Although well intended, this scenario opens the doors for factors such as socioeconomic status and parents’ education to intervene in the educational practice. For those who are honestly concerned about a healthy development of the child’s potential, this is clearly an undesirable situation. This is because under this scenario, school matters only if the deserving students are in the right classes at the right time, and this is true regardless of how effective those classes may be.

There is no doubt that school is distinctive from other societal institutions in many respects, but mainly, I think, in the area of delivering information, facts and verbal concepts. Accordingly, school curriculum reflects sequences of learning practice and opportunities. It is also fair to say that it is in this area that school can go far beyond what the family can do, considering how much time and effort teachers presently channel into this endeavour. However, pedagogy so conceptualized fails to take into account such matters as teaching children self-reliance and the ability to think independently.

Provided that there is general agreement that attaining of such qualities arises from direct and self-guided experience involving personal experience, it is logical to conclude that traditional school is seriously lacking in this respect. Instead, children spend much time of the day sitting in rows, attending to teacher’s instruction, scribbling notes, reading from textbooks. It would seem that schools nowadays have become almost “less daring”, if you will. Part of my criticism of the current educational system is

that the schools, by undervaluing or discouraging creative methodology, have created an anti-intellectual climate within the system. Somewhat ironically, the question arises whether an entire generation of children will consequently fail the preparation for the adult life test because they cannot think their way through real life problems, work in teams, critically distinguish good information from bad or speak a language other than English.

Particularly, if one considers current economic and technological trends, I believe the present concentration on competency in reading and math is only the minimum the school can offer. Likewise, scientific skills are utterly necessary but insufficient. Today's complexity of living with its increasingly global mode of thinking demands not only an adequate level of competence in the traditional academic disciplines, but also the ability to evaluate new sources of information, to think outside the box and, generally, to know more about the world. Children need to have an understanding of this complexity and of an overall balanced approach to problem solving and information processing. The mission is to teach children, even at an early age, how to become discerning consumers of information and how to be able to investigate, communicate and rationally defend their own position. I think in the age where Google and other search engines continue delivering vast quantities of information of varying quality, it is absolutely essential for children and adults alike to possess these invaluable skills.

I believe that a close relationship between culture and the workings of educational system exists, and that much of what children experience in school is and should be influenced by social institutions and societal trends alike. Consequently, in an era of an overwhelming information flow and ever-pervasive attempts of the media to influence

our common sensitivities, children need to be taught to sift through what is presented to them and distinguish between what is reliable and what is not. Since we often act on information received, validating this information becomes an important aspect of everyday life. Another area deserving our attention as educators is the emphasis on the development of communication skills and the ability to cooperate in teams. Perhaps even more pressing in the Canadian context is the ability to cooperate with people of differing cultural backgrounds. All this requires adding more depth and rigor to the curriculum design.

Essentially, in the Google era we live in, where information is available at a keystroke, we need to redefine what the concepts of knowledge and preparation for adult life represent. Here again, I must stress that children do need a substantial source of information in order to master complex concepts later in life. Without accumulating fundamental principles of math, science or social studies, this would be impossible to achieve. At the same time, however, there must be a proper balance between these core disciplines and the acquisition of a wide variety of other more practical skills such as independent critical thinking, making connections between ideas, etc.

I think formal education, when looked at from the right perspective and when conducted properly, is irreplaceable as a process of learning. It is a process of understanding and knowing how to find significance in the world and our position in it. When children learn early on that their own value and the value of their experience is recognized and attained through understanding, creating and working on projects and exercising their own self-determination, education becomes an internally motivated and profoundly rewarding endeavour to live through. In a way, it is a spiritual experience,

whereby the child is encouraged to search for his inner value and his position in the community. Such a learning process has the potential to contribute to an active and realistic engagement with the world. At this point, we may generalize by saying that a self-directed educational activity, when accompanied by the discovery of the purpose and personal value embedded within the activity, presents a rewarding and effective form of learning. This is because whenever the child can see the connection between effort and success, he is intrinsically motivated to continue and to perfect the activity.

I am a strong believer in the importance of motivation in any activity, and think that any endeavour, whether it be mathematics, painting, or sports, if properly motivated, can be perfected and enjoyed to the highest level. It is clear that the absence of formal education, or education that is unresponsive to children's natural talents and their aspirations, can be alien and hostile. In fact, it disables the child's enjoyment of what the world has to offer and prevents him from actualizing himself effectively.

This is, of course, a much broader and much more holistic understanding of education than commonly accepted. It is not education that concentrates on reading, writing, explaining, and dry memorization of fact. Rather, its epicenter is found in the correspondence to the human character, and its purpose is the cultivating of the child's distinctive habits and abilities that enable him to be excellent in whatever activity or profession he is suited for the most. Education, when understood and practised this way, enters a sphere of self-mastery and a sort of inner tranquility through self-sufficiency on the part of the learner.

Here again we arrive at the conclusion that the closer to the conditions of normal life experience the learning process can be brought, the more real will the problems of the

day seem and will function as new challenges to be overcome. As such, education and the child's distinctive mode of operation and life experience must enter into a reciprocal relationship. The more fully the child can learn from his own learning experience without no or minimum input and interruption from the adult, the more complete, lasting and personal his knowledge will be. Moreover, if he can feel the problem and deductively test and ascertain a solution to the problem for himself by using his 'inner tools', if you will, the more educationally and socially significant the results are. This point is of profound importance, and the more we reflect on it in the educational as well as social context, the increasingly more meaningful the conceptual framework of personal value becomes. I believe we have made the mistake of perpetuating many outdated ideas about the purpose of educational enterprise as if they were universally relevant. This way, our education became static. Because of this, we are confronted with serious problems in contemporary education.

Some express their concerns by arguing about what should be included in the curriculum. Others advocate just as strongly for increased parental involvement in the decision-making (Schmidt, 2001). During my preparation for the writing of this thesis, I came across numerous books citing evidence from cross-cultural studies of education. All of these studies compare and evaluate students' achievements based on standardized tests. Undoubtedly, such studies have implications for the competitiveness of that particular nation, perhaps even political significance. They may inform us about how different countries allocate their resources and what priority is placed on providing effective education to the masses. These studies, however, say little about individual learning and personal growth. They also generate very little evidence of what aspects of



education and what educational practices produce a desirable level of cognitive growth. What the schools offer over and beyond the typical lecture in the classroom is, I believe, as important as the formal curriculum itself. These elements would be highly informative as they could shape educational policy.

There is yet another dimension to the argument developed so far. Every day, most parents send their children off to school without giving a thought to the final goal of the educational system. They do not question or even contemplate the learning methods employed. Although, as already mentioned earlier, they may voice their concerns at times, their opinions remain largely passive. Consequently, parents' pervasive silence about their children's education is interpreted by teachers and school officials as an implicit approval of the status quo. Yet, for children to achieve their full potential, instructional method must be adapted to the characteristics of the child. Under this doctrine, a certain level of liberal thinking on the part of the teacher will be required. Not only that, however. Teachers must be equipped with a solid knowledge base from developmental and cognitive psychology. Most teachers I have met had a very constricted perspective in terms of what the child's intellectual comprehension may be at a certain age level.

Teachers have a considerable level of autonomy in the classroom. They have freedom to create their own teaching method within the curriculum framework, for instance. I think such initiative comes from within the teachers' personal belief rather than from some external directive. Teachers often complain about the limitations imposed upon them by the administration, and about the lack of resources. Most

teachers, however, spend the majority of their teaching time under no official guidance from above. It is a matter of how and to what end one chooses to use such autonomy.

The school day is almost exclusively spent in verbal interaction. Teachers are frequently convinced that it is the most effective teaching method available. I see a certain level of naivety in this argument in that it assumes that for every bit of reality there is a corresponding word to describe it. Kant, of course, would strongly disagree with such an assumption arguing instead that language is a means for learning and that it can never substitute learning itself.

Having had the opportunity to experience educational practice from the elementary through to the university level in the former Czechoslovakia, I remember classes dwelled on key concepts that were taught in depth and were often accompanied by practical instruction with hands – on experience. This is in contrast to a succession of dry details followed by examination as practiced in most traditional schools today. Extensive textbooks with new editions being published every three to four years support this latter approach. A typical textbook used by children as young as ten deals with a mind-boggling array of topics and subtopics in an attempt to satisfy a vast range of prescribed standards. As a result, the instructional method where the seated class listens to a teacher reciting as the *modus operandi*, leaves little room for experimentation, for applying these facts in real life situations or a self-actualizing form of learning. In fact, I strongly believe that it is through marrying theory and practice that a fact becomes more meaningful and engrained in the child's memory. Especially with the very young child, educational material which can be felt and observed and directly experienced and where senses are actively involved produces a long-lasting effect. It is precisely this direct

experience that allows the child to make a personal connection to the subject matter more readily. It opens the doors to discussions about not only what we know, but also about how we know.

In questioning children under ten years old, one may be surprised by the inadequacy of their reasoning and by the difficulty they often experience in recalling how they reached their conclusions. I am convinced that this is due to inadequate verbal, rather than intellectual, sophistication. It is apparent that children experience a great difficulty defining and justifying the concepts they employ. By the same token, perhaps it can be maintained that the child's intelligence at this age is by and large sensorial and if so, deeply connected to what the child can see, touch, smell, etc. In other words, the child may be unable to verbalize his thought properly as his dominant mode of functioning is still that of manipulation of objects and active exploration. If this is so, the typical child is probably much more sophisticated in action than in language. One may then ask, how will the child behave when faced with a learning situation based almost exclusively on verbal transfer of knowledge and memorization of fact as is the case in the current school system? It is no surprise to see that children often demonstrate anxieties, behavioural difficulties and lack of interest at best. These instances may then be erroneously interpreted by the adult as behavioural/learning disorders.

Interestingly, scholars, philosophers, and scientists would most likely agree that the majority of scientific discoveries, the results of which create the core of our knowledge about the world today, were born out of experience and experimentation rather than theoretical analysis of facts. It was a gradual process of discovering relationships between things and events, cause and effect. After all, this is precisely why

we value and respect scientific disciplines - for the assumed objective quality of their results. Why would then an educational system rely so heavily on mere accumulation of data? I find this argument quite compelling.

I think both intellectual mastery and practical competence are the fundamental duties of a sound educational system. If school should fail to adhere rigorously to this principle and continue giving its students only the results of scientific discoveries in the form of textbook fact, there would never be a comprehension of logical reasoning in the true sense of the term. There can only be a superficial and disconnected collection of information, likely to be forgotten once the test is passed.

Most of the traditional approaches have been concerned explicitly only with clearly expressing what is to be learned, taking the child's cognitive level of development for granted. If I am correct, however, teaching should encompass both aspects, and it is within this framework that we can distinguish between good and bad teaching method. Betham and Sharpe are similarly critical of the workings of the current educational system and label such practice as heavily associative. This means, according to the authors, that learning is based on stimulus - response conditioning and later on associating concepts in a chain of reasoning (Ibid.). This is in order to assure that the material is committed to memory which leads to accurate reproduction when needed.

Clearly, this is a more mechanical process based on application of rule while the characteristics of the learner are overlooked or at best considered as a by-product of such learning experience. Surely the trouble in this case is that education is conducted without any concern for the simple logical point that all teaching, at least in theory, consists of two layers, namely, teaching somebody as well as teaching something. This is especially

relevant if we consider the fact that, according to numerous developmental studies, young children are incapable of learning through verbal instruction and purely abstract reasoning.

In Piaget's (1896 – 1980) theory, for instance, children's thinking is not abstract at all up to about age eleven. This means that their reasoning is not driven by premises and logic as is usually the case in adults. Rather, according to Piaget (1967), their thinking is governed by the appearances of the material before them. This does not mean that children cannot reason correctly at this developmental level. Instead, their reasoning power is enhanced by sensorial experience. One may wonder whether educational endeavour that fails to take into consideration what children can and cannot learn satisfies the definition of 'teaching' altogether.

While the validity of the above outlined indictments can be debated, I often think of the causes responsible for the lack of the child-centered approach to learning. In doing so, however, I am faced with the paradox that teachers and parents alike view themselves as providing for the future well-being of their children regardless of the fact that, in the process, they make them disconnected and often lost. Based on my experience and belief, these inadequacies are at least partly due to the institutionalization of education which prompted redirection of the traditional emphasis on individual needs to a somewhat general communal need in an effort to mold the child into a predetermined, socially desirable shape. And so, while the principle of education based on the child's needs exists in theory, in practice, cookie-cutter methodology characterizes the majority of the teachers' pedagogical endeavour.

It is no surprise then that teachers frequently express frustration about the fact that children lack concentration and that they have to be forced into acquiring even the most core principles of mathematics, spelling, etc. Based on my own teaching experience, I can attest to this unfortunate state of affairs. However, although educators may at times communicate their dissatisfaction, their reaction remains largely the domain of staff room discussion only. I suspect that it is very unusual for teachers to publicly show initiative in regards to more effective teaching methods. Rather, as mentioned earlier in this paper, teachers' publicly announced concerns are seemingly and frequently limited to argumentation that organizational issues, such as wages and class size will solve these problems. Reduced class size, for instance, may undoubtedly lead to greater efficiency, but it will not resolve the issues of methodology. As long as the underlying principle of human learning remains the method of almost exclusively abstract thinking rather than the combination of both abstract thinking and discovery derived from the child's own actual experience, our children will not benefit from the learning experience to its greatest potential.

A curriculum, which fails to consider all aspects of the child's experience including aesthetics, emotions, skill capacity and interests, will not function as an effective educational tool. In reality, such a curriculum will most likely constrain children in finding their own intrinsic reasons for learning, a topic I wish to return to later in this work. I think it is reasonable to say that the only way to eliminate the above-mentioned problems as they arise in the current educational system is to critically reconsider the processes of teaching methods employed. Rather than bombarding children with information about various subjects, it seems to be more important to teach

the child about himself; about his values as they change during his formative years. It is the role of the teacher to communicate to the children that it is their needs and their concerns that are important and that their feelings and their experiences are of relevance.

I believe that when a child is developing a certain level of knowledge and comprehension in a particular subject area, which I suppose is at the heart of what we generally mean when we use the term “being educated”, he will facilitate the process of learning significantly by making a personal connection to the subject in question. Methods traditionally employed in our schools to transfer knowledge such as explaining, questioning and displaying are all methods externally imposed on the child, and as such, disregard the child’s point of view, creativeness, and capacity to think independently. The child’s autonomy is understood as the final product of intellectual growth through academic experience. In my conception, the child’s autonomy is acquired and is unfolding already prior to the child’s entering the school system. One of the purposes of this thesis is to indicate the implications of the erroneous conception of education and human development not only for the teaching profession, but mainly for the child.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Education as a Reflection of Socio-Economic Trends**

In this chapter, I would like to examine the origin of contemporary educational practices vis-à-vis social and economic considerations. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that any dissemination of knowledge including the educational practice in schools can be connected closely to wider socio-economic developments in society.

Traditionally, societies have selected various subjects which were considered important for the proper functioning of that society. The approach to achieve such effect has varied, but in general terms, the child has been expected to passively listen to what was being taught, to make notes, to understand, to remember, and finally to recall as much as possible. With passing time, however, I believe we are now questioning such a teaching process and realize that the instructional method has created a range of problems including boredom, lack of concentration, anxiety and fear.

Historians of education and sciences tend to agree that the stepping stone for many of the educational practices central to the modern educational system was laid in post-Revolutionary France. According to Bernard and Kolesnik (1965), for instance, “modern education, in its administration, its curriculum and its philosophical theory, dates from the France of the eighteenth century and receives its most complete exposition at the time of the Revolution. Thus, it is eighteenth century France that can be credited with planning, establishing and eventual application of educational practices as we know them today. We also know that it was in the nineteenth century that scientific disciplines



such as psychology and sociology began to emerge. Many argue that scientific discoveries around this period led to increasing institutionalization of scientific endeavour with a gradual move towards a national educational system (Ibid.). Allan (1989) characterizes this period as a “shift from eighteenth-century natural history with its emphasis on surface structure and classification to nineteenth century humanities, with its emphasis on physiology and development of the individual” (p. 45). If a connection between educational practices and scientific knowledge can be established, one would assume that the newly emerging scientific views also contributed to the way educators and philosophers understood issues central to the nature of human development, and consequently adapted their learning and teaching methods in accordance with these findings.

If we look at the prevailing view of human nature around this period, we find that it was speculated that the human mind was considered a ‘tabula rasa’ which was shaped and transformed by the environment (Myers, 1999). Naturally, under this doctrine, any differences in intellectual capacity were attributed to experience, educational or otherwise. Perhaps it was such a strictly environmental view that further fueled a profound interest in education resulting in restructuring of the existing educational system around the French revolution as pointed by Bernard.

I also suspect that it was human sciences that introduced to the educational system the concept of classification and standardization as these are the principal concepts associated with scientific procedure. I have always been troubled by the setting of an arbitrary standard and categorizing individuals according to this standard. This is because it always introduces testing or examination of the individual in order to establish

his level of intellectual capacity or otherwise. This notion of norm or publicly/scientifically established standard was most likely at the heart of the standardized educational system at its very inception during the nineteenth century France. If this is, in fact, the case, it is reasonable to say that the modern educational system with its testing and evaluation measures is inextricably related to the methods introduced by the human sciences in the nineteenth century. Under the tenet of norm as described earlier and in view of the extreme environmentalism of the day, perhaps it was inevitable that the goal of education became to create an individual that conforms to this assumingly desirable standard of health, competence, behaviour, and a variety of other aspects of the human condition. In this climate of scientifically based pedagogy with its well-defined objectives, an array of shaping and value-laden procedures was introduced.

Assuming that one of the principal objectives of education is to produce a rationally liberated, creative person, it is somewhat ironic to see that the contemporary school adheres almost exclusively to standardized methodologies of learning.

What is also ironic about this system, although based on scientific and, therefore, hypothetically objective tradition, is that it legitimizes subjectivity in terms of important judgments being made within the system. Let us, for instance, briefly consider the emergence of the Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

It is only recently, and perhaps as the result of social and moral pressures, that we have witnessed almost an epidemic of ADHD as well as a variety of other learning and conduct disorders. In psychology textbooks, the disorder is characterized usually along the lines of difficulties that interfere with effective, task-oriented behaviour in children, particularly impulsivity, excessive motor activity, and difficulties in sustaining attention

as the name would suggest (Myers, 1999). Of course, the diagnosis itself is a problematic matter since where lies the line which separates those children who are simply active yet 'healthy' and those who are excessively active and, therefore, warrant treatment? Many in the psychology community observe the lack of clarity in diagnosing hyperactivity, and attribute this shortcoming, in part, to the lack of reliable assessment instruments (Reber, 1987). In light of such unclear differentiation along the spectrum of hyperactivity, it is questionable whether teachers and parents, who predominantly make initial recommendation, are able to identify children who are truly affected by the disorder. This concern is even more pressing if we consider the far-reaching consequences such labeling of a child as 'sick' can have.

It is with no surprise that the use of medication traditionally meets with an enthusiastic approval among the parents and teachers as both parties see it as a viable solution to the problem. However, one cannot help but wonder whether this acceptance stems, once again, from adults' misrepresentation of the child as discussed earlier in this paper. Also, could it be that medication is administered to manage the child's behaviour merely for the convenience of the adult? Or, alternatively, because it is easier to treat through a dose of pills rather than adapting one's instructional style to the child's situation? It may simply be the case that the student who trusts himself, who is aware of his values, is frequently seen as unrealistic, as a troublemaker, as someone who needs help in adjusting to "traditional" demands. This general attitude is apparent from the following quote: "There is the reality of the group and the reality of the individual. The simple but questionable way in which many people have solved this dilemma is to conclude that reality must be whatever the majority says it is; according to this view, the

more the individual moves away from the concept of the group, the more odd or queer or the crazier he is “ (Arbuckle, 1965, p. 302).

With regard to ADHD, it seems that we quite readily administer drugs producing dubious results without even considering adjusting the learning techniques to meet children’s needs and maximize their learning potential first. Perhaps it is the case where these behavioural patterns represent a normal reaction to educational method that fails to ignite children’s interest and engage their senses.

Cognitive studies consistently show that the teacher’s instructional style and the context strongly influence the child’s motivation and performance (Myers, 1999). The problem, as I understand it, is that instructional programs do not take into account individual differences and variability in personal values, goals and cognitive capacities. A comprehensive child-centered approach to curriculum planning is, therefore, needed.

In my opinion, the emergence and the almost suspiciously rapid spread of ADHD in North American schools is a sign of the conflicting relations between the child and the adult as well as the erroneous understanding of the educational process as a ‘normalization tool’. It is traditionally believed that through education it is possible to produce a socially desirable individual who conforms, in the case of ADHD behaviourally, to publicly accepted norm. If this proves to be a challenge, as is the case with overly hyperactive children or children with other conditions which are believed to undermine their learning potential, we readily drug these children to achieve the objective of education – the ‘normal’ child. For some, such normalization practice is nothing more than a reflection of exercising power over the child.

Foucault was among the philosophers who devoted a significant portion of their writings to the forms of societal control. He believed that while modern power permeates all layers of modern society, it was developed, refined, and legitimized by disciplines such as pedagogy and other human sciences (Carr and Halldane, 2003). Foucault goes even further to indicate that through the educational system's obedience to certain norm, the system deviates from the objective of producing rationally autonomous persons; rather, it produces persons who are easily governable (Ibid.). I tend to agree with Foucault's line of reasoning. It is my belief that although teachers may, with best of intentions, pursue a genuine educational goal, it is their effort to bring children on a certain, assumingly desirable, level of existence that actually limits the child's natural propensity to be creative and individual in his/her actions.

Although many teachers and even parents may disagree with such indictment of the school system, they would probably agree that the school as a primary educational institution in the society is not always growth-promoting. If the school does not always foster growth, it follows that many situations within the system may exist where the assumingly "maladjusted" child is not maladjusted at all but rather rebelling simply because there is a disconnection between his values and realities on the one hand and the education he experiences on the other.

There are strategies well known to improve attention, one of them being the metacognitive method. The core of this method is to teach children how to use their cognitive skills, such as planning and mental representation, to achieve a well-defined goal. Pipkin and Lent (2001), for instance, describe the procedure as self-evaluation of the strategies children use in progressing toward goals they have set for themselves. In

this type of classroom atmosphere, the child is expected to find out that some of the most meaningful learning is the learning that comes from within, out of his internal state of mind. If this is so, as is evident from Pressley's description of the metacognitive strategy, a certain degree of active, self-directed learning is involved. Often, scholars use the terms 'self-reinforcement, self-verbalization, and self-monitoring'. If, in fact, these strategies foster attention and school performance in hyperactive children who would otherwise be given medication instead, it would seem rational to focus attention on the methodology currently used with children. Especially in light of such high occurrence of the ADHD disorder in North American schools, it is imperative to teach self-management learning skills to actively engage the learner.

In conclusion of this section, one may wish to ask, 'Toward what ends and for the sake of what values should education be aimed? Is our current educational system humane in nature or is it simply an arena where bits and pieces of knowledge are transferred according to an artificially agreed-upon contract called the curriculum?' It is my conviction that the typical teacher is, by and large, immersed in the day-to-day task of adhering to rigid rules of methodology based on abstract thinking rather than focusing on the practice of deriving knowledge directly from one's real life experience. Merely delivering facts and imposing adult values upon children appears to be an ineffective approach to learning. And unless we trustfully allow children, even very young children, to accept an age-corresponding level of responsibility for their learning while gently guiding them along the way, we will continue to witness students who are bored, disinterested and apathetic.

Within thusly constituted learning method, it is the learner as a unique entity that becomes the focal point of the basic curriculum. In other words, the learner's rather than the school's or society's values are the centre of the educational enquiry. I trust that it is within this framework of the learning process that the teacher's number-one role is to direct and motivate children in their quest for self-determined educational ambitions.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Product over Process, Knowledge over Creativity -**

#### **The Educational Paradigm**

In education as in any other human effort, the ends determine the means. Thus, teaching practice as well as modes of assessment stem naturally from the specific goals of the educational endeavour. As our Western way of life is by and large dominated by competition, productivity and material acquisition, such hierarchy of values has undoubtedly permeated our conceptualization of what the proper objective of education ought to be. I believe that our current societal absorption centred on material accumulation is reflected in the educational process as a total preoccupation with cultivation of intellect for the sake of a future economic success of an individual. Not only does this approach sidetrack our attention to nurturing care in students, it also demands that the educational effort be unidirectional. Consequently, children become subjects of this standardization process while their self-forming capacities are being virtually neglected. This is very apparent in the ever-increasing level of implementation of classification measures, profiling, and subsequent monitoring of achievement. It is also for this very reason that, for instance, a significant dichotomy exists between the perceived educational merits of art and sciences. In fact, this misleading distinction



presents one of the major stumbling blocks precluding a fuller acceptance of the arts in basic Canadian curriculum.

In a climate where the educational concern is revolving almost exclusively around the development of intellectual capacity in order to secure future economic competitiveness, all other values including creative involvement and exposure to arts in general are being viewed as secondary and of significantly lesser importance. Many scholars warn against making such a sharp distinction between what is considered intellectual and that which is creative. This suggests that there appears to be a growing awareness that the divide between sciences and art that has been so created is, in reality, detrimental to the effectiveness of the educational process. Bailin, for example, argues that a close interconnection between the purely intellectual and the creative exists. In her argument, both of these aspects are equally crucial and, in fact, inseparable, in any attempt to improve the thinking of our students both in school as well as with respect to real life problems (1988). I think Bailin's advocacy of both disciplines as equally meaningful in terms of their position in the school curriculum implies that the creative mind is the stepping stone for all kinds of knowledge and discovery - scientific or otherwise.

Clearly then, if intellectual growth of children is the primary educational objective of the current pedagogy, it is vital to recognize that art and creativity provide an essential and irreplaceable avenue not only for uniquely personal growth, but for all forms of growth including academic achievement. Essentially, I think what Bailin insinuates in her line of reasoning is that the current educational system with its overemphasis on academic disciplines and the promotion of the intellect is an incomplete educational

approach. In effect, such a system neglects the fact that the child also possesses emotions which can strongly influence the proper functioning and growth of intellect.

It would appear that the current school system operates on the assumption that if a teacher adheres to a particular method of instruction as articulated in the school curriculum, the knowledge so transferred will be automatically assimilated by the child. This may be so, however, only if the child is emotionally prepared to learn. In other words, the capacity to learn will be proportionate to the child's level of emotional maturity. Freud (1933), for instance, went so far as to say that adult existence could be explained only as a consequence of periods of tensions not only during the childhood, but also during the early stages of development. It is unfortunate that such a view of the importance of childhood emotions and experience was not sustained within the context of the elementary education. As a result, schools are typically inattentive to the child's emotional needs, hence failing to create a climate that would encourage the flourishing of the self as a legitimate aspect of the learning process.

This realization is, of course, even more pressing during the child's formative years. Therefore, the need to attend to young children's needs and feelings, to allow children to discover their hidden potential and personal objectives, must all be included in the everyday educational experience. Instead, and as already indicated earlier, present-day schools rely predominantly on formal instruction, facts and verbal ideas; a system, which is essentially non-creative and which is placing high pressure on children as young as seven years. Assuming that aspects of human development such as self-reliance and even the ability to think critically are the by-products of experience and of an active and independent involvement in real life situations, one must wonder whether imparting

knowledge and fostering intellect should really be the fundamental goal of a sound pedagogy. I feel it should be expected that an educational system must, in addition to imparting knowledge, offer appropriate means a child may use to test his potential in as many areas of the human endeavour as feasible. Only this way can he realize and appreciate what is truly in himself and what he can be counted upon to do in a real life situation.

Whether or not one accepts this reasoning completely, it must be recognized that there is inherent truth in it. While the value of knowledge in education is no doubt substantial, it should not be dominating the educational effort as witnessed in our schools nowadays. Certainly, accumulation of knowledge should remain one of the vital roles of the educational process, but knowledge alone is inadequate to produce a well-adjusted, secure, and complete individual. In other words, factual knowledge should not equal education.

Plato postulated that education must attend to “divine ideas” while Aristotle contended that educating people must consist of “intellectual definitions”. In my opinion, and as argued by Bailin and others, both aspects of the learning experience are equally important and complimentary to each other. Judged by the practices and methods I have experienced in our traditional schools, the Aristotelian principle is very much alive and well.

## Chapter Five

### Montessori – Her Life and Work

Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) – Italian physician and educator was born in Chiaravalle in 1870. It is important to mention that Italy was undergoing a gradual industrialization around this time resulting in strong economical inequalities among people. In large cities such as Milan and Rome, newly established urban slums quickly grew into underclass of industrial workers (Rydl, 1992). It was in one of the so-impacted districts of Rome that Montessori opened her first Casa dei Bambini, so-called Children's House, where she began to apply her newly founded principles of early childhood education.

Working with children from underprivileged families, Montessori became justifiably sensitive to the suffering of children living in the poverty-stricken inner city. This, most likely, was the motivating force that propelled her on her life-long quest for answers and viable solutions to the challenges and obstacles presented by these difficult living conditions. As she points out in her book *Discovery of the Child* (1969), the “Children's House has a two-fold importance. It is socially important in that it is a school within a house. It is also educationally important as it employs a special method of instruction”. (p.41). In carrying through on this conviction, Montessori devoted the majority of her life to intensive study of the lives and daily activities of individuals. This intimate connection to the realities of people's actual lives is reflected throughout her

writings. In fact, I subject, it is these common realities that she considered to be the bedrock of the educational process.

Many ideas and values make up the Montessori model of teaching, but at the heart of her theory is the idea that the purpose of education is to fully develop human potentialities and thus secure a happy and fulfilling life. In this premise, Montessori tapped into the issue of a parental as well as societal responsibility for educating the masses of Italy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, Montessori began to advocate a particular instructional method suitable to a child's level of maturity. For instance, she argued that as the mentally deficient child is one "who has not the force to develop, the very young child is one who is not yet developed" (Montessori, 1967, p. 18).

It is apparent that, as a medical practitioner, Montessori effectively incorporated her professional background into her educational framework, and built her views around the connection between mental health and learning. In this process, she emphasized the importance of movement, spontaneity, choice, and personal responsibility. Considering both the deficient and the very young child undeveloped, thus putting them on the same plane, Montessori essentially argued for the same learning approach to be applied in both instances. As such, Montessori can arguably be considered a pioneer in what we know today as an inclusive education. Under this concept, children with a variety of learning disabilities, or those who are considered less educationally gifted due to a mental deficiency, can attend classes and hopefully benefit from instruction to their best potential.

I consider it important at this stage of the work to examine very briefly the nature of the schooling system in Italy around this period. I think it is vital to view and evaluate

Montessori's method and principles in light of the societal and cultural context within which she worked during the early decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, however, one should also look for similarities and connections with our own times if one seeks to find answers to current problems. I believe this approach will allow us to benefit from the insights and discoveries of the past more readily as we transfer so acquired knowledge into our own times and conditions.

Zimmerman reports, for instance, that the Italian educational system was rapidly changing in character during the industrialization period, growing from humane and communal to a system where the teacher functioned as a sole pedagogical agent and the method applied stressed "recitation, dictation and memorization of textbook material" (Rydl, 1992, p.24). While I understand that we must view and evaluate Montessori's methods and principles within the context of society within which she worked during the early decades of the twentieth century, it is equally important to note the similarities in societal trends between her period and our own. In this way, we can draw a connection to our current situation more competently and thus derive many useful solutions to the problems we face today. For instance, if Zimmerman is correct in his evaluation of the workings of the educational system dominated by rigid rule, it is fair to say that such system was very similar in nature to our contemporary school concept where children's creativity and self-directed learning are essentially discouraged. In addition, one may assume that the reason why the teacher began to play primary role in the upbringing and education of children is closely connected to the rapid movement of men and women alike into the workforce during the industrialization period. The teacher essentially

replaced the mother who had traditionally cared for the home and the children on a day-to-day basis.

According to Von Dehsen, Montessori scorned traditional classroom with a teacher lecturing to rows of students, and began to advocate for creating an environment in which the student would be able to learn informally by using a so-called 'didactic apparatus' – tools such as cylinders, blocks, and beads which she discovered taught the children basic pre-mathematical and reading skills while holding their interest (Von Dehsen, 1999). As I had the chance to observe a typical Montessori classroom, I came to realize that although the teacher demonstrates the material at the beginning of the class, she remains in the background, so to speak, for much of the remainder of the day, intervening only when absolutely necessary to help facilitate the self-learning process and provide opportunities for discussion.

Hers and our era share, indeed, many similarities. Much like in Montessori's time, the majority of child care today is assumed by babysitters and teachers as, apparently due to economic reasons, both parents must typically contribute financially to the workings of the family. Our time is also witnessing a generation of women who are increasingly career-oriented compared to their counterparts from a mere 30 to 40 years ago. This again means that the primary care for the children is taken over by others, whether at home or in an educational institution. Also, the traditional two-parent family is in our day only one among many family configurations. Many women are single parents who work outside the home to maintain a decent standard of living for themselves and their children. Consequently, the majority of the child's waking hours are under the supervision of others.

Based on this parallel between the societal as well as educational climate in Montessori's times and our own, one can see that she was naturally troubled by the inadequacy of the school system and by the domination of the learning process by examinations and dry memorization of facts. Hence, she began to search for a meaningful and more practical purpose in education, one pertaining to the child's real life experience. In *Discovery of the Child* (1969), Montessori expresses her attitude in the following way: ".....schools resemble governmental bureaucracies. In school there is only one prize for all those who enter the race, a fact which generates pride, envy, and rivalries instead of that thrill coming from effort, humility, and love which all can experience. In this way we create a conflict between the school and social progress" (p. 14).

I subject that Montessori realized that such education is disconnected from daily life and, therefore, mostly inapplicable and of very little educational value. This point is very apparent from her writings, especially when she notes that educators had called "such learning a 'scientific education' even though the school as well as the pupils remained unaffected by such studies. Instead, it made the students adopt an attitude of weariness or self-defense rather than enabling them to give expression to the creative energies that naturally belonged to them" (Ibid. p. 18).

Closely related to the notion of education being connected to the life realities is her cautious approach to the introduction of fantasy and fairy tales, for instance. In this regard, Montessori argued that the child's development of imagination needs real objects and realistic stories for optimal development. This position is again in sharp contrast to traditional views. Bettelheim, for instance, views fairy tale as an important element in



the child's growing up since it teaches children culturally important themes and roles (Sutton, 1996). While Bettelheim may be correct in his assumption regarding the value of fantasy play, I would subject that Montessori, perhaps inadvertently, incorporated fantasy play in her method as well. Her Practical Life area, where children learn to perform daily chores such as serving tea and washing dishes, undoubtedly reveal some fantasy play.

It is very evident that Montessori's method emphasized process over product. I consider this an important element of her teaching philosophy. This is mainly because it testifies to her capacity to see children for what they are and her capacity to identify with present, rather than future, needs of children. By doing so, Montessori challenged Italy's social and pedagogical status quo of the day. As argued earlier, children, unlike adults, live for this particular moment. Any reference to a future goal or objective is, in the child's world, an abstract concept too difficult to comprehend. It was this concern, among many, I believe, that led Montessori to focus her efforts on developing an understanding of the process of the child's immediate experience and the study of the individual child rather than some overarching objective of pedagogy in general. In the *Discovery of the child* (1969), for instance, she proclaims that a sound educational method should have for its basis a study of the "...individual child and an analysis of the physiological and psychic phenomena appearing during the course of his education" (p.31).

In this essay, my aim is not to give a thorough account of how the various school subjects are taught under the Montessori order. The intention, instead, will be to outline the various pedagogical and psychological laws which underlie Montessori's

conceptualization of the child. This is with the realization that the ever-growing demand for accountability in schools has resulted in narrowing of our educational goals to higher scores on achievement tests, hence letting us to rely on a behaviourist model of education. In this climate, of course, the resistance to Montessori's philosophy is still common. However, I suspect to find that her principles are in accordance with current theories pertaining to cognitive development in children.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Montessori's Liberal Education for the New Age**

In the previous sections, I outlined the perceived shortcomings of the current educational model. I have established that the school system, with its insistence on rigid structure in educational practice and its stress on accountability, overlooks the unique nature of the child as an individual. By sacrificing children's unique capacity to discover and learn spontaneously, the status quo violates a healthy development of the creative, competent mind and free unfolding of the child's personality. It also limits children in self-discovery in terms of their potentials and drives. Instead, in our traditional school, the importance is being placed on future economic success in the workforce once the child becomes an adult. In this way, the system imposes an adult point of view on the child. It is the perspective of this study that this aspect represents the main disharmony within the current educational system. Essentially, this discord between adult and child stems from our distrust in the child's ability to learn and discover on his own.

In the next section, I wish to turn my attention to the Montessori educational philosophy as I consider her method a healthy and a much-needed supplement to the existing structure and method used in schools today. This is with the realization that although her approach may not offer all the answers to the problems of education confronting us today, it does chart a new and, in my opinion, superior course of action in

solving them. Naturally, this will require a certain level of acceptance from the educational mainstream and willingness to give Montessori a fair chance. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that the Montessori philosophy represents a well-balanced, child-centred learning tool which effectively avoids imposing an adult frame of reference on the child.

I believe that Montessori, as is apparent from her educational doctrine, valued the fact that when a child begins mandatory schooling, he has already acquired six years worth of real life experience. This element of Montessori's model goes beyond the pragmatic dictum that the intellectual growth of the child begins with the first days of schooling. She emphasizes instead that the child's character, interests, and needs are already formed to some extent. Based on this realization, Montessori developed an educational system which takes into account such differential unfolding of the child's life prior to entering the school. In fact, reading her work, one quickly comes to a realization that Montessori devoted a significant portion of her writings to the child's first six years. She saw this period as the stepping stone for all future learning, and thought of this period as of one of extraordinary importance. She says, "We serve the future by protecting the present. The more fully the needs of one period are met, the greater will be the success of the next" (Montessori, 1967, p. 195). This premise naturally places parents or those who function in their position as the child's first and most essential teachers.

I think this is one of the reasons why her theory is so appealing to many. With her insistence on taking into account the child's unique life experience and with its associated level of maturity, her theory can be easily applied to multi-age teaching,

because it builds on the environment and habits of each student. Through giving her students the liberty of choosing which educational activity to attend to at the moment, her technique allows them to learn at their own developmental level and within their own capabilities. In fact it is a common practice in Montessori classrooms that projects are not divided according to age. Rather, a number of projects of varying difficulty are presented at the same time and students are given the liberty to select which one they want to tackle individually. Again, this allows the children to work at their own comfort level, and if they so desire, they can stretch their horizons by trying to do one of the more difficult projects on offer.

Montessori's vision of freedom does not leave any doubt about its meaning. "Liberty", she said, "does not mean the freedom to do anything one likes, but rather the ability to act without help" (1939, p.56). To restate this, Montessori gave the child freedom so that it can develop creatively with a sense of accomplishment.

Montessori did not segregate children according to their age. Instead, it was mental maturity which guided their ability to learn, she maintained. In fact, she encouraged multi-age classrooms. I think from an educational as well as social point of view, this is an excellent concept. Just like children living together and interacting with their siblings at home, students in the Montessori system are taught to work as a team. School, therefore, becomes an extension of the family life. This process develops the capability of the students to gain knowledge from one another. Not only that, however. From the moral point of view, they learn to respect each other's work and to be considerate of the classroom milieu. Additionally, they learn, despite the differences in age, how to work together towards a common goal.

According to the Montessori theory, it is during the early years of the child's life that he can be taught to acquire additional skills that will serve as building blocks for the future of his education. The child develops skills that work together to provide the ability to learn new academic as well as life skills. It is apparent from her writings that she insisted that the benefits of her educational model be sustained throughout the child's life.

The Montessori theory holds that children learn during so called 'sensitive periods'. These can be characterized as intervals of spontaneous and very intense fascination with something in their environment. According to Montessori (1939), it is easier for the child to learn age-appropriate skills during these periods than at any other time in their life.

Montessori held that there was one developmental process common to all humans. This was a natural, an intrinsic process that manifested itself by curiosity and desire to absorb new information. Essentially, she proclaims that the child's needs and spirit occupy an important place in the educational process, and that the developmental characteristic of the child must be in harmony with methodology. In some cases, children may have emotional problems resulting from some unmet psychological need. Teachers may unintentionally teach in such a way so as to create a feeling of rejection and insecurity in the child who is then, as a result, unwilling or incapable to learn. This, in turn, is translated as intellectual deficiency. Taking account of children's needs in such instances would secure educationally favourable conditions. I think this is the direction modern pedagogy must take in order to satisfy all of us concerned with the affirmation of continuity between the child's unique life circumstances and the educational practice.

This notion would prescribe no particular content, but rather a particular method of teaching.

Accordingly, Montessori's educational process stresses conditioning a child through careful design of his environment and creating puzzles and other learning material for the child to be solved. In this regard, Montessori stood in sharp contrast to, for instance, Plato. It is because the latter emphasized society while the former the individual's own forces. Perhaps this reliance on the individual was the result of Montessori's distrust of the society she lived in. Europe of her day was undergoing through a fair degree of reconstruction and chaos due to heavy industrialization and constant movement of people from rural areas to large cities. Montessori witnessed directly the effects of such changes on the lives of children.

I think one of the reasons why her method is still widely and universally applied today is precisely because it is founded on the general characteristic common to all individuals rather than on the ever changing society. Perhaps this is why the theory has been able to withstand the test of time regardless of new educational theories being introduced.

Montessori assumes a very unique approach to education and its purpose. Education, in her own words, "...is to be regarded as a help to happy life and its purpose must coincide with the larger life purpose of those being educated...and as such, education must start at birth (Ibid., p.4)". She believed this purpose, ultimately, ought to be life-long happiness and satisfaction with one's chosen profession.

At the very beginning of Chapter Two, I challenged the traditional position that education is viewed simply as preparation for adult life. Although I have not discarded

such a view, I pointed out that it is a narrow conceptualization of the overall purpose of education if taken from this perspective. Keeping in mind the current societal obsession with prosperity and economical success, the purpose of education constructed as preparation for adult life will and does reflect this dominant view. Consequently, the educational process similarly overemphasizes economical and professional success rather than personal achievement and happiness. I also cautioned that such a perspective may lead to education that fails to connect to the genuine life experience of the child. Here, I subject, Montessori suspended such concentration on the material aspect, and designed a curriculum which actually takes the child's unique experience into account and, at the same time, stresses the child's life-long happiness. She reinvented education as life philosophy, one that connects to the larger life more so than the education we are familiar with today.

I find something profoundly comforting and simple in this idea. However, how is one to go about it? How are we to perform the task of teaching the child to conduct his life in accordance with the laws of the larger world outside the school while maintaining his natural enthusiasm and curiosity? We cannot simply throw the school door wide open and let the children go and find out on their own. Similarly, no amount of memorized data and abstract thought implanted into their heads will achieve this task. Instead, as Montessori envisioned, we bring the larger world to the school environment and the curriculum.

Based on this conviction, Montessori vitalized the learning environment which emulated life itself. Perhaps the essence of Montessori's theory on this subject can be expressed by her insight that ".....an adult works to perfect the environment, but a child



works to perfect being itself” (Montessori, 1939, p. 217). In other words, within Montessori’s environment carefully prepared with an educational goal in mind, the child selects his own activity. This alone is a reflection of Montessori’s trust in the child as a self-guided learner. Her position in this regard also stands out as a sharp departure from the traditional way we view children as incompetent and irrational, thus in need of our assistance. Furthermore, children in a Montessori classroom are subject to no drill. They sit in low chairs at small tables which they are free to move around if desired. They even come and go at will. Perhaps even more interestingly, there is no reward or punishment in the Montessori approach. The pleasure of accomplishment is simply considered a sufficient reward. I find this to be an astounding and very bold principle when built into the educational process. I also think this represents Montessori’s spiritual gift to education, a subject discussed later in the essay.

The idea of relating school activities to the wider life is to some degree present in the traditional school as well but, by and large, in a very indirect way. To take an example at random, we all can recall representatives of various professions such as firefighters and police officers giving speeches in classrooms, demonstrating the primary objectives of their respective jobs. This, of course, is excellent in its way, but it does not consciously set out to secure the child’s curiosity and eagerness to explore the world in order to perfect the capacities and talents in himself. Only this, I believe, would enable him to move about in that world with greater confidence and independence. Few of my former students attended the Boy Scout organization which, I believe, comes closest to what Montessori had in mind when speaking of education being closely connected to the larger life experience.

At some point, one may inquire how do we know that it is the right approach to place such great emphasis on connecting school and reality? Montessori's answer to this question can be found in her book titled *To Educate the Human Potential* (1950) where she says: "When the child's mind – which has arrived at certain degree of maturity – sees a group of facts related together in light of reality, it experiences a sense of satisfaction, an inner assurance, a state of repose" (Montessori, p.46). By using the word 'repose', I am assuming she was thinking along the lines of inner assurance rather than a passive state of mind. Froebel, for instance, talks of this particular state of mind in terms of the child's "inner view leading to knowledge, insight, and consciousness, a transition from the domestic to the higher cosmic order of things" (Allan, 1989, p. 101). Both of these statements express a common understanding of the child as an eager knowledge seeker once certain conditions are satisfied.

Undoubtedly troubled by the domination of education by drill and memorization of facts followed by examination and realizing the impossibility of learning innumerable facts, I am assuming Montessori sought to eliminate dualisms. By dualism, I mean the black-and-white type of thinking that reflects dogmatism and limits introduction of new modes of educational practice. Sad to say, educators find themselves shoulder-deep in routine yet outdated practices without even realizing it.

There is much to be learned on the topic of education from philosophers such as Dewey, Montessori and other like-minded writers who offer us the opportunity to gain fresh insight and understanding of the problems we face today. I strongly believe her educational thought deserves our intense attention for the contribution it can make to the progress of not only the child, but of the whole community in the long run. As she

writes, her method touches directly the “.... most important aspect of society, which is the man’s own inner tranquility” (Montessori, 1969, p.26). Reading this sentence one can speculate that Montessori was not directly motivated to advocate her educational approach with the goal of societal advancement in the mind. Instead, I suspect, she regarded the most effective and psychologically informed method of teaching as the means for creating well-balanced and confident human beings able to form an integrated, moral, and prosperous society. For Montessori, this seems to be a natural progression; one from the properly educated child to the well-being of the society.

On a much lighter note, Montessori had a great appreciation for the presence of love and understanding in children’s lives. This is very apparent once we start studying her works. Today, many students of psychology declare that if the child is deprived of affection, he will later be unable to relate emotionally in a healthy manner to other people. Montessori returns again and again to the need to secure the welfare of the child as, in her own words, “...it is the meeting ground upon which people of all countries, races, and beliefs could resolve their differences. If education is a powerful armament for peace, love is even more so” (Ibid., p. 306). Montessori often uses the term ‘love’ in the broad sense of the adult’s active involvement in the child’s development. She also uses the term to point to the child’s natural inclinations such as ‘love of environment’ or ‘love of learning’. This way, Montessori tells us that the child, in addition to his emotional needs, has needs in such areas as his physical, intellectual, and social development.

Her basic conviction that the first eighteen years of human development can be divided into three very distinct periods in terms of psychological functioning attests to her profound sensitivity to the child’s needs, characteristics, and style of learning. The

Montessori philosophy is directed to meet these needs through giving the child ample opportunities for individual initiative and self-regulated learning. In addition, adults who understand these functional differences can anticipate them and reciprocate with corresponding modifications in their own style of parenting or teaching. "Too often a teacher commands because he is strong and expects a child to obey because he is weak" she writes and continues by saying, "...adult should show himself to a child as a loving and enlightened guide assisting him along the way" (Ibid., p.14).

I believe Montessori's writing outright demands our attention, especially in light of the rapid advancements in technology and communication. It is ever more pressing to pay attention to her insights into the nature of a child's development. While people of my generation played imaginative games in our immediate neighborhoods when little, today's generation of children are driven to organized sports and events. Developments in electronic technology similarly influence the functioning of today's family. This, I believe, results in a gradual replacement of family time by less valuable activities such as viewing television and playing computer games. We now have a generation of young people who, unless discouraged by a sound attitude of their parents, have spent a significant portion of their lives in front of a television screen. It is truly unfortunate that in many families today, television and computers almost replace parental role in terms of affection, trust, and value creation. I am very upset to see children who are evidently becoming attentive television viewers as early as two years old and continue throughout their childhood and beyond into their adult life. It is truly sad to see that many parents seem to show insufficient effort to work out a reasonable balance in their child's life, a balance between family time, homework and television.

Once again, I believe that one of the reasons for this apparent neglect of what ought to be the common values in society stems from the current climate of ruthless competition and materialistic obsession. In many instances, it is the pursuit of the material that occupies the majority of the parents' day, leaving only very little time for meaningful and quality family time. In some cases, children are encouraged by their parents themselves to devote a large portion of their waking hours watching TV and playing electronic game simply for the parent's own convenience where TV sets serve as a cheap babysitter.

It troubles me greatly to see a small child watching a program or play a video game which, even though originally intended for children, portrays crime and destruction as something humorous and having no serious consequences. I doubt that it is likely that such activities have even the slightest potential to elevate children to a certain desirable plateau, educationally speaking. In other words, it is doubtful that such questionable activities will lead them to higher levels of intellectual accomplishment, thus benefiting them in their future life endeavours.

Although Montessori could not have anticipated the vast influence of advancements in technology on the lives of children, her perspective seeks to remedy such societal ills. Montessori challenged such detriments to children's development and abdication of traditional aspects of growing up such as reading, artistic attainments, and interactive relationship among family members in general. I particularly like her quote in *The Discovery of the Child* when she states the following: "We should not corrupt or suffocate the child's mysterious potentialities...", and later in the same work she adds: "The child's environment can modify, as it can assist or destroy his potentialities for life"

(Ibid., p.63). In this instance, Montessori's query centres on suitable environment where a child can pursue a wide variety of challenging and stimulating objectives. As such, real tasks involving practical goals and finding solutions to ordinary social situations arising from collective activity then result in not only increased skill in a particular task but also in a gradual development of a mature and competent social character. Education in Montessori's terms then encompasses not only teaching of specific skills and imparting of knowledge, but also something less tangible yet more profound: good judgment and wisdom, a morally correct way of living.

Czech teacher, educator, and writer, known as "Teacher of Nations", Jan Amos Comenius (1592 – 1670), held the principle that every theory of education has to be functional in practical use and morally instructive. I think Montessori's educational philosophy, through her understanding of who children are and through her awareness of their position in society, satisfies Comenius' implicit call for the formation of a moral adult.

In her Practical Life curriculum, for instance, we can find instructional practice called "Grace and Courtesy". These are very short lessons given to children in areas intended to help them learn directly the skills required to get along with others. These may include standard behaviours such as greeting visitors, table setting, using 'thank you' and 'excuse me' when appropriate. Even though all these may seem like old-fashioned ideas, and by and large unrelated to the mainstream concept of knowledge, I believe these lessons form the bedrock of the child's expanding comprehension of social responsibility and proper moral behaviour. Perhaps we can say that these simple lessons of politeness carry an underlying principle of respect for others. Sadly, however, I also believe the

value of such instructional experiences is frequently downplayed by us adults. Although we expect these skills from children, we often assume children will somehow absorb them from somewhere else.

I think it is only in recent years that it has been realized that a connection between many problems of children of all ages and excessive TV watching exists. Examples include obesity as the time spent watching TV significantly decreases the time for normal physical activity, and aggressive tendencies due to the violent content of many TV programs and video games. Furthermore, as research results have indicated over and over, academically more accomplished students tend to watch less TV (Walf, 2005).

Even more pertinent to my enquiry are devoted TV viewers under six years of age - those who, according to Montessori, are going through the most important stage of their psychological and intellectual development. In Montessori's terms, hands and language are instruments of human intelligence (1967). In watching TV, of course, there is no opportunity for meaningful use of either hands or language. We have all had the opportunity to witness the effortlessness of language development in very young children. To capitalize on this innate capability of humans, a child, according to Montessori (1912), must not only hear a wide variety of words and sentence structures, but must actively practise using them. Television is a one-way medium, meaning it gives children virtually no opportunity to respond or ask questions. One may also observe that the vocabulary used in TV programs is of far lesser complexity when compared to print. This reminds me of the poor vocabulary and fragmented sentences some children use in schools today. Talking to children, reading to them, or simply recapitulating the day's events before bedtime are extremely important experiences. I

think these simple activities provide a much richer language experience during these developmentally critical years.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the problem of Attention Deficit Disorder. Many believe that this problem emerged relative to the widespread TV watching among children (Allan, 1989). Earlier, I have established that the disorder is essentially an inability of school-age children to concentrate. Montessori had much to say on the topic of child's concentration. She felt concentration must be carefully nurtured through providing the child with stimulating material where the child can freely "explore his potentialities through trial and error" (1969, p. 112).

Developmental psychologists have speculated that the abrupt rise of ADD in our children is due to their brains becoming accustomed to the fast-moving TV images that change every six to seven seconds (Mayers, 1999). Results of research conducted by American Academy of Pediatrics suggest that the level of difficulty experienced by seven-year-olds in learning to read is proportionate to the number of hours per day that these children watched TV when they were under four years of age (Trelease, 2001). These findings give more credibility to the speculation that children's intellectual development is significantly influenced by regular TV watching at a very young age.

In view of these environmental risk factors seriously constraining the child's social and academic success later in life, it is not surprising to see that for many young adults, it is virtually impossible to continue making the many adjustments that life itself demands. Social interaction problems resulting from alienation and failure to establish a meaningful personal relationship are no doubt among the major precipitating stressors in the development of suicidal thought in adolescents.



Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) offered an explanation for the differences in suicide rates among a variety of demographic groups. His findings are particularly pertinent in our times when the rate of successful suicides among young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 essentially tripled since the mid-1950's, and for those between 15 and 19, rates have quadrupled in North America (Myers, 1999, p.242). Based on his findings obtained through analyzing records of suicides across cultures and historical periods, Emil Durkheim concluded that the greatest deterrent to committing suicide in times of personal stress is a sense of involvement and identity with other people (Carr and Haldane, 2003). More recent studies conducted by Sluter and Depue (1981) and Frederic (1985) echo the same notion (Butcher et al., 1998). According to their study, and in line with my earlier proposed connection between TV watching and social alienation, in some non-Western cultures, such as the aboriginals of the Australian desert where communities are small and tight, suicide is non-existent (Ibid.). These findings suggest that cultural factors affect the rate of suicide to a large degree.

Based on these findings, I wish to speculate that in communities where life is less complex and children do not have the opportunity to spend most of their free time watching TV, they indulge instead in fantasy play just like my generation did. Kohlberg (1981), for example, cites unpublished research evidence suggesting that insufficient opportunity for fantasy play may be cause for inadequate cognitive development.

I think such play allows the child to exercise creativity by using different materials and objects to create a setting of his own. In addition, social roles are frequently emulated in this kind of play. The little girl who pretends to run a cloths shop is trying out social skills and newly found identity against the real world. Perhaps even

more importantly, she practises to accommodate her ideas to those of her peers, and to play cooperatively. Indeed, one of the problems facing a young adult today is to work out the patterns of relationships and responsibilities on which the rest of life will be founded - work relationships, social ties, marriage and parental responsibilities. We experience a much more complex web of duties and obligations than did the generations before us.

One must also not forget that young adults today experience a unique set of pressures associated with the global mode of thinking. We are all global citizens nowadays, and young adults in particular are expected to act that way. Children in schools are taught to be more sensitive to other cultures and encouraged to learn foreign languages, for instance. But I think the global perspective also demands a hefty dose of creative and innovative thinking. It requires children to be able to grasp issues outside their own national borders and to understand the complexity and depth of conflicts we are witnessing, for instance, in the Middle East today. This is something, traditional school fails to put adequate emphasis on. In addition, disciplines are treated separately, so the global citizen who wants to see the larger picture must ultimately learn how to combine art and mathematics, geography and political history.

One must also keep in mind in connection with regular exposure to media from early on, that young children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to emulative behaviour and to suggestion offered by the environment. The recent school shootings in the United States and Canada, for instance, are examples of this phenomenon. I think these are instances which strongly attest to the effects of frequent exposure to questionable ethical behaviour often depicted on TV and particularly in video games.

While it is not the intention of this thesis to isolate the dynamics of modern technology as a single factor affecting the rates of social and psychological problems among children and young adults, I consider their impact massive and persistent enough to be worth mentioning. I believe it would be a mistake to discount the cumulative effect on children over a period of time.

Of course, Maria Montessori did not concentrate on, nor even experience, the enormous effect of television. Hence, we can only speculate what her thoughts would have been on the viewing habits of many young children today in terms of their intellectual development. In regards to the child's real needs, so central to her philosophy, Montessori believed that young children have a basic need to form relationships with people, physical contacts with loved ones, etc. As opposed to such actual experiences, frequent television watching creates a sort of artificial environment in which needs and desires are induced externally by programs of questionable value.

Montessori (1969) argues that with a proper educational philosophy, that is, with a system which aids each individual in viewing life in the context of its nurturing environment, he will choose to use his natural creative capabilities both to enhance his own personal life as well as that of the society. Hence, Montessori in her method concentrates on the connection between the child and the community as a whole. "If we were to establish a primary principle, it would be to constantly allow the child's participation in our lives. For he cannot act if he does not join in our actions, just as he cannot learn to speak if he does not hear..." she proclaims (1967, p. 160). Indeed, I think she came to believe that the informal education that families provide to their children makes more of an impact on a child's total educational endeavour than the formal

educational system. “If a parent does his job well, the teacher can then provide effective training. Otherwise, there is a little the professional can do to save the child from mediocrity” (Ibid., p.168). Essentially, Montessori’s perspective offers a series of insights and practical suggestions which follow a particular developmental framework while simultaneously insisting on values central to the genuine growth of not only human life but the society as well.

Although Maria Montessori could ultimately be considered a psychologist, biologist, and philosopher, when I read her books, I think she can be understood equally well as a genetic epistemologist. Similarly to Freud, she discovered a novel field of study, a new perspective. Montessori postulated that every child has a spontaneous urge to learn. Montessori believed the best way to achieve a higher level of well balanced education was to ensure that education suits the child’s nature and inclinations. To fulfill this purpose, she said, it is necessary to base the method on scientific principles drawn from firsthand investigation of the school in general and from observation of children during activity in particular. Indeed, Montessori (1969) labeled her theory as a “system of scientific pedagogy”; a system that is vague yet frequently discussed, but which in reality does not exist (p. 1). She developed a new method that revolutionized teaching concepts, freed the child from rigid routines of formal education, and brought to the classroom a sense of joy and self-achievement. Essentially, she changed the way we look at education today. Her methods led people, including parents and educators, to take a good look at the processes through which nations all over the world educated their children.

As a former student of psychology, I can appreciate the delineation of this discipline in her studies. However, it is also fair to say that her enquiry goes far beyond the scope of any single discipline, especially if one considers its implications and connections to other scientific disciplines. Hers is essentially an experimental philosophy where she seeks to answer epistemological questions vis-à-vis developmental study of the child. Montessori's is what one may label an indirect inquiry whereby the environment rather than the teacher shapes the child's mental structures. "Education is not what the teacher gives (p.56)", she cautions in *The Absorbent Mind* (1967) and continues by saying that "education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the individual, and is acquired not by listening to words, but rather by experiences upon the environment (p.57)". This does not mean that Montessori somehow downplayed the role of the teacher. Quite to the contrary, she devoted a large portion of her writings to the adult and, in fact, considered the education and training of the adult as the bedrock of any success in the education of the child. In Montessori's term, scholarly endeavour does not consist of isolated acts of calculation and analysis. Rather, it is a cumulative, well thought-out set of activities carried out by unique persons who address their equally unique realities in their learning.

To reflect the conviction that a particular attitude or experience of the child colours or, to some extent even, conditions his discoveries, insights and construction of reality, the Montessori model involves teachers carefully preparing program settings and filling them with Montessori materials that are designed to encourage children to learn on their own. Naturally, there is a precise way for children to use each set of materials to learn a particular concept or skill. In this regard, Montessori teachers show children how

to use the materials, then let the children select which ones they will use. This emphasis on using material specifically designed for this purpose, Montessori very carefully combined teaching methods with well-defined collections of educational tools. In *The Discovery of the Child*, Montessori talks of the need to eliminate the ‘pressure of the teacher’ and the ‘bondage of an unsuitable environment.’ She states: “To liberate the child we must reform the environment, and reform the world. This is a necessity if we are to have life at its highest development” (1969, p.46). By the phrase ‘reforming the world’, she implies rethinking our distrust towards the child as a self-regulated learner.

This I find to be one of the most fundamental principles of her theory. This is because it stresses the importance of the adult’s involvement in and his understanding of the dynamics of the child’s development and learning. Ironically, I believe this is also the point where educators and the public in general misrepresent Montessori’s theory. This is because they erroneously view her model as one undermining if not outright excluding the adult’s involvement in the education of children. Simply stated, Montessori’s concept of liberal education where the child chooses his activity and level of difficulty of the task challenges the widely accepted view that children are not capable of self-directed learning. Under this traditional doctrine, the adult becomes the one and only regulating agent in the learning process.

Montessori’s intention, however, is not to eradicate or limit adults’ input in the educational endeavour of their children; nor is it to let children choose an activity merely out of curiosity. Quite to the contrary, the weight remains on the shoulders of the adult, only in a different manner. She considers the adult to be an essential and irreplaceable agent in the design and setting of an environment conducive to effective learning. “What

has to be defended is the construction of human normality. To recognize this great work does not mean to diminish the parent's authority. Once they can persuade themselves to be the builders, but merely to act as collaborators in the building process, they become much better able to carry out their real duties" (Ibid., p.112). Consequently, the teacher's position in the educational system is to a large extent intended to function as the catalyst between the child and the environment prepared for his education. However, more importantly, the adult's role in Montessori's education has a spiritual undertone. In *The Absorbent Mind* she cautions that "...a teacher must have a special training that is not simply intellectual but which also assures a contact of souls between him and the child" (Ibid., p.79). Realizing that the traditional school system lacks in the sphere of spiritual growth, I wish to turn to the issue of spirituality in education later in this work.

In terms of the child's liberty, Montessori cautions that whatever the child selects to work on, must relate to what he already knows. This is, she claims, for the sake of proper assimilation of new information (Ibid.). "The child's activity is not reflection of his interest in learning or in attaining an external goal. Rather, it is something completely interior connected with the current needs of a child and with conditions characteristic of his age" (Ibid., p.102).

Here, yet again, we are reminded of Piaget's cognitive theory. According to this theory, assimilation helps us make sense of our experience. To this end, Piaget claims, the maturing brain forms concepts, which he called schemas. These can perhaps be characterized as mental categories into which we store and organize our experience. Subsequently, we interpret every new and unfamiliar experience in terms of our current understanding of things as encoded in these schemas. Gradually, we adjust schemas to fit

reality or, if you will, to fit the particulars of a new experience. But what does this mean in terms of the child's intellectual growth?

Montessori, like Piaget, emphasized the freedom of experience within a context of she called sensory experiences. Both scholars theorized intellectual stages of child maturation and development, and designed a set of experiences in which children were encouraged to participate. Montessori in particular encouraged self-exploration in a carefully designed learning environment with materials based on 'sensory' learning. In this regard, Montessori insists repeatedly on the use of learning through senses in small children and cautions that "the aim of education, especially at the start, is to train the child's energies along natural lines in order to improve the motor and perceptual powers already present rather than start abruptly upon something new" (Ibid., p. 115).

One of the main premises of both Montessori's and Piaget's theories is the idea that, as the child encounters educationally stimulating environment, his schemas are growing from broad to more concrete. This refinement of categories of knowledge is thus directly dependent on the child's environment and its richness in stimuli. For instance, given a simple schema for a car, a very young child may call all vehicles on four wheels a car. With subsequent experience, however, he distinguishes between different types and models of cars. Essentially, this process represents a transformation of the child's mental experience via active encounters with the environment. As such, cognitive development is occurring in stages, and it is vital that the child's current experience or chosen activity is a continuation of his previous experience. Montessori's stress on sequential learning is built upon this principle, and is reflected in the design of the learning material used in her classrooms. In a way, due to this continuity in the



curriculum, both theories provide clear limits for early childhood educational framework in that they take into account what the child can meaningfully understand.

Where Montessori departs from the traditional view is in her conviction that human beings are creative in nature and that they possess a natural drive to learn. It is the essence of humanness to be creative, and humans will express this creativity in their behaviour unless that creative potential is stifled or destroyed early in life by an intrusion of the adult, even if well intended. “We should help the child not because we think of him as a weak creature, but because he is endowed with great creative energies” (Montessori, 1967, p.28). This was true when Montessori proclaimed its importance and, I believe, it is still one of the most consequential aspects of parenting in our times as well.

Montessori’s liberal education is par excellence, a guardian of this inner natural force in the child. Every effort is made to have the child create his own education. Self-reliance, initiative, self-control, are strongly encouraged. I do believe that one of the messages we ought to take away from reading Montessori is the realization that the child needs to feel a certain level of ownership when it comes to a completed task and acquiring a skill or knowledge. As a result, Montessori children have a poise and determination not often found in traditional elementary classroom, even at a much more advanced age.

Baines and Snortum (1973) compared the behaviour of children in a traditional public elementary school and a Montessori elementary classroom. Montessori children spent the largest percentage of time (44per cent) in self-directed study. The traditional school children, on the other hand, spent over 90per cent of their time under direct supervision of the teacher (Chattin-McNichols, 1998, p.187). What is even more

interesting is that this study revealed that the Montessori children spent a significant amount of time teaching each other (Ibid., p. 190).

Her promotion of spontaneous learning and “hands-on” experience goes hand in hand with the principle of protecting the child’s psyche. Here, yet again, one may observe a parallel between Piaget and Montessori as both hold the idea that active exploration and direct manipulation of objects are the ways in which children learn most effectively. This, of course, holds true if, as Montessori mandated, we actually grant children personal autonomy in their decision-making and let them choose their work from a wide variety available to them. This is a noble task, one that contradicts our deeply ingrained notion of the role of the adult-directed form of learning.

Well-meaning parents, who are not adequately informed about their children’s strong natural instinct to absorb new information, can unwittingly frustrate children’s booming efforts by giving precedence to their own will, their adult environment, and to their fast-moving schedules. Consequently, in their efforts, they are pushing too far, too fast while their children are learning routines without really understanding the underlying concepts. This, of course, does not mean that Montessori informs parents that they should relax all discipline and allow their children to do whatever appeals to them. Her aims are nobler than that. She wants parents to become more educated when it comes to the behaviours that are essential to children’s development thus creating conditions in which they can flourish.

To achieve this goal, Montessori devotes much of her writings to parents. I consider this to be evidence of her realization of the positive value of parental involvement in the academic achievement of the child. This is again in contrast to most

of the conventional schooling practices today where teachers meet parents once or twice a year to discuss only very briefly their children's academic progress. Montessori (1969) instead stresses that,"..... the family life is essentially a continuation of school life and vice versa" (p.46). In the next section, I wish to concentrate on the rationale behind this premise. In other words, I would like to discuss the obvious benefits of parental involvement in the academic life of the child.

Previously in this work, I pointed to the concerns voiced by parents and educators alike regarding the shortcomings of the current educational system. I have established that as we search for ways to improve the modern educational system and to eradicate the problems in it, it is indispensable for us to investigate the causality of these problems within the system. It is apparent that the drawbacks do not arise solely from the academic side. Consequently, it is obvious that a dynamic involvement of parents in the education of their children should be a consideration.

I am an advocate of a system where parents work alongside teachers towards a common goal. I suspect that the impact of parental involvement and the benefits accruing from it are deeply rooted in a direct cause-and-effect relationship. In order for a student to achieve success academically, a relationship based on respect and mutual understanding between students, teachers, and parents is essential. In fact, Montessori (1969) believed that "loopholes at any place in this relationship cause the academic achievements of a child to collapse into failures" (p. 176). To take Montessori's objective one step further, one may subject that along with improvement in student's academic achievements, parental involvement and harmonious relationships in the family also considerably boost the cognitive maturity of the child.

From a psychological perspective, it is reasonable to say that sustained involvement of parents in facilitating their children to gain knowledge of non-academic matters at home would likely result in their children attaining a level of cognitive maturity that is well beyond their class grade level. This presupposition resonates with Montessori's claim that education begins at birth which points to the family as the primary formative environment of the child. It also goes hand in hand with her desire to design a school curriculum with this very important part of the child's life in mind. One must, however, keep in mind that it would be wrong to paraphrase the term 'parental involvement' as an authoritarian approach to academic and cognitive maturation in children. As already established in this work, and as Montessori would vehemently caution us against, to impose upon the child our own adult frame of reference restricts the child's natural potential for growth. "The child has his own laws of development", Montessori reminds us in *The Secret of Childhood* (1939), "and if we want him to grow, it is a question of following these, not of imposing ourselves upon him" (p.23). Just as is the case in Montessori's classrooms, the adult role is not to teach, but to prepare conditions that will facilitate the learning process.

Another precept of the Montessori philosophy can be discerned in the power of engagement provided by her approach, especially as it relates to encouraging the active involvement of parents. Unfortunately, despite rich evidence supporting the positive role of parental involvement, this component remains missing from many contemporary approaches. These studies suggest, for instance, that the involvement of parents in the academics of their children not only benefits them as students, but is also advantageous to the educator. According to a recent study, boost in educator's drive and the use of

constructive educational tools are directly consequential to parental involvement (Myers, 1999). The participation of parents in the child's activities, whether at home or on the school grounds, yields benefits to the students in two ways: firstly through boosting the child's cognitive and subsequently academic potential, and secondly through the superior teaching method offered at school by the teachers as they may feel more accountable to parents for proper education of their children.

Many scholars also note that involvement of parents has a sustained effect on the child's life to follow. This is quite evident once we consider that the likelihood of enrollment in post-secondary education is an accrued advantage that the child achieves upon maturity (Walf, 2005). As research findings continue to provide facts that support the role of parental involvement in academic achievements of a child, and new educational strategies continue to promote same, improvement possibilities for academic success are boundless. As noted above, however, the importance of parental involvement is typically overlooked. This lack of attention is perhaps even more puzzling if one considers that this may be one of the most cost-effective practices a school can employ to improve its effectiveness.

Especially in our Canadian context, schools need to establish a pattern of collaboration with parents and families of colour since values and behavioural responses differ so markedly between these communities and the Canadian mainstream. If parents were able to use guidelines at home that are similar to those used by their children's teachers, then children would have the advantage of consistency in their two primary environments. They would not be confused by two sets of standards or conflicting expectations for acceptable performance and behaviour.

In fact, it is for students from disadvantaged social groups that Montessori originally developed her teaching methods. I find it ironic that in the contemporary educational setting where overworked teachers struggle to balance the requirements of an increasingly multicultural classroom, these seemingly simple methods are not being used more widely, particularly as they relate to parental involvement. From all perspectives, sound parental participation in the child's formative years and ongoing cooperation between the parent and the teacher is a must if one is to raise a healthy and secure adult.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Montessori's Main Principles vis-à-vis Educational Theory**

Of particular importance to parents and teachers alike is her basic conviction that children undergo three distinct stages of development, so called sensitive periods. Each stage involves a particular need and style of learning. Montessori (1967) claims that it is easier for a child to exercise and perfect a particular skill during the corresponding sensitive period than at any other time in his life. She theorized, for example, that the appropriate sensitive period for learning to read is between the age of four and five. This is a controversial idea for many to accept. However, current research has substantiated the value of an earlier start in reading. In a study conducted by Miller and Bizzell, two contemporary reading specialists, the results showed that the Montessori group maintained statistically significant favourable differences in reading and math when compared to children who started reading and computing in elementary at age seven (Chatin-McNichols, 1998).

According to Montessori, especially in the first stage from birth to about six years of age, learning is inner-directed. As such, the adult's role is not to teach but to allow spontaneity in learning and to prepare an environment rich in opportunities to do so. It was Montessori's conviction that each little task, especially if self-chosen, contributes to the child's development. From this she infers that "the child will enjoy doing the work needed to complete himself. "The child's life is one in which work begets joy" (Montessori, 1967, p. 18). Montessori's resistance to parental coaching at

this developmental stage is also supported by the results of studies showing that very young children are not responsive to direct instruction (Ibid.). This means that we should avoid the orthodox methods of teaching based on adult reasoning, which relies heavily on verbal instruction.

If we were to observe a child at six years of age, we would quickly notice that he constantly explores everything in the environment provided by the adult. In fact, the child's accomplishments in this period are substantial. He learns an entire language including the vocabulary, sentence structure and meaning. He learns to move around, to sit up, and walk. In this initial stage, the child learns more than in any other six-year span in his life and, what is more, they remember it for the remaining of their lives. .

The second developmental period extends from about six to twelve years of age. This period, of course, is particularly important when considering the methodologies applied in public education. "Knowledge can best be given where there is eagerness to learn, so this is the period when the seeds of everything can be sown", proclaims Montessori (Ibid, p. 19). This is a period of expansion of knowledge, understanding and distinguishing between right and wrong.

The third developmental period begins with puberty and continues until the age of fifteen. This is a period marked by instability and restlessness and, as Montessori observed, "the character is seldom stable; there are signs of indiscipline and rebellion" (Ibid., p.21).

Montessori, in her writings, clearly states that the first stage of development is the most important for the individual's life to come. "The most consequential period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to age six.



It is the time when human intelligence is formed. But not only intelligence; the full totality of psychic powers” (Ibid., p. 22). One can only speculate what Montessori’s term ‘psychic powers’ encompasses. In the American Heritage Dictionary the meaning of the word psyche implies “The mind functioning as the centre of thought, feeling, and behaviour, and consciously or unconsciously adjusting the body to its social and physical environment” (Johnson, 2000). Montessori, I believe, used the term ‘psychic powers’ to refer to spiritual quality of an individual. This is not so much in regards to one’s religious nature but rather self-knowledge and self-actualization. Spirituality is a subject I wish to turn attention to later in a separate section of this work however.

Although Montessori did not specifically define psyche, I think she used the term in the same sense as the above definition implies. In her description of the developmental periods, for instance, she repeatedly makes reference to both physical and psychological changes. It is apparent she considered both, the body and the mind, as equally important aspects of the child’s total character. Such unity of the body and mind and with it associated believe that the learning mechanisms of the child are very much different from those of the adult was also advocated by Piaget.

To follow up on Montessori’s proposition that the very first stage of the child’s development is the bedrock of future success, I reviewed several long-term studies showing the effects of her schooling. In Karner’s study, for instance, the effects of four preschool programs were compared based on a wide range of measures including reading scores and school readiness in general. The study revealed that the Montessori program was rated as the most effective on all accounts in producing long-term school success, ahead of the traditional, behaviourally oriented programs (Rydl, 1992).

Montessori classroom is set up with specifically designed materials, taking these important aspects of development into account so as to help the children benefit more fully from these periods favorable to learning. The educational materials typically used in the Montessori system are prearranged into dissimilar subjects such as language, mathematics, cultural sciences, and activities related to practical life. What is even more interesting is that, in spite of this diversity of subjects being presented, these themes are fashioned in an integral manner in order for the student to comprehend the physical and logical interrelationships between them. For instance, a practical skill is combined with a mathematical puzzle.

Throughout her educational efforts, Montessori obviously paid a close attention to the child's cognitive maturity. What will most likely be notable by a newcomer to the classroom is that the Montessori system takes advantage of the child's senses as the primary and most natural information processors available to him. Accordingly, her materials are organized into series of objects which are grouped together according to a some physical quality, such as colour, shape, texture, etc. At the same time, each group of objects represents the same quality, but to different degrees. This way, the child can comprehend quality and quantity at the same time.

Similar to Montessori, Piaget considered the role of the senses in the cognitive growth. In his book *Six Psychological Studies* (1967), he talks of cognitive processes in young children and states the following: "In place of logic he substitutes the mechanism of intuition – simple internalization of precepts and movements in the form of representational images and mental experiences, which prolongs the sensory-motor schemata without true rational coordination" (30). In other words, the child's

judgment is based primarily on his perception of things rather than logic. This implies that, at least in small children, the building of knowledge occurs through sensorial activity rather than by mechanical absorption of information. This requires active and personal experimentation and observation. Similarly to Montessori, this realization led Piaget to oppose the direct teaching of material through conditioning and association of fact (Ginsburg, 1979).

In Piaget's theory, one of the early developmental stages is appropriately called the Sensorimotor Stage, where, according to Piaget, children experience and test the world while still lacking logical reasoning (Mayers, 1999). He further postulates that abstract reasoning does not develop until the child reaches about 12 years of age during the Formal Operational Stage (Ibid).

In *The Absorbent Mind* (1967), Montessori explains her rationale for the training and sharpening of the senses in the following way: "...it has an advantage of enlarging the field of perception and of offering an ever more solid foundation for intellectual growth. The intellect", she continues, "builds up its store of practical ideas through contact with, and exploration of, its environment (104)". This argument will, of course, remind any attentive student of psychology of the numerous studies concerned with the dualistic body/mind notion and the way these two parts of our nature react upon each other. Meyers (1999) contends that the intellectual part is concerned with abstract ideas, pure reason, and free will. The bodily part, including the five senses, is directed towards individual objects in the outside world.

As evident from her commentary regarding sensorial foundation of the intellect, Montessori realized that the child's intellect does not work and evolve in

isolation, but is intimately bound up with the body. In fact, the body or, in this case, the senses function as a primary medium for building a solid intellectual bedrock. I appreciate the fact that Montessori avoids treating the child as if he were a pure intellect. Rather, she takes into account the child's incomplete cognitive development and his inability to comprehend abstract ideas, and builds her educational model around this idea.

I think Froebel (1782 – 1852), German educator and founder of the kindergarten system, would be in an agreement with Montessori in this regard. In *Education of the Man* (1885), Froebel notes the following, “As the development of the very young child was predominantly that of life for the sake of living.....so the period of boyhood is predominantly the period of learning”. (p. 95). Although I find Froebel's articulation of his ideas less clear compared to Montessori's, I think here again we see that intellect, or reason, if you will, builds upon prior life experience. Within Montessori's developmental framework, the child's progress unfolds from the sensorial to the intellectual.

In comparison to the traditional school model of education where abstract ideas and reasoning based on verbal instruction occupy most of the young child's day, Montessori's approach is sensitive to the differential manner of thinking in the child as opposed to the adult. In Montessori's (1967) own words, “During the early period education must be understood as a help to the unfolding of the child's inborn psychic powers. This means that we cannot use the orthodox methods of teaching, which depend on talk. The child must be safeguarded from the influence of adult reasoning, so as to give priority to the inner teacher who animated him (p.56)”.

From Montessori's perspective, the fundamental purpose of education is to build on the child's early life experience and help develop a free child that knows what it wants to be and do. "If children were given the opportunity to blossom into free children thusly", she believed, "they would not be inclined later in life to willingly accept dictatorial rule, or to submit to the demands of an oppressive regime" (Ibid.). In her book, *The Montessori Method* (1912), she wrote, "The child is the first part of the adult's life; indeed it is the builder of the adult. The good or the bad in the grown man is closely connected with the life of the child from which he came. The child is the whole of future humanity . . . The social question of the child leads naturally to a desire to try to find out the laws of man's formation, so helping us to create a new conscience and giving a new direction to our social life" (p. 373). It is clear that her theorizing has educational as well as moral and ethical value in that it takes into account the interconnection between individual and societal well being. This sentence also testifies very strongly for her, although perhaps not intentional, connection to Freudian tradition where the adult life is a reflection of the person's experience early on in life.

In contrast to the uniformity of the current instructional method employed in our traditional schools where no continuity between the school's highly structured method and the child's previous field of experience is established, the Montessori method eliminates such a discrepancy through allowing children to learn at their own pace within a certain structural framework. This framework, again in contrast to the traditional schooling approach, is dictated by the material selected for use by the child rather than by the instructions imposed by the teacher. As such, the technique leaves children to master

their environment thus helping them become more self-reliant and independent in their learning experience.

One may ask at this point how a child of five can be expected to manipulate his environment and learn at the same time. I would contend that the Montessori environment and material are identifiably different from the traditional school setting precisely because the children are encouraged to participate in self-initiated activities with a considerable degree of autonomy. This is, in fact, what is so unique about her setting.

Montessori placed great emphasis on the educational value of the material firstly, by making it more attractive to children. She built into the design of the didactic material what she had considered 'children sensory and aesthetic preferences' in colour, dimension, and even texture. As a result materials used in her classrooms even today are pleasant to handle, well finished, and wonderful in colour and shape.

Secondly, in order to assure that learning does, in fact occur during the child's direct manipulation of these materials, Montessori incorporated precise mathematical and logical relationships into the design so that there is only one correct solution to the task. The assumption is that children will eventually assimilate these relationships. This idea is very much in line with Piaget's conceptualization of learning processes through assimilation, a subject I will return to in more detail later in the work.

All of her material is self-corrective thus children themselves can control for error. "The principle agent is the object itself and not the instruction given by the teacher" she notes "It is the child who is active, and not the teacher" (Montessori, 1969, p. 165). To use the simplest example as an illustration of this self-corrective feature, if a

child puts a cylinder in the wrong opening, there will in the end remain one piece left, which will not fit into the remaining opening. The child is thus prompted to take few steps back in order to finish the task. Showing the child the importance of finishing whatever task he has started is one of the hallmarks of Montessori's teaching.

Of course this particular quality of the didactic material functions on several levels. It makes the child more independent of the teacher. It also secures the child's sense of accomplishment and does not oblige him to compare his achievements with others in the class. In addition, the focus has shifted from getting the right answer to using the correct process. In *Discovery of the Child* (1969), she writes "The control of error through the material makes a child use his reason, critical faculty, and his ever increasing capacity for drawing distinction" (p.108). This has the effect of placing the emphasis on process rather than on the correct answers. Another effect of using self-correcting material is that the teacher is one possible source of information, rather than the only source.

Thirdly, it is important to note that it is in the child's discretion<sup>9</sup> what toy or object he chooses to explore. This way we can be assured that, under a gentle guidance of the teacher, the child chooses tasks adequate to his level of development. As previously mentioned, this does not mean the child has a total freedom in doing whatever he pleases. Instead, the child is taught to make decisions within an educationally sound framework offered by the teacher.

This way of teaching assures that the individual tasks are neither too difficult and discouraging, nor too simple and boring. Appropriately, one of the characteristics of Montessori material is what she called 'the isolation of difficulty'. Each child is able to

work at his own pace. I am very much in favour of a learning process structured in this way. Aside from the enormous faith in the child that this method represents, it places a great deal of responsibility on the teacher, in particular on the design of the environment and the diversity of the materials used. Throughout this process, the teacher must assure that the activities offered are attractive in nature and the material is equally attractive in design.

I think such teaching style represents methodology which slowly prepares the child to tackle the harder problems of adult life, to accept responsibility for his actions, and to overcome difficulties. These are very important characteristics to have as the pace of adult life becomes ever-more demanding and, at times, complex. Research evidence supports this rationale in that it shows that children, once they tackle a task successfully, somewhat naturally progress to a more advanced level of difficulty (Rydl, 1992). This is in contrast to the traditional school method, where the curriculum is typically aimed toward teaching the average student, if you will. As a result, children who function above this average lose interest in the activity and become bored and frustrated.

I think Montessori took very seriously her knowledge and understanding of how children learn and the implication of this insight for the educational design. Her main focus was on the delivery of materials through which information can be more effectively transmitted by adults and understood by children. Montessori's specially designed educational tools allow the child to experiment and reflect upon his little, albeit important, achievements. The child can return to the same activity and repeat the same task over and over without the adult imposing a certain time frame upon him. The adult instead offers an opportunity for discussion and reflection where needed. Reflection in



particular has been a very important element of the educational process for many theorists in the developmental field.

Vygotsky (1896 – 1934), for instance, was a strong defender of giving children the opportunity to refine their thought upon independently completing a task (Myers, 1999). It is particularly in his concepts of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development where Montessori receives affirmation from Vygotsky. His model suggests that children are more intellectually competent when asked to solve a problem alone (Ibid). Furthermore, Vygotsky thought that children can perform at a higher level when supported by an adult or a slightly advanced peer (scaffolding) (Ibid.). The concept of scaffolding must not be confused with the adult's interference or outright helping the child with a task. Instead, it is careful guidance through the task or even just offering feedback upon completion.

I think Montessori was skeptical about the adult's ability to control his urge to help the child along the way, and designed material with built-in control for error instead. This way, the object itself provides a unique form of scaffolding allowing the child to build a higher , more personalized level of understanding.

Among contemporary theorists, Betham and Sharpe (2007) identify two main aspects of learning. First, the interaction with material systems and concepts in the particular domain and secondly, interactions in which learners discuss their developing understanding and competence. Collins advises that “we should consider concepts as tools, to be understood through use, rather than as self-contained entities to be delivered through instruction” (Betham, 2007, p. 17). All of these commentaries, of course, represent a challenge to the existing design of curricula

Montessori's design is very much a constructive model where achieving understanding progresses via active discovery. Montessori, as Piaget, was concerned with how knowledge and skill are acquired and internalized rather than how they are manifested in test scores. Moreover, they both stressed the importance of continuity in learning in that each subsequent field of experience is built upon a previous one.

Similar attention to the previous field of experience can be observed in John Dewey's writings (1859 – 1959). Considered perhaps one of the most influential thinkers on education in the twentieth century, Dewey's contribution lies along several fronts. His attention to experience, to reflection and to community and learning environments stands in parallel to Montessori's vision of ideal educational practice. In his writings *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) details his education theories and beliefs. Similarly to Montessori, he believed that education of children involves many different factors such as interest in the community, pragmatism, reflection, interaction, and direct experience (p.135). According to the author, a quality education must engage and create "larger experiences" (Ibid., p. 137). By "larger experiences", I believe, Dewey implies not only building upon one's unique experience in the educational practice, but, at the same time, upon the student's ability to connect with and apply his acquired knowledge to the larger world. This conviction, of course, resonates in part with the philosophy of Montessori who also promotes the idea that experience is the total foundation for one's learning ability.

In another educational theory, Decker Walker outlines similar ideas taken from a different perspective. In his *Curriculum and Aims* (1986), the author discusses the political ramifications of the different approaches to educational practice in the history of

the educational system. Perhaps even more importantly, however, Walker identifies what are the dominant forces that influence and guide the educational operation and policy. By and large, his theory is sociological in nature; however, the author also discusses the importance of experience being incorporated into school curriculum “so that the person can build a life long love of learning” (Soltis and Walker, p.35). Essentially, it is evident that the above-mentioned writers realized that education involves a range of different forms of knowledge as well as the importance of a continuum between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’.

## Chapter Eight

### Montessori's Spirituality Philosophy

Humans are spiritual creatures by nature. Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity is the belief in things that are intangible, a belief that can only be rationalized and supported through faith. Despite enormous differences otherwise, throughout the ages, people have always been interested in the spiritual nature of the world around them in an effort to understand what was happening to them. Children are no exception, of course. When it comes to the spiritual nature of children, though, there are some profound differences from their adult counterparts that may not be readily understood.

Montessori was one of the proponents of recognizing and using the spiritual aspect of children in educational settings. The following section provides a critical evaluation of Montessori's contribution to child's spirituality in general and how her recommendations from her book, *The Secret of Childhood* in particular, can be used to help educators today provide their students with superior learning opportunities and improved academic outcomes.

In spite of her predilection for using scientific methods and techniques in educational settings, Montessori was a firm believer in the spiritual nature of life as well, and cited metaphysical reasons for her guidance. Her writings are sprinkled with references to the spiritual nature of some feature of the human condition supported by a scientific or biological example. For instance, when she advocated a program for free

lunches for school children, Montessori (1969) provided a rational reason in its support from a social problem-solving perspective, but she employed a spiritual one as well: “The necessity of eating is itself a proof that the matter of which our body is composed does not endure but passes like the fleeing moment. And if the substance of our bodies passes in this manner, if life itself is only a continual passing away of matter, what greater symbol of its immateriality and its spirituality is there than the dinner table?” (p. 17). While adults cannot imitate children to good effect, they are in an excellent position to help them use their spiritual interpretations of the world around them to identify opportunities for learning because of the enormous influence they have on children’s lives.

The term 'spirituality' can mean many things to many people, of course. However, when Montessori talked about nourishing the child's spirit, she was referring to the preservation of the inner core that holds the child’s secret for a natural and spontaneous desire to learn as well as a meaningful life later when he grows into an adult. She aimed to achieve this through the use of intrinsic motivational factors incorporated in the learning process, and insisted that children learn for the sake of learning rather than out of necessity or in order to attract adult approval, good grades, etc. In her book *The Absorbent Mind*, she states the following: “The child is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future. If what we really want is a new world, then education must take as its aim the development of these hidden possibilities.” In the previous section, we pointed out that Montessori believed that these “hidden possibilities” could be discerned and nurtured if an adult tuned into these potentials by

understanding the spiritual nature of childhood rather than imposing his own frame of reference upon the child.

As already indicated in the previous chapters, one of the goals of the Montessori method is to have the child reach his full potential. One of the primary mechanisms to do this is to allow each child to choose an activity from the wide selection of activities offered in the classroom. Montessori's rationale for this was that only the child really knows exactly what interests him, and that we can rely on the child's drive to work at the highest of his learning capacity to keep him moving on to new tasks.

Also reflecting on my earlier discussion regarding the seeming disharmony between the child and the adult, this can prove to be a daunting endeavour for many adults since helping children along the path to inner enlightenment requires more than a lecture or a film on personal hygiene. In fact, while Montessori recognized the importance of environmental factors on a child's development, it was the *tabula rasa* nature of the young person that made such guidance so important during this formative period in their lives. According to Montessori, "The spirit may be so profoundly latent that it will not be apparent . . . like the instinct of the animal. The absence of fixed and determined guiding instincts . . . is the sign of a fund of freedom of action demanding a special elaboration to be created and developed by each individual" (1967, p. 17).

For the purposes of this work, nurturing spirituality in children is very much distinguished from teaching them a specific religion. Rather, spirituality is understood as a basic human condition that gives meaning to our lives. For Montessori, the building of a strong spiritual foundation begins with birth.

At this point, it is important to distinguish spirituality from religiosity. Although some people may consider them the same (and for these people, this definition is appropriate because these are inextricably interrelated), for others, spirituality may or may not involve elements of religion, but rather involves establishing connections with the larger world around them in ways that make things understandable. I think this is the essence of spirituality in children. For example, according to Montessori (Ibid.), “The child is full of fancies, and the adult seems to be an omnipotent being, who can fulfill the desires of his dreams in all their dazzling splendor. Such a feeling finds full realization in fairy stories, which, while they have often a profound spiritual significance, may often appear as romances of the child soul” (p. 185).

Even though many adults may not remember how these processes played out in real life, it is reasonable to maintain that many children understand the world in profoundly wrong ways, but these ways make sense to them because this is how the human mind works. As erroneous information is replaced with more accurate data throughout one’s life, these understandings of how the world works and an individual’s place in it become more refined, but the processes are essentially the same from birth to death. People use what they know to make sense of the world, and this means that children may use some extraordinary approaches to interpreting their own reality with a spiritual theme running throughout.

From Montessori’s perspective, it is possible for teachers to use this insight to understand what mental processes children are experiencing in their interpretations of the world around them and their attempts to work out their relationships with peers and adults. For example, in her book, *The Secret of Childhood* (1939), Montessori advises,

“[The child] must be observed rather than analyzed, but observed from the psychic standpoint in an endeavour to ascertain the conflict through which he passes in his relations with grown-up persons and with his social environment” (p. 7). When considering such observations today, it is important to keep in mind that Montessori was formulating her concepts “on the fly” as it were, her careful consideration of previous studies along these lines notwithstanding. In fact, her reforms were nothing short of revolutionary in real social terms in that they were expected to transform society into a more pluralistic environment that treated children on equal terms with adults, at least insofar as their individual developmental needs were concerned.

Young people’s world views might be as rich and certainly as colourful as their adult counterparts, but these world views are, of course, far more limited in the information needed to accurately interpret it, and there will naturally be erroneous interpretations of what is known. In this regard, what is important to recognize is the fundamentally universal nature of spirituality in humans, and how it emerges and develops during childhood so that it can be nurtured and guided in appropriate ways.

For the purposes of this paper, spirituality has an educational undertone and is generally understood as a basic human condition that gives a meaning to our lives. In Montessori’s terms, scholarly endeavour and spirituality are intimately connected. In other words, the kinds of persons we are and the different experiences we have influence our intellectual activity. Palmer expresses this idea very aptly in the following statement: “Spiritual knowing is driven by compassion and love that implicates the learner in the web of life so that he or she and whatever is known are called to involvement, mutuality, and accountability” (Carr and Haldane, 2003, p. 119).



Although Montessori referred frequently to the child's spirituality, she spoke of the concept only very broadly and never actually defined it. Because it is difficult to express spirit or spirituality in a brief definition and to discern its function, I prefer to look at how other writers have described it.

Jacobs, for instance, offers conceptual understanding of spirituality as "knowing, active enjoyment of goods that are accessible through virtue – and delight in acknowledgement of how we are related to the world through it, and completed by it". One may notice that Jacobs' definition is very much in agreement with Aristotelian notion of personal happiness mentioned in Chapter Two of this work. Aristotle had much to say on the subject of virtue and similarly stressed one's virtue as a guiding force behind an individual's satisfaction with life and happiness. "Virtuous activity is naturally pleasing.....and the life of these active people is also pleasant in itself", according to Aristotle. In connection with spirituality, Aristotle believed spirituality completes and perfects virtue (Ibid., p. 55).

Foucault defined spirituality as "the set of enquiries, practices and exercises, which constitute, not in terms of knowledge, but of the very being of the subject, the price for gaining access to the truth" (Ibid., p.42). This definition, as I understand it, implies that some internal processes on the part of the learner must take place in order to access 'the truth' (truth being knowledge or skill for our purposes). As such, spirituality is not innate, but rather gained through questioning, inspection, manipulation, etc.

In Montessori's terms, I believe, spirituality means actualizing of one's value in life and deriving joy from it. I suspect that Montessori, similarly to Foucault, understood spirituality as an organic process rather than a static quality of an individual. Where she

departs from Foucault is in her proposition that children are naturally gifted with a spiritual sense, that is with a natural desire to learn

In *The Secret of Childhood* (1939), she writes the following: “The greatest challenge we all face as spiritual nurturers is to become attuned to the child’s authentic spirituality, which – unlike our own – is still such an integrated part of life”(p. 27). It follows, therefore, that the task of the adult is to protect and respect this gift by creating conditions in which it can grow. It is Montessori’s notion that the extent of this growth into, as she puts it, “fullness of human character” will depend upon the depth and richness of the child’s experience. Not only that, however. Under her doctrine, no external rewards such as grades and credits are necessary, quite to the contrary. Montessori considers them outright damaging. Instead, she believes in the value of an intrinsic award such as taking delight in learning and reflective engagement with the world. For Montessori, as for Aristotle, virtue alone is the proper motivating factor. From this it follows that school activities must reflect on the child’s virtues. Spirituality so constructed is a sort of inner tranquility through self-actualization and self-sufficiency, a truly psychological event.

This is very much in contrast to the traditional understanding of motivation as one can observe in schools today. In many respects, the majority of educational processes are based on the idea that motivation is a matter of the child’s response to an external reward. In the current school system, external reward functions as a control mechanism to elicit a desirable cognitive or behavioural response. This approach, once again, implies certain distrust in the child’s own decision process and ability to direct himself towards an educationally valuable experience.

Montessori's notion of spirituality implies a passionate commitment to learning and knowing which in turn, as Palmer puts it, "can move the knower beyond perception and theory into relationship with the world to be known" (Carr and Haldane, 2003, p. 119). Whether we accept this rationale or not, it nevertheless remains true that one of the hallmarks of Montessori's method is that children possess a spontaneously active intellect

"It is as natural and certain that a child will begin making comparisons and classifications as it is that he will begin to walk", she states in *The Absorbent Mind* (1967, p.125). It is her view that if children do not display a desire to work spontaneously and seem bored instead, the problem does not stem from the children themselves, but from the manner of presenting the material to be studied. Such regard for children's spontaneity in learning, of course, has more relevance to the method of teaching rather than to its content. Montessori believes that if students are bored, inattentive, and seemingly disconnected, it is because the teaching methods used present barriers to the child's natural spontaneity and creativity.

I think most of us adults lost this natural spiritual engagement with task at hand. Most of our lives, we have been taught the strategy of being adequately rewarded for our achievements rather than considering pleasure in the process of achieving excellence in a skill. We, therefore, work in the opposite direction to the Aristotelian line of reasoning and to Montessori's idea of virtue. Our main objective in most of what we do has been some external reward, whether money or a better professional position. In most instances, work is regarded as an unpleasant necessity. I think this is at least partially due to the fact that no attempts are made to match persons to their meaningful work. In

educational terms and in line with Montessori's reasoning, this would mean to direct children toward the self-knowledge that such matching requires.

In the previous section, I indicated several deficiencies in the current educational climate. For instance, I mentioned the preference of outcomes over the processes that lead to them and failure to address the multi-dimensional nature of the learner. I also mentioned the disconnect between the academic ambience and real life experience creating an undesirable distance between the learner and the subject of study. At the present time, our schools favour a traditional teacher-centred approach, and do little to encourage diverse forms of teaching and learning.

Since children love to learn, the spiritual component can be – and should be – incorporated into the pedagogy. Montessori, I believe, tried to maintain this natural love for learning and the absorption of new information, firstly, through her insistence on intrinsic motivation and, secondly, through giving children freedom in selecting their activity. Children, simply by seeing the results of their own educational efforts, will spontaneously strive to achieve higher levels of knowledge and skill. For instance, Montessori (1939) emphasizes that, “The child is driven forward by delicate sensibilities aglow with intellectual love, which urge him indefatigably towards the outer world and make him garner impressions of things as a spiritual milk on which he must feed to nourish his inner life. That is why the child's psychic manifestations are at once impulses of enthusiasm and efforts of meticulous, constant patience” (p. 223).

Empirical observations suggest that children want and need guidelines and rules to help them understand what is expected of them in terms of behaviour, but they desperately want to be able to learn on their own and achieve a sense of accomplishment

through their own endeavours – this is how people grow and learn. In fact, this is one of the most important aspects of the Montessori approach to helping children develop: “In the special environment prepared for the child in our schools, he expresses this inner need by saying ‘Help me to do it by myself!’ How eloquent is this paradoxical request! The adult must help the child, but help him in such a way that he may act for himself and perform his real work in the world” (Ibid., p. 224).

Such inner-driven desire to learn is assumed to be carried over to the adult life, and will result in one’s confidence in his abilities and satisfaction with work and life in general. Spirituality so understood can then be defined as the development of the individual’s self-concept. For example, in her book, *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori writes: “The child strives to assimilate his environment and from such efforts springs the deep-seated unity of his personality. This prolonged and gradual labour is a continual process through which the spirit enters into possession of its instrument” (p. 33).

The traditional school method, of course, employs extrinsic type of motivation, one based on grades, credits, and rigid structure. Under this doctrine, it is assumed that rewards enhance behaviour (Skinner, 1953). In the educational process as such, there is no room for spontaneous learning. By nature, the traditional school ignores and, in fact, hinders the child’s natural propensity for learning.

In recent years, researchers have studied the connection between reward and behaviour and offer a counterpoint to the traditional view of learning. Lepper (1973) reports, for instance, that if the child initially engages in a behaviour simply for the pleasure it brings rather than for an actual reward, then extrinsic rewards for engaging in the behaviour tend to decrease the likelihood that the task will be enjoyed for its own

sake in the future. In other words, extrinsic award decreases intrinsic motivation. Some researchers have examined the connection between intrinsic motivation and creativity. For instance, Sullivan reports students that increased intrinsic motivation accounts for better performance on creativity measure as compared to students in traditional classroom (Myers, 1999, p. 213).

Essentially, this discussion is about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in the learning process. It is a discussion about finding one's inner spiritual integrity, if you will. Finally, it is a discussion along the lines of Maslow's self-actualizing individual or Piaget's concept of "inner equilibrium". Somewhat in line with this reasoning is the following statement by Bestor (1985): "...schools exist to teach something, and this something is the power to think. To assert this simple fact is to assert the importance of good teaching" (p.10).

Maslow (1908 – 1970), a humanistic psychologist, believed that if basic human needs such as hunger, love, safety, and belonging are satisfied, people ultimately strive to actualize their highest potential. To describe self-actualization, he studied a number of highly productive individuals and summarized his ideas about qualities they shared. Most notably, he observed that they were self-aware and self-accepting, not paralyzed by other's opinions (Myers, 1999). Often, according to Maslow, they channeled most of their time and energy into a particular task, completing of which they regarded as their spiritual or personal peak (Ibid.).

Like these humanistic theorists, Montessori also concluded that while adults are in a good position to help children develop, they must "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk" to achieve true development and self-actualization, to use Maslow's term. For

example, Montessori (1969) emphasizes that the child “must carry out the work for his development alone and he must carry it out in its entirety. To become a man of twenty he must take twenty years. It is indeed precisely the characteristic of growing childhood to follow just a programme and time-table unerringly, and unsparingly” (p. 220).

The conditions that support the emergence of a favourable self-concept and competency as described by Maslow are created in classrooms by teachers who concentrate on the learner. These attributes will not develop in an environment characterized by authoritative style of teaching or strict adherence to mechanical memorization of facts. The teacher or the parent who believes that children are not to be trusted in their educational endeavours , cannot be a positive influence on the young mind.

To the extent that teachers “teach to the test,” is the extent to which they will likely fail to take into account young people’s natural tendency to want to learn and ignore the potentials that could be realized through a more sensitive approach to the delivery of educational services: “The child does not grow weary with work, but increases his strength. He grows through work and that is why work increases his energies. He never asks to be relieved of his labors, but on the contrary he asks to be allowed to perform them and to perform them alone. The task of growth is his life, he must truly either work or die” (Montessori, 1963, p. 223). From this quote, it is apparent that one of Montessori’s primary concerns was to eliminate the salience of teacher-initiated constraints on cognitive development of the child, such as grading. Instead, she advocated more individualized task performance in order to develop an intrinsic motif for learning. In *The Montessori Method* (1912), she emphasizes that, “Truly our social life is

too often only the darkening and the death of the natural life that is in us. These methods tend to guard that spiritual fire within man, to keep his real nature unspoiled and to set it free from the oppressive and degrading yoke of society” (p. 376).

As noted above, these are revolutionary – if not inflammatory – concepts, and it is little wonder that Montessori has attracted both support and opposition to her ideas. If her methods were widely used, Montessori maintained, society’s ills could be solved by children who would enter adulthood as spiritually enlightened and eager members of a new social order committed to freedom and equality. For example, she writes that her approach to the delivery of educational services “involves a conception of life more usual in religious fields than in those of academic pedagogy, in as much as it has recourse to the spiritual energies of mankind, but it is founded on work and on liberty which are the two paths to all civic progress” (p. 369).

Unfortunately, most busy teachers in today’s mainstream classrooms may not enjoy the luxury of such personalized attention to 25 to 50 young and eager learners from a wide range of socio-cultural backgrounds. I assume the best that can be hoped for in these situations, is to help as many children as possible be promoted to the next grade level where their unique childhood developmental and difficult-to-discern but vitally important spiritual problems will become someone else’s concern. Nevertheless, I suspect, the most effective leaders in any setting – educational, military, corporate or otherwise – recognize that careful attention to followers’ needs and wants is an integral component of their jobs. It is reasonable to assume that most teachers would prefer to take the time required to achieve superior academic outcomes, but resources are often



scarce and providing individual attention to every student in a No Child Left Behind classroom can prove difficult.

Wentworth (1999) makes a strong case in favour of a learning atmosphere characterized by intrinsic motivational structures when she makes the connection between intrinsic award and increased creativity in children. As already mentioned, teachers are awarded a considerable degree of autonomy with regards to the teaching methods they employ. Undoubtedly, teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences can also have an impact on children's intrinsic pursuits. Teachers not only communicate knowledge, but also, through their own attitudes, can inspire their students. Evidence suggests, for example, that students of teachers who believe in the importance of student autonomy are curious, prefer working on challenging tasks, and desire to complete work independently (Rydl, 1992). This way, children feel more confident in their work and more willing to cross the boundaries in terms of their creative pursuits. Unfortunately, it is important to note that the current school structure in which teachers perform their task often imposes limits on their own intrinsic motivation and creativity in using novel method of teaching.

To overcome these constraints, Montessori believed that a complete restructuring of the current emphasis on the adult world was required, with more consideration given to what children needed and wanted to help them learn more effectively. Equating the young learner to a "spiritual embryo," Montessori (1969) emphasizes that in sharp contrast to mainstream classroom settings today, "... the environment must be a living one, directed by a higher intelligence, arranged by an adult who is prepared for his mission. It is in this that our conception differs both from that of the world in which the

adult does everything for the child and from that of a passive environment in which the adult abandons the child to himself” (p. 224). If the adult accepts the child as an individual and gives the child autonomy and opportunity to assert his own will, then the child achieves a secure sense of self. This general attitude is then assumed to be carried over to the adult life.

Research showed that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human, and is one of the things that set people apart from lower animals. Just as ancient mankind looked at the stars and sought answers through mystical interpretations, children take what they know and use it to understand the world around them in ways that may be difficult for adults to understand. In truth, it may not be possible or even desirable to seek to intimately understand what a particular child may think about the world in terms of its spiritual nature to recognize that this component exists and what role it plays in the child’s growth and learning. The same holds true for adults as well.

In this regard, Montessori concedes that the challenge is tall, but her approach to the delivery of educational services provides a framework in which teachers could be trained for this purpose: “The treatment of the child is so complex and so delicate that it needs something more than an awakening in the mother, or the training of new types of nurses and teachers. The response to the child’s needs must be a mental renewal of education, which will be the centre of many collateral sciences, till the crowning result is achieved, a new philosophy of life” (pp. 225-6).

In this regard, the research also clearly showed that understanding the spiritual nature of the childhood experience provides an important and useful basis from which teachers can identify opportunities for further development according to the child’s

individually expressed desire to learn: “The adult who is unaware of this secret cannot understand the child's work. And, in fact, he has never understood it. That is why he has always prevented him from working, supposing that what the child most needed in order to grow was rest” (Montessori, 1963, p. 223). Certainly, it is possible to dissect some of Montessori’s more controversial observations and recommendations and thereby discredit her reliance on the metaphysical aspect of the human condition, but this would not only do her a disservice, it would miss her overall points concerning how education can best be delivered.

Given Montessori’s background in educating special needs children and the extra amounts of attention these young learners require, it is not surprising that some educators might be reluctant to embrace her methods for work with their own students. Simply, they may not feel they have the time or resources to use them effectively. The main points made by Montessori concerning spirituality, though, do not cost a dime and can be applied to all of us, including adults. When teachers are able to look beyond their own world views, though, and see the world through a child’s eyes, it may be possible to catch a glimpse of the magic once again and put this new insight concerning the spirituality of the human condition to good use in the Montessori-guided classroom.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Conclusion**

Universal, free public education represents one of the major achievements of any democratic society. Throughout the Western world, however, education seems to face a number of problems. This is especially the case in some of the technologically advanced societies where economical and professional success constitutes to be the major motivating factors in the lives of most people. The opinions in the Western educational milieu today are divided between those who believe that good teaching should be directed to sound intellectual results, and those who are prepared to undervalue intellectual development and adjust the methods of teaching with merely practical aims in mind.

In the current educational climate, educators and the general public engage in a debate as to the cause of educational inefficiency. The debate seems to focus on the confusion about the purposes of education and the consequent lessening of its aims and standards.

Our society channels enormous amounts of money into education, yet the general outlook is such that schooling is regarded as a mere experience, delightful to the recipient, but hardly valuable to the society. In another words, it is not expected that society will get its money's worth out of the educational process in terms of intellectual proficiency and greater skills among its population.

Admittedly, it is a problematic task to measure the effectiveness of a school system. I suppose that if the schools are doing their job, we should expect evidence to show a significant and indisputable achievement in raising the intellectual level of the population. Matters such as per capita circulation of books, improved taste in entertainment, a higher number of newspaper subscribers, may serve as valuable indicators of the efficiency of the school system. On almost every count, there is common disappointment with the educational results currently shown by most of our public schools. These criticisms come from parents as well as from those who are directly involved in the educational endeavour. The latter group is best qualified to judge what sound education ought to consist of and what deficiencies exist in today's system of public schooling.

I trust that if those in the position of policy-making decide to dedicate their time and energy to overcoming the apparent shortcomings of the educational system, they must learn to draw comparisons with the very best schools past or present, domestic or foreign, from which they can acquire new knowledge. I think the present workings of the school system, measured against the best that can possibly be achieved, is the only valid measure of our educational output.

It is important to note that our schools improved tremendously on many levels in the past century. In the instances where educational methods and goals have been well conceived, the money and the effort channeled into education have produced clearly identifiable progress. Over the years, for instance, we have eliminated virtually every barrier that race, religion, or economic status may present to prevent anyone from

attending school. Through scholarships and grants, every Canadian has the opportunity to pursue the highest level of study in any discipline he desires.

I thus suspect that the quality of education is not a matter of money or lack of effort. Rather, as I see it, the difference is in the lack of a properly formulated direction in the educational process where the needs and capacities of the child would be effectively taken into account. It is my personal conviction that by misrepresenting or generalizing the aims of the process, educators and administrators have contributed, unwittingly perhaps, but nevertheless substantially, to the lowering of the academic standard.

Whether one accepts this argument or not, in the past decade, a number of measures have been introduced in the name of education. Arguably, many of them make no substantial contribution to knowledge or to clear thinking, and could not conceivably do so in the future. School's involvement in the regulation of ADHD diagnoses in children, or the all-inclusive philosophy of education where children with mental deficiencies learn alongside intellectually gifted children, are just two examples of such dubious programs. While these measures may represent a morally honorable move, they do not in any remarkable way contribute to intellectual growth.

The current educational paradigm is concentrated around a set of selected books and the display of countless ideas and propositions put forward by others. The typical school day is by and large governed by the textbook. This means that the curriculum of most schools is resistant to the introduction of everything that is novel and interesting in a real life experience of the child.

The school dictum goes even so far as to produce a curriculum that is entirely free of controversial materials. Recent ban on religious books in public schools and the exclusion of stories relating to gay issues are examples of this philosophy. I think that through such sterilizing of the overall school experience, the school is essentially drawing all the curiosity and creativeness out of the child, further denying him many forms of knowledge he can later profit from educationally. The fact that the motives for such measures are well intended does not make such a pedagogical error less problematic.

Bailin (1988) makes a strong case that creativity is always a function of conflict. What is insinuated in this logic is that creativity is an effort to deal effectively with some social or personal difficulty in the hope of making things better. As such, it involves active, as opposed to mechanical, thinking. This line of reasoning substantiates Bailin's assumption mentioned earlier that creativity is closely linked to cognitive abilities (Ibid.). As far as the child is concerned, school, which fails to realize the above line of reasoning, will always be viewed only in terms of a mere promotion to the next grade.

At this point, one may wish to pose the question of what is it that we expect the school to do for our children. I suspect we would find a surprising consistency in the way most people would answer that question. We all want students who can express themselves well, who are readers and are excited about reading. We want children who have not only learned some basics in geography, the sciences, and math, but also children who can make rational and informed life decisions. And above all, we all realize how important the attitude toward school is for children's future learning.

With these common goals in mind, I present this thesis as an introduction to a Montessori educational philosophy. The central task in this paper has been to contrast

Montessori's philosophy of education and her proposed reforms with our modern Western philosophy of education as we witness it in our schools today. This is with the realization that although the Montessori model does not provide all the answers to the problems of education which confront us, it does chart a new and, in my belief, much superior course in solving them.

Looking through Montessori's numerous writings, I identified one ruling principle logically arising from all of her educational ideas. It is the affirmation that the curriculum and teaching methods must take into consideration the child, that it must fit the developmental nature of the child, rather than outside needs. Montessori's dictum, "Follow the child", speaks for itself. Logically then, the purpose of education ought to grow out of the needs and capacities of those who are being educated. Consequently, one may find that in the true Montessori classroom, the focus is on the process rather than the product.

It is Montessori's conviction that schools exist to teach something, and that this something is the power to think independently and rationally so that one can solve his own problems and direct his own life. The teacher who produces his model and then holds it up as the prototype for the children to imitate has no place in the Montessori classroom. Instead, in the Montessori model, the child's own interest is appealed to, his own judgment is encouraged and tested. Lastly, he is constantly reminded of the point that he must face the world in his own capacity. All this is projected upon the child indirectly rather than through a rigid sequence of intellectual pressures as is the case in the conventional classroom.



Pursuant to the above logic, Montessori put enormous trust in the child's self-directing capacity to learn. Her doctrine of freedom of choice alone implies trust in the validity of the child's decision-making powers. In fact, she held the child's values, feelings, and ideas in high regard. This principle became the core of the motivational component of her theory. Her insights came from her ability to observe children as they really are – not little adults, but unique entities with very special needs, particular ways of learning, and a special delight in ordinary experiences.

Another confirmation of Montessori's ideas comes from the recent rethinking of the relationship between motivation and reward. Montessori talks repeatedly about children working to perfect themselves, about children's attraction to activities that are just at the limits of their competence. The real object of education, according to Montessori, is the development of the child's capacity to value school work for its own sake and not for some practical reason. The child's pleasure in the activity is intensified if he can recognize the merit of his own achievement. This is very much an inner process, and education so understood can be classified as truly holistic, spiritual.

Montessori differentiates the intrinsic motives in the learning process from external motives such as prizes, grades, or teacher approval. I believe Montessori, in this way, addressed the issue of spiritual growth in a more inclusive manner than the traditional construction of the term would suggest. In this regard, Montessori considered education as a sort of embodied experience producing a deep understanding of the task at hand. One may discover a certain aspect of voluntarism and desire to learn in her model. The assumption is that pleasure completes an activity. Montessori would be quick to point out, however, that in all such cases, the dispositions, needs, and natural inclinations

shape what the child finds pleasing. From this it follows that for a child to achieve his full potential, instruction must be adapted to his characteristics.

In light of the proceeding discussion, I now wish to recapitulate the main points I have made so far. Few would argue that in society, the child needs certain tools. Firstly, he needs to be able to read, to work with numbers, and to write. These skills can be understood as the essential element that will allow him to access the treasures of his enrichment, and as such must form the core of any educational enterprise. Secondly, he is required to master the particulars of his life. He needs to be able to solve his own problems effectively and to accept responsibility for his decisions. Here he will need the wisdom of both his parents and teachers as well as the lessons presented by scientific discovery. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, he needs to have the feel of his own accomplishment. Only then will he have the inner, spiritual drive to achieve his highest potential, his own personal virtue. The school will not succeed if it fails to assist him in the objective to live a genuinely personal life.

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