
Montessori examined

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Author: **W H KILPATRICK**, PhD
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CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. Education as Development
- III. The Doctrine of Liberty
- IV. Adequacy of Self-Expression in the Montessori System
- V. Auto-Education
- VI. Execises of Practical Life
- VII. Sense-Training by Means of the Didactic Apparatus
- VIII. The School Arts: Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic
- IX. Conclusions
Outline

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of Madam Montessori's educational ideas is laid before the reader in simple but attractive manner in her principal work, *The Montessori Method*, as the English translation is called. But slight reference to the now well-known story is needed. Madam Montessori, as assistant physician at the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome, became some fifteen years ago interested in defectives. She thus learned of the work done by Edward Seguin for the education of idiots. From this and from personal experimentation in the education of the feeble-minded, there came the suggestion of using Seguin's method with the normal child. In this is found one important factor in the making of the Montessori method. While this study of defectives was going on, there had been organized in Milan a School of Scientific Pedagogy. The anthropologist Sergi appears to have been the leading spirit in the enterprise. The emphasis in this school was upon anthropometry and measurements in the experimental psychology, particularly of the sensations. Whether from a more widespread interest or from the influence of this particular school does not certainly appear, but the field of scientific measurement constitutes another factor in the formation of the Montessori method. A third element was the general background of prevalent educational theory which one absorbs more or less unconsciously as one does his uncriticized religion or politics. This we may surmise was largely Pestalozzian in its ultimate origin. A fourth factor was the invitation extended to Madam Montessori by a building corporation in Rome to organize the infant schools in its model tenements. The effort to meet this demand created in large measure the Children's House, especially in its institutional aspect. In these four elements we seem to have the origin of the Montessori schools.

It is not necessary to the purpose at hand to show just how far Madam Montessori is indebted to Seguin for her didactic apparatus. No acknowledgement could be more open or generous than is hers; and everyone acquainted with Seguin's work will be struck with the similarity. There is, however, one important difference: Seguin was interested mainly in leading the defective to make those acquisitions of knowledge and skill which would with relative directness prove useful in the ordinary affairs of his life; Madam Montessori, on the other hand, is more interested – as we shall later discover – in the disciplinary aspect of the exercises.

The study of science has had far-reaching effect upon Madam Montessori and upon her educational theory. In the general wish to apply scientific conceptions to education, few surpass her. Those who feel the urgent need for a more scientific study of education and for the bringing of the scientific spirit into our attitude toward educational practice, can but applaud the insistence with which Madam Montessori returns again and again to this point of view. In addition to the general demand for a scientific attitude on the part of teachers, we find specific elements of her procedure based on her scientific experience. For example, the teachers must keep records, both anthropometric and psychologic, of each child. The books in which these are kept are often shown on the visitor, The remark may be interjected that the data so recorded, unfortunately, hardly function otherwise than in keeping alive in the teachers a general spirit of child observation. Another application of the scientific attitude is found in the insistence upon the liberty of the child as a prerequisite of the scientific study of educational data. "If a new and scientific pedagogy", says Madam Montessori, "is to arise from the *study of individual*, such a study must occupy itself with the observation of *free children*". Further, the adaptation of Seguin's material to a disciplinary end would seem to have had its origin in the wish on the part of Madam Montessori to utilize her scientific study of sense-experience. It must be said, however, that while Madam Montessori's interest in the scientific attitude is entirely praiseworthy, her actual science cannot be so highly commended. Her biology is not

always above reproach, as, for example, the alleged disinfecting influence of garlic upon the intestines and lungs. She generalizes unscientifically as to the condition of contemporary educational thought and practice from observation limited, it would seem, to the Italian schools. If she had known more of what was being thought and done elsewhere, her discussions would have been saved some blemishes and her system some serious omissions. Her psychology in particular would have been improved, had she known better what Wundt was doing in Germany, to mention no other names.

While these shortcomings are mentioned, we should not fail to call attention to an evidence of scientific attitude and faith too seldom found in the teaching world – be it said to our shame, Few in the history of education have been capable of breaking so completely with the surrounding school tradition as has this Italian physician. To set aside tradition for science is no common achievement. That the innovator is a woman will seem to some all the more remarkable. With the true scientific spirit of experimentation Madam Montessori has devised a practice and an institution. Such a consciously scientific creation stands in marked contrast with the conservatism and mystical obscurantism which but too widely characterize kindergarten education in England, America, and elsewhere. Whatever opinion be held as to the success of the effort, no one can fail to approve Madam Montessori's thorough-going attempt to found a complete school procedure upon her highest scientific conceptions.

In the discussion which follows it will be assumed that the reader is acquainted with Madam Montessori's chief work, *The Montessori Method*,¹ and also with the didactic apparatus itself. The effort will be to examine the Montessori system and to appraise its worth to American education. Especial attention will be given to the merits of the Casa dei Bambini as a rival to the kindergarten. Owing to limitations of space, only the most characteristic elements of the system will be considered.

¹ Heinemann, London

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS ARE **NOT** YET EDITED . . .

PROCEED TO: CONCLUSIONS **(IX)**
OR TO: OUTLINE **(last)**

II

EDUCATION AS DEVELOPMENT

III

THE DOCTRINE OF LIBERTY

IV

ADEQUACY OF SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE MONTESSORI SYSTEM

V

AUTO-EDUCATION

VI

EXERCISES OF PRACTICAL LIFE

VII

SENSE-TRAINING BY MEANS OF THE DIDACTIC APPARATUS

VIII

THE SCHOOL ARTS: READING, WRITING, AND ARITHMETIC

CONCLUSIONS

We have passed in review the principal features of the Montessori theory and practice. Good points and bad have appeared. Before attempting a summary of the several valuations made, it may be well to ask, Where among other systems of education does this one belong? What is the relation of Madam Montessori to the world's educational thinkers? When the surmise was made in the first chapter that Pestalozzi formed the background of Madam Montessori's educational philosophy, one might better have said that it was the Rousseau - Pestalozzi - Froebel group which formed that background, although there are more distinct marks of Pestalozzianism than of the others. This group of educational thinkers are differentiated from others by the presence of several characteristics which we find also in the Montessori theory. The revolutionary attitude, the feeling that one is breaking with customary practice, while certainly present, need hardly be mentioned, as this is an element found to a greater or less degree in all reformers. More to the point are: (1) a belief that the child nature is essentially good; (2) that the educational process is fundamentally an unfolding of what was given at birth; (3) a consequent belief in liberty as the necessary condition of this development; (4) the utilization of sense-experiences as means to bringing about the development; (5) a tendency to accept the faculty psychology; (6) the consequent tendency to emphasize the disciplinary aspect of sense-training; and finally (7) the emphasis upon nomenclature in connection with sense-experiences. While not all of these are found with distinctness in the writings of each one of the group, they either are so present or have been drawn as corollaries by followers. They are likewise present in the Montessori theory. When we consider that each of these characteristic doctrines, while containing a greater or less amount of truth, still has needed to be strictly revised in order to square with present conceptions; when we further consider that Madam Montessori's own conception of these doctrines has needed an almost identical revision; when we still further consider that Madam Montessori has confessedly been most influenced by Sequin, whose ideas were first published in 1846; when we consider, in particular, that Madam Montessori still holds to the discarded doctrine of formal or general discipline, -- in the light of all these, we feel compelled to say that in the content of her doctrine, she belongs essentially to the mid-nineteenth century, some fifty years behind the present development of educational theory.

If we compare the work of Madam Montessori with that of such a writer and thinker as Professor Dewey, we are able to get an estimate of her worth from still a different point of view. The two have many things in common. Both have organized experimental schools; both have emphasized the freedom, self-activity, and self-education of the child; both have made large use of "practical life" activities. In a word, the two are co-operative tendencies in opposing entrenched traditionalism. There are, however, wide differences. For the earliest education, Madam Montessori provides a set of mechanically simple devices. These in large measure do the teaching. A simple procedure embodied in definite, tangible apparatus is a powerful incentive to popular interest. Professor Dewey could not secure the education which he sought in so simple a fashion. Madam Montessori was able to do so only because she had a much narrower conception of education, and because she could hold to an untenable theory as to the value of formal and systematic sense-training. Madam Montessori centered much of her effort upon devising more satisfactory methods of teaching reading and writing, utilizing thereto in masterly fashion the phonetic character of the Italian language. Professor Dewey, while recognizing the duty of the school to teach these arts, feels that early emphasis should rather be placed upon activities more vital to child-life which should at the same time lead toward the mastery of our complex social environment. Madam Montessori, in a measure

following Pestalozzi, constantly uses logically simple units as if they were also the units of psychological experience. In reading and writing it is the letter and the single sound, not the word or thought connection, that receive attention. Sense-qualities are taught preferably in isolation, apart from life situations. She speaks also of leading the child "from sensations to ideas . . . and to the association of ideas". Professor Dewey insists that the experience is the unit, and that the logically simple units emerge for consciousness by differentiation from the experience. Things, as a rule, are best taught, then, in connection with what is for the child a real experience, when they enter as significant parts into such an experience; and this because learning is essentially the differentiation and organization of meanings. It is, of course, to be borne in mind that a child experience is vastly different from the adult experience. What to a child is a whole satisfying experience, to us may be very fragmentary and disconnected.

But there are even more comprehensive contrasts. Madam Montessori hoped to re-make pedagogy; but her idea of pedagogy is much narrower than is Professor Dewey's idea of education. His conception of the nature of the thinking process, together with his doctrines of interest and of education as life, -- not simply a preparation for life, -- include all that is valid in Madam Montessori's doctrines of liberty and sense-training, afford the criteria for correcting her errors, and besides, go vastly farther in the construction of educational method. In addition to this, he attacked the equally fundamental problem of the nature of the curriculum, saw it as the ideal reconstruction of the race achievement, and made substantial progress toward a methodology of its appropriation. This great problem of the curriculum, it can almost be said, Madam Montessori has, so far, not even seen. While this is no adequate recital of Professor Dewey's contributions, it suffices, in connection with what has been previously said, to show that they are all ill advised who put Madam Montessori among the significant contributors to educational theory. Stimulating she is; a contributor to our theory, hardly, if at all.

Is this, then, the final judgment of Madam Montessori's contribution? The question of a permanent contribution turns on whether there have been presented original points of view capable of guiding fruitfully educational procedure. What novel and original ideas have we found that could at the same time bear the scrutiny of criticism? The scientific conception of education is certainly valid. Madam Montessori may, in a way, have come upon it herself; but no one could say that the world did not have a fuller conception of it prior to her. The most that can be claimed on this point is that her advocacy and example have proved stimulating. Her doctrine of education as unfolding is neither novel nor correct. In the doctrine of liberty she has made no theoretical contribution; though probably her practice will prove distinctly valuable. Our kindergartens and primary schools must take account of her achievement in this respect. Her doctrine of auto-education will at most provoke thought; the term is good, the idea old. Her utilization of "practical life" activities, more specifically her solution of early tenement-house education, must prove distinctly suggestive. It may well turn out that the Casa dei Bambini is after all her greatest contribution. The sense-training which to her seems most worth while, we decline to accept except in a very modified degree. The didactic apparatus we reject in like degree. Her preparation for the school arts should prove very helpful in Italy. It is possible that her technique of writing will prove useful everywhere. If so, that is a contribution. With that the list closes. We owe no large point of view to Madam Montessori. Distinguishing contribution from service, she is most a contributor in making the Casa dei Bambini. Her greatest service lies probably in the emphasis on the scientific conception of education, and in the practical utilization of liberty.

OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The genesis of Madam Montessori's educational ideas
2. Her indebtedness to Seguin
3. Influence of science upon her educational system
4. Insufficiency of her science
5. The Casa dei Bambini a scientific creation

II. EDUCATION AS DEVELOPMENT

1. Education as development is frequently misconceived
2. Individual development is possible only through the utilization of *the race achievement*
3. Madam Montessori considers development to be the mere unfolding of latency
4. Such a conception (a) but ill adapts to a changing environment, and (b) furnishes a wrong basis for freedom

III. THE DOCTRINE OF LIBERTY

1. The doctrine of liberty dates from Rousseau
2. Madam Montessori wrongly bases liberty upon the unfolding of latency
3. Child liberty as the precondition of child study
4. The Montessori doctrine of liberty shown by contrast with the conservative kindergarten
5. Montessori liberty not anarchy
6. The advantages of child liberty
7. Co-operation on the basis of liberty
8. Amount of knowledge and skill expected of a child of six
9. Such knowledge and skill best secured on a basis of freedom
10. Wrong conduct best avoided by encouragement of proper impulses
11. The child best learns to "get on" with others in a régime of freedom
12. Madam Montessori's re-emphasis of freedom highly commendable

IV. ADEQUACY OF SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE MONTESSORI SYSTEM

1. Self-expression is the essence of freedom
2. The didactic apparatus affords but meagre self-expression
3. Imaginative and constructive play has little or no place in the Montessori schools
4. Games, drawing, modelling, stories, and dramatization are inadequately utilized
5. The "practical life" activities afford excellent opportunities of self-expression
6. On the whole, the Montessori curriculum is unduly restrictive

V. AUTO-EDUCATION

1. Some scheme of auto-education is the necessary counterpart of a régime of freedom
2. Madam Montessori seeks auto-education through mechanically simple didactic apparatus
3. Such auto-education is too restricted
4. Self-education comes best where real problems present themselves naturally

VI. EXERCISES OF PRACTICAL LIFE

1. The tenement-house origin of the Casa dei Bambini introduced many immediately practical features
2. Many of these exercises delight the children and give excellent training
3. The longer school day is worthy of consideration for other countries
4. Specific practical exercises must fit community needs
5. Children should be encouraged to do for themselves
6. The motivation of actual service
7. Madam Montessori's "practical life" exercises are in keeping with a world-wide educational trend

VII. SENSE-TRAINING BY MEANS OF THE DIDACTIC APPARATUS

1. Sense-training is most fundamental in the Montessori system
2. Improving the sense-organs v. brain connections
3. General v. specific training
4. Pedagogical corollaries of the three suggested theories
5. Madam Montessori accepts the rejected theories
6. The didactic apparatus is thus based on error
7. Less formal apparatus would give more useful sense experiences

VIII. THE SCHOOL ARTS: READING, WRITING, AND ARITHMETIC

1. The enthusiasm of new educational projects often shows remarkable results
2. The Montessori reading method depends on the phonetic character of the Italian language
3. The two elements of writing are taught separately:
 - (a) Manipulation of the instrument,
 - (b) The visual-muscular image of the letters
4. Whether the Montessori writing method is a contribution is as yet undecided
5. The arithmetic teaching has little or no suggestion for England or America
6. The "three R's" should probably not be taught before the age of six

IX. CONCLUSIONS

1. Madam Montessori belongs to the Rousseau - Pestalozzi - Froebel group of educators
2. Her system falls essentially below the best Anglo-Saxon theory
3. Her greatest original contribution is the Casa dei Bambini as a social institution
4. Her greatest service lies in her emphasis upon a scientific education and in the practical utilization of freedom

FÅR EJ KOPIERAS