

## **Abstract**

Dr. Maria Montessori provided the world with a powerful philosophy and practice for the advancement of humanity: change how we educate children and we change the world.

She understood two things very clearly: One, that we can build a better world, a more just and peaceful place, when we educate for the realization of the individual and collective human potential; and two, that the only way to create an educational system that will that will serve this end is to scrap the current system entirely and replace it with a completely new system. She gave us a system through which to accomplish that goal: The Montessori Method.

The following is a personal and professional account of the Montessori Method of educating children.

## **The Montessori Method: Cultivating the Potential of the Child to Build a More Peaceful World**

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I carry, stored in my heart's memory, the image of a happy young child standing on a front porch one early September morning in the late 1980's. She is dressed for the first day of school, lunchbox in hand, feeling, I imagine a mix of anticipation, excitement, and "grownupness". She was the youngest of four children, who for as long as she could remember had been witness to the morning departure of her siblings as they ventured off to a place called School. It was her turn now, she was five years old and ready for kindergarten. She stood eager, enthused and ready to enter this new world of school!

A mere three years later and the story had changed dramatically for this little girl. She didn't like nor want to attend school anymore. It both saddened and angered me, sending me into a tumultuous quandary, because of course this was my little girl and I couldn't bear to see what had happened to her in such a short span of time.

What *had* happened? For roughly six hours, five days a week she was forced to be in a place she did not want to be. The wonder, curiosity, enthusiasm and joy that had once freely tumbled out of this child had been dampened by a heavy layer of authority, boredom, and tedious tasks that blanketed her school day.

Volunteering in the school my children attended was something I always found time for, despite struggling as a divorced mother consumed with making ends meet financially, taking classes at a nearby university, and just generally trying to keep my head above water. I had observed, experienced, let go of *and* tackled dismaying situations in the classrooms of my other children, but somehow this was IT for me. Maybe it

brought me to the breaking point, perhaps it put me over the edge, but what I know for sure is that in the midst of my youngest child's third grade year I stood at a turning point, the result of a transformative series of events culminating with the witnessing of a spirit diminished in a child I so loved.

Restless, tossing and turning beneath the covers in the middle of a cold January night, I broke into a sweat of distress. I could not sleep. What was I to do? Request yet another meeting with the principal? Ask that my daughter be transferred to a different classroom mid year? Pull her out of the public system altogether and home school? Among the options there appeared one deeply authentic, satisfying action, one all-certain response: become a teacher myself and *be* the teacher I hoped all of my four children- Jacob, Matthew, Anna and Eva- would have each year of their schooling. I realized that what I wanted for my children and what I felt they deserved, *all* children deserved. Yes, I would change course, take classes to earn a teaching license and become a teacher. It was my path of reconciliation.

It wasn't an easy journey, but after eight years of studying part-time at a local university the teaching license was finally in my hands. I was hired in what I deemed to be a "progressive" district, one in which I had seen indications that there would be opportunities for me to be the kind of teacher I was committed to becoming. Hired for a position at a middle school, I was granted a transfer for the following year to a self-contained fifth grade classroom. During that second year a school administrator approached me regarding a new program the district hoped to incorporate, a Montessori program, and asked if I would be interested in taking the training and becoming the implementing teacher?

Montessori Method? I wasn't even sure what it was. Books about and by Maria Montessori became my evening reading. I was intrigued. Visits to Montessori schools were scheduled. A growing, hopeful anticipation mixed with awe and inspired curiosity set in. A summer spent in training (a daily round-trip drive of 4 hours) and I knew something very different was about to happen as we prepared to open the doors to our first Montessori classroom in that public school in southeast Wisconsin. But I had no idea, none at all, as to how deeply amazed, how passionately inspired I would be over the course of the next decade during which I taught first, second and third grade using the Montessori Method to educate young children.

There is so much to say about the Montessori Method, but for purposes of this article let us for the moment move back in time to the late 1800's, to the city of Rome, Italy, where a period of economic decline and social unrest, a time of upheaval, political turmoil, and instability prevailed. A preceding housing boom suffered a catastrophic crash, credit tightened, and building projects collapsed and fell into the hands of the banks and loan companies which financed them. One such project, a risky endeavor during the best of times and undertaken during the boom period in a less than desirable location of the San Lorenzo district, was brought to an abrupt halt. Several apartment buildings, five stories tall, were left in a skeletal condition. There was no plumbing, heat, or lighting, and there were holes in the walls where windows and doors were to have gone. Despite its dismal state, the buildings were not vacant for long as beggars, criminals, and the homeless found shelter in the abandoned structures. It was an intimidating neighborhood, avoided by local citizens and police alike.

Eventually a wealthy group of bankers decided to pool their resources and tackle

the buildings, seeing for themselves both a business and a community service opportunity. These gentlemen understood that their future occupants could only be those with little money who were unable to afford a higher quality of living, thus they kept their efforts focused on the only rudimentary renovations. Doors and windows were hung, repairs made, walls painted, and running water installed. The courtyard was cleaned up, and modest landscaping was provided. The new tenants, poor working couples trying to make ends meet, left their preschool-aged children unattended during the day while they worked. Lacking adult supervision the children ran about in the building defacing the walls, dirtying the halls, and engaging in small acts of destruction requiring frequent maintenance and repair. In an effort to curtail the chaos the bankers decided to hire someone to set up a daycare for the unattended children, and in doing so sought out the assistance of an increasingly well-known young woman, Maria Montessori, who had only a few years prior established a name for herself by becoming the first female in Italy to earn her medical doctor degree.

Dr. Montessori must certainly have shocked her friends and colleagues when she relinquished her medical practice as well as her position as Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Rome, in exchange for running a daycare! But Montessori's interest in children's learning was piqued during her experiences working with and studying children housed in what were then known as Rome's "insane asylums." She had discovered and exposed the hidden capabilities within the very children deemed incapable of learning, and in the San Lorenzo daycare project she saw a working laboratory and an opportunity to take what she had learned and apply it to "normal" children.

Thus, in 1907 the first Montessori Children's House (preschool) opened its doors to nearly sixty impoverished children of the San Lorenzo housing project, laying the groundwork for one of the most holistic, respectful, and hopeful forms of education ever established. Today it is estimated that there are 4000 Montessori schools in the United States and 7000 worldwide.

It is important to understand that Dr. Montessori's method of education for children was more than a curriculum framework with lessons to be implemented by classroom teachers. Montessori was a philosopher, an anthropologist, and psychologist and was convinced that the only path for humanity to evolve to a higher level, the only way to create a more just and peaceful world was by changing how we understand and educate children. Thus Montessori education, at its heart, embodies the belief that we can create a more peaceful world when we change how we educate children. The Montessori Method is based upon the premise that human potential, what each individual is capable of being and doing in their life, lies hidden within the child, and it is the role of education to nurture and support the unfolding of that potential. It doesn't begin during adolescence or in the high school years, but at birth, and she described the newborn child as a spiritual embryo. She insisted that it was the fundamental role of adults-parents, teachers, and relatives to nourish and protect this spiritual embryo in order that the child's whole being be nurtured, not just the intellect.

Later, during the 1930's against the backdrop of a looming world war Maria Montessori delivered numerous lectures to government officials, dignitaries, and world leaders in Europe that chronicled her growing understanding and beliefs about war, peace, and a new way of being in the world. Her call was deliberate, passionate, and

unapologetic and her vision prophetic- humankind must find a higher level of existence- one in which justice, peace, and love are the pillars of the individual and society. This transformation of the individual and society, she contended, has its origins in early childhood environments that foster spiritual growth.

The book, *Education and Peace (1972)*, is a collection of lectures from this time frame in which Montessori advocates for laying the foundations for peace through education, for recognizing “The real danger threatening humanity is the emptiness in men’s souls,” (p. 53), and for a “spiritual restructuring” which would heal the brokenness of an oppressed and unenlightened humanity. She understood this transformation to occur only when the child is raised and educated in freedom and liberty, bounded by self discipline and social responsibility. The role of the adult is not one of authority, but that of a guide, steeped in deep respect for the child and a heartfelt belief in each child’s potential. Thus the cognitive intellect is nurtured and the human spirit is cultivated using the Montessori Method.

The Montessori Method is founded upon the following underlying principals, which I shall describe with examples from my own classroom experiences.

- Auto-education
- Multiage classrooms
- Teacher as guide
- The prepared environment
- The child’s love of work

### **Auto Education**

Children teach themselves. Born with an inherent sense of curiosity and wonder human beings learn and grow as they interact with their environment. Expressing a desire to explore their surroundings and learn new things, children have an almost effortless ability to absorb information and concepts they glean from acting upon their environment. Montessori Children's House (ages 3-6) and elementary (ages 6-9 and 9-12) curricular materials are designed to be self-correcting in order that children are able to work as independently as possible. Dr. Montessori also understood that the classroom materials should be beautiful in order that the children are attracted to and enjoy using them.

In many elementary classrooms the students work from a workplan in which the teacher, or in the very best scenario, the teacher in conjunction with the student, writes the workplan which may take several weeks for the student to complete. When the students begin their work each morning, the workplan serves as a guide as they learn to make good, balanced work choices. In an elementary classroom for example, this means the child learns to complete projects from the day before as a first choice, balance math work with botany study, plan a project that integrates both text and graphics, or to know which works are best suited to doing with a partner and which are best undertaken as an individual work.

In my own classrooms I observed that when young children exercise their option to choose meaningful activities and to make decisions about how they will demonstrate what they have learned the need for rewards and punishments disappear and intrinsic motivation is stimulated. As children reach middle or high school there is a lot of noise about why so many of them do not take responsibility for their learning, but somehow we



fail to see that it is our very educational system that denies them the opportunities to do just that. We are called then, not to do for the child what they can do for themselves, thereby encouraging self reliance, self-confidence, and self respect.

I recall a visit to an elementary Montessori classroom back when I was first gathering information about Montessori education. The children were engaged in a variety of subjects and projects, there was a quiet hum of activity in the air, and of the two adults (teacher and assistant) in the room, one was engaged quietly with one or two students at a time and the other sat on a small chair, looking about the room. I was confused about her inaction, and judged her to be a bit lazy, perhaps. But what that teacher was doing was incredibly important - she was observing her students as they worked. The value of observation as a form of understanding students and being aware of their progress cannot be understated and is a fundamental tool for gathering student data and documenting progress. The idea of auto-education which Montessori promoted in her writings, lectures, and training centers forms the origins of self-responsibility and nurtures self-confidence, problem-solving, and the ability to self-direct learning.

### **Teacher as Guide**

Before Montessori, when I was fifth grade teacher, I spent a good deal of the school day as most teachers do, in front of the class presenting information, leading discussions, and looking quite like a teacher in control of her students. When the students were engaged in group work or individual assignments at their desks, I moved among them, up and down rows or amid clusters of desks, asking questions and checking their work. Later, as a Montessori teacher, I understood my role in a much different light. As a Montessori teacher, I rarely taught to the whole group. Except for a brief morning

lesson (5-15 minutes) at the start of the school day, I gave lessons to individuals or small groups as needed, and then stepped back out of the children's way. I observed constantly from the periphery of the room or from an inconspicuous place if possible, trying not to interject unnecessarily. The Montessori teacher is always assessing whether or not his/her intervention is needed. More often than not, it isn't. This sends the essential message to children that adults believe in their capabilities and want to help them grow in self-reliance.

The teacher's main role is in preparing the classroom environment so that all children have the materials and the ambience they need for learning and growth to take place. Practically speaking, this is a monumental task. It requires gathering, preparing, maintaining, and organizing materials and learning activities for children of a three year age span. (Consider the range of abilities in a traditional one-grade classroom, at any level. Montessorians work with a range three times that.) It also demands a detailed record-keeping system, if each child is truly to work at their own pace. This is not only for teacher accountability measures, but also assures the child's learning is not hampered by ill-kept records. Readyng the Montessori classroom is an all encompassing task, and one may wonder or speculate on how much easier traditional teaching might be with its teacher's guides and set curriculum, worksheets and answer books, and children mostly of the same age. In fact, I had many people ask me that very question and other teachers did not hesitate to express their definite disinterest in becoming a Montessori teacher. I distinctly remember a fifth grade teaching colleague who having heard that I had accepted the new Montessori position told me, "I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole." She later became a principal for the district. But the explanation for the appeal of

being a Montessori teacher is simple, really. And that is the unequalled experience of awe and wonderment when one witnesses the actualization of a child's potential. For the most authentic teachers this becomes an act of great love and passion.

### **The Prepared Environment**

The child is able to work independent of an adult and the teacher is able to act as observer and guide only when the classroom environment has been carefully prepared and maintained. Visitors to Montessori classrooms are amazed at the high level of independence exhibited by the young students. This is due in large part to the design and setup in the classroom. Montessori teachers strive to maintain a prepared environment that contains materials for the child's academic success while at the same time nurtures their spirit with warmth, love, beauty and joy. Activities (there are no textbooks), books, and hands-on curricular materials are arranged on shelves in an orderly fashion and are beautiful and well maintained in appearance so that they may *call to the child*. An organized and ordered environment allows even very young children to develop a sense of confidence and ease in his surroundings, knowing always where to find what he needs and where to return materials when he is finished with them. Maria Montessori understood that children desire and prefer an orderly environment, and you will find even the youngest children in Montessori schools cheerfully taking responsibility for keeping materials and furniture clean and organized. *Cheerfully*, the reader might ask? The very child who at home declines cleaning her room or doing evening chores? This phenomenon is best understood by an examination of how many adults view work. That is, as drudgery, something to be done in order to get to the better things in life, or chores those children must be bribed with rewards to participate in. But this is the fault of the

adult who presses her own misunderstood views upon the child. When children are presented with a vision of work that is uplifted and respected, when they understand work as an expression of their creativity or a path to cognitive and spiritual growth, their own attitudes change. It is this very ordered and organized setting in which work is extolled that allows the child to function free of adult control and take charge of her own learning.

The ideal prepared environment is also beautiful, free of cartoon-like and animated posters, uncluttered, and clean. One is apt to find art on the walls, plants, fresh flower arrangements, and materials organized in baskets or attractive trays. Beauty is fundamental to the Montessori environment because for children, just as for adults, beauty soothes the soul. Montessorians strive to create spaces that nurture not just the intellect, but the spirit of the child, as well. The prepared environment allows children to feel joy and gratitude in their surroundings, to develop habits of order and organization, and to take responsibility for the maintenance and care of their personal and communal belongings.

### **Multiage Classrooms**

In a typical Montessori setting the children remain in the same room with the same teacher for three years. As a lower elementary teacher, my students stayed with me through first, second, and third grade. I came to know each one on an extraordinarily profound level, which enabled me to support them more fully in their own growth and learning.

As in other Montessori classrooms, my students became exceptionally comfortable in their learning environment; the classroom became their own, and they took great satisfaction in caring for the place in which they spent the better part of three

years. The younger children learned from the older classmates, and the older children had opportunities to be leaders and role models. They became skilled at nourishing relationships and we were able to build a strong sense of community with annual celebrations and shared experiences over three years. I will always remember how the children learned to watch out for one another on the playground, and to try to resolve conflicts peacefully. It was inspiring to hear them as they learned to ask important questions such, *How can I help? Do you need a friend? You look lonely, would you like to join us?* They worked at taking care of each other with love and tenderness. One such memory I have is of seven year old Nicholas, who at the end of a school day, as the children and I bustled about gathering belongings and ready themselves for departure, noticed a classmate weeping quietly in the corner of the room. Nicholas came to me and in a whispered voice asked if he could get the massage roller that was kept on the peace shelf. Of course, I responded, but why? “Maria is sad”, he said pointing to the child. Then, he went to her and without saying more than a few gentle words, began massaging the sad child’s back.

Given opportunities to explore deep philosophical issues about what it means to be in community with others, these young children of six, seven, and eight years, were able to articulate the interconnectedness amongst themselves as they became aware of the universality of human needs. They understood how to affirm and listen to each other and could do so beautifully, acknowledging the precious gifts of friendship, forgiveness, inclusion, and love. These are the very life skills needed throughout our lives and they are transferred in adulthood to how we function in families, neighborhoods, religious, and community organizations.

## **Love of Work**

Throughout the last several decades there has been an extraordinary emphasis on the role of play in early childhood education and the promotion of the idea that learning must be “fun” if the child’s interest is to be captured. Certainly there can be no dispute over the value play has in childhood, but perhaps instead of insisting that all good learning must be fun we can aim to provide experiences that are compelling, satisfying and intrinsically rewarding. Yes, even for our youngest students. Maria Montessori respected the child’s desire to work, and observed that the children repeatedly choose work materials over toys available in the classroom.

“The child has proved to have instincts whose existence we did not even suspect. He has proved to possess a striking fundamental instinct- he wants to *work*.” (p.104, 1972)

Furthermore, in *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori noted that children do not tire from work, but in fact are energized from being deeply engaged in work activities. “As far as the child’s personal reactions are concerned, his cessation from work is not connected with weariness since it is characteristic of a child to leave his work completely refreshed and full of energy.” (p. 196, 1972)

Dr. Montessori viewed work as the tool through which children create themselves. In a Montessori classroom, work is defined as a meaningful activity freely chosen in which effort must be made and learning new things takes place, but is not so difficult to frustrate the child or leave him discouraged. It is not unusual for the child engaged in her work in a Montessori classroom to fall into deep levels of concentration, appearing exceptionally contented, oblivious to what is going on elsewhere in the

classroom. Therefore, the uninterrupted work cycle of 2.5-3 hours is essential to the Montessori classroom. This provides children the time they need to initiate and prepare work projects, and then to cycle through layers of concentration during which deep learning occurs. While we may recognize these as characteristics of successful secondary or adult educational experiences, rarely do we attribute them to the learning environment of young children. In fact, the work experience Montessorians see in their students correlates to the research on *flow*, or what psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as “optimal experience”, those states in which we feel deep enjoyment, concentration, and a lack of self-consciousness. Absorbed in such activity, we feel at the height of our abilities. It appears that children can have these same experiences.

In her book, *Montessori, The Science Behind the Genius (2005)*, Angeline Stoll Lillard explores the concept of play and work, suggesting that “work” as understood in Montessori classrooms and play activities in traditional preschools and kindergartens, have several shared characteristics and it is these very characteristics that make work appealing in Montessori learning environments. They are:

- Play is almost always child-directed, as are work choices in the Montessori environment.
- Both offer opportunities to engage in activities of interest.
- Play is intrinsically rewarding (no need for rewards such as stickers, free time, etc).

So too, Montessori education steers clear of rewards and punishments.

- There is a social element to play, in which children interact with their peers. In Montessori classrooms children are free to choose to work independently, with a

partner or in small group.

- Both play and the Montessori concept of work are based in freedom and perceived choice.

Clearly, Dr. Montessori was not opposed to play, nor did she believe it did not have a role in early childhood, just as leisure has a role in adult life. It was, however, her repeated *observations of children* in which she discovered that when given an option (classroom materials or toys) they preferred the classroom materials. (Standing, 1984)

The Montessori concept of work is one in which the child engages in rich, meaningful learning experiences, grows skilled in making thoughtful and reflective choices, and aims consciously to develop focus and concentration through the work day. More importantly, the Montessori school environment cultivates a deep respect for the student's learning activities, both in the learner and the teacher. The idea that the child is doing valuable work fosters within the child the knowledge that they are capable of doing great work, teaches them to seek purpose and meaning in their life, and encourages them to contemplate how they can contribute to society.

Maria Montessori understood two things very clearly: One, that we can build a better world, a more just and peaceful place, when we educate for the realization of the individual and collective human potential; and two, that the only way to create an educational system that will that will serve this end is to scrap the current system entirely and replace it with a completely new system. The Montessori Method was developed to create this new world based on a system of education that cultivates the spirit of the child as well as the intellect. When the spirit is free, the child is able to realize her true potential and thereby find happiness and satisfaction in a self-actualized life. When



individuals live a self-actualized life they are then able to give fully to the universe, living the answer to life's most profound questions-why am I here and what is the meaning of life.

There is no remedy to the current system of early childhood and elementary education that is large enough to fix the problem that we face. A new math program, more testing, less recess, or programs such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* cannot bring about that change that is needed. Only a completely different, holistic approach to educating children will transform the individual and society and move us all along the path of humankind's evolution. It's a daunting task, certainly, but not impossible, as we have had before us for 100 years a model that is capable of doing exactly that. The Montessori Method of education nourishes a sense of wonder, curiosity and love of learning. It is truly a child centered model, enabling autonomy and independence. But most importantly, at its essence, this approach nurtures the spirit of the child, cultivating respect, compassion, kindness, service, peace and love and serves as a tool for exploring those eternal truths we seek individually and as a collective humanity.

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