

Rationalizing Maria Montessori's Teaching Methods in Global Contexts: *'When Education met a femme reformatice'*

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Abstract

The world has metamorphosed itself and modified itself into a digital one. It is pacing up instantaneously with technological impetus, eventuating ceaselessly at an accelerated pace, with the advent of computer, the globe today is shriveling swiftly and concluding itself to be well-connected. Same is the story with the world of education which has witnessed its own evolution. The technological onslaught of modern society has endorsed less harmony between the society and the individual. In this milieu, it is indispensable to look back at a pioneer educationist and explorer of innovative educational ideas- Maria Montessori. She was noted spokespersons for compassionate humanism and education in India and the world. Looking at the challenging scrim of modern times, this study seeks to look into the educational legacies of Montessori, explore the spreading of her methods and relevance in today's modern world. This paper is an attempt to know the views and methods shared by the pioneer, which are still implemented worldwide.

Keywords: Maria Montessori, Casa dei Bambini, Montessori Education

Introduction:

"Scientific observation then has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment."

—Maria Montessori, *Education for A New World*. p.14

Maria Montessori was an eminent educationalist and avant-garde of early childhood education. Her alms are momentous and provide consequential aid to today’s apperception and consciousness of the principles of early years of pedagogy. Montessori’s aspiration was to unravel the predilection of each and every individual child. Her approaches recognised that young children are active learners, who need independence and choice, whilst being steered by a responsive teacher who expedites their learning by bracing an environment, which in turn becomes agreeable to their improvement. The children, who perk from these experiences, cultivate into confident adults, enthusiastic to endure learning and inquisitive about life, whilst being considerate and respectful. In Montessori’s view, they are the heralds of social change.

Education with a New Vision:

Montessori postulated that children evolve in unparalleled stages and these are mirrored in the organisation of the Montessori provision for children. The accentuating principles, based on Montessori’s early innovations, to sustenance the child’s individual capability, upholding independence and contributing freedom within its possible confinement, in order to champion, responsibility should be applied to all Montessori settings, irrespective of the facts, whether they cater to toddlers, preschoolers, babies, primary or secondary school-age children. However, how these principles are elucidated banks upon the children’s formative needs and levels of maturity. The culture and regulatory essentials scheduled by the country in which the Montessori nurseries and schools operate also determine their organisational structure. The majority of the 22,000 Montessori schools (approx.) around the world provide education for children between 2-6 years of age. (Understanding The Montessori Approach, Early Years Education In Practice, p.14) These organizations are among charitable trusts or private businesses, which are initiated to back up the desire of relinquishing Montessori education:

“If education is to be reformed, it must be based upon the children.”
Maria Montessori, *Education for A New World*. Ch 2, p.16

Maria Montessori did not feel necessary to protect or patent the name which would serve as a trademark and thus the movement remains unregulated. As a consequence, a wide range of Montessori practice can

be recognised around the globe. However, there are certain customary components which should be retained in the majority of the Montessori schools, which include the usage of Montessori learning materials and the organisation of the learning ambiance. Unfortunately, there are also settings which still adopt the Montessori name to attract parents and use it as a marketing tool without actually employing any using Montessori equipment or trained teachers. (Understanding The Montessori Approach, Early Years Education In Practice, p.32)

Realization of the Vision - Casa dei Bambini:

“Education has determined an environment for the children. Individual differences to be found in them can, therefore, be put down almost exclusively to each one’s individual ‘nature.’ Owing to their environment which offers means adapted and measured to meet the needs of their psychical development, our children have acquired a fundamental type which is common to all.” Dr. Montessori’s Own Handbook, p.81

Maria Montessori, in 1906 was proposed to administer the education of a class of children who belonged to working parents in an unfamiliar residence for families with depressed income, in the San Lorenzo district in Rome, Italy. The first Casa dei Bambini or the Children’s House was established in 1906 under Montessori’s supervision, while being able to affix her practice to around 50 normal children aged between 2 to 7 years. Montessori combined the liberal ideas of Pestalozzi, Rousseau and Froebel’s child doctrine with some practical and realistic activities and enterprises to train the senses. Montessori got the first favourable chances to administer her mechanism on normal children in 1906. Maria Montessori’s Casa dei Bambini became distinguished in the plenary world within a very abbreviated span of time. Visitors numbering in thousands went away enthused and bewildered after the accomplishment of her first school she had entrenched. This engaging frame of reference processed in so many diverse ambiances.

Montessori became the engrossment of scientists and leaders all over the globe. Plentiful articles and publications were penned by her and about her. This fashioned Maria Montessori an acclaimed identity to both teachers and parents alike. From the commencement of the first Casa dei Bambini in 1907 till the flaring up of the First

World War, Maria Montessori became globally acclaimed to a calibre which was incredible for her time. The Casa dei Bambini during this time progressed to become an ideal ‘*model school*’, which was visited, appreciated and dwelled by researchers and educators from all around the world. International recognition and renown was supervened like a shot. The accomplishment of pedagogical switch owe a lot to the Montessori Method. The techniques were universalized by the enthusiastic followers, as well as the press. Montessori movement now commenced permeating globally. Societies, schools and associations were introduced in divergent edges globally including America, Japan, Russia and India.

“In the Casa dei Bambini, ‘Children’s House’, a large room set aside in one of the tenements, Maria developed a radically new kind of infant school. She discarded the prescribed group lessons, and the gifts and occupations of Froebel. She substituted training of the senses, exercises of practical life, motor or muscular education and, her most radical departure from kindergarten practice, training in the three R’s. The method depended heavily on the ‘didactic apparatus’, colourful, varied, and graded educational toys and games designed by Montessori herself after models first created by Itard and Seguin. Montessori’s stated goal was to ‘aid the spontaneous development of the mental, moral, and physical personality of the child.’” The Montessori Movement in England, 1911-1952, p.53

Radiating Education: Embracing Montessorian Method in Europe and USA:

Teacher training programmes for Montessori schools were initiated and Montessori schools seemed ingrained all through the world. During 1914-1915, Montessori achieved the summit of her recognition in the United Kingdom. Thereafter, Montessori toured to the United States of America where she published articles, gave public lectures, made open demonstrative classes and ran training courses. Eminent people like President Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and Hellen Keller, supported and encouraged her cause. During the initial three decades of the 20th Century, the Montessori Method implied to adduce acceptable notions for each individual. The conservative and traditional school of thought opined for the responsible and quiet behaviour and etiquettes of the budding children, which would also value their dedication for work. Montessori was praised by people with deep liberal approach, for her spontaneity and freedom of approach.

Educationalists and political leaders viewed it as a vehicle to reform the traditional, old fashioned, conservative schooling patterns of Asia, Europe and North America. There was an underlying hope, that such a pattern would ensure a harder working, disciplined and peace loving population. Scientist belonging from all disciplines appreciated Montessori’s experimental foundation and objectivity of the Montessori Method. There was a soaring rise in the number of Montessori schools to 1000 by 1925 and by many tens of thousands all around the world. But conditions took a breathtaking turn by the closure of 1930s. However, Montessori schools, rapidly abated in the United States of America. Maria Montessori denied acknowledging children in her schools to be a chunk of the youth fascist movement. (*The Montessori Method; The Origins Of An Educational Innovation: Including an Abridged and Annotated Edition of Maria Montessori’s The Montessori Method*, p.36-39) Fascism expanded in Europe, which concluded in the burning of her books from Netherlands to Berlin, where Montessori’s Method gained a mainstream support. In spite of numerous switch of fate, Montessori schools continued and experienced to be favoured in the United Kingdom and Europe.

“The Montessori Method seemed perfect for England, then. Devised especially for infants, it promised individualised instruction, self-development, and more. It promised the most satisfactory classroom solution available to the problem of the reconciliation of the demands of authority and freedom.” - The Montessori Movement In England, 1911-1952, p.55

Rationalizing Montessori Education in India:

The President of Theosophical Society, George Sydney Arundale, invited Maria Montessori in 1939, to administer a Montessori Training course at Adyar. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore felt that this new innovative Montessori Method was appropriate and could satisfy the growing need of the huge illiterate masses of India. Tagore also accepted and endorsed to be a benefactor of the first Indian Training Course in Education, which was to be conducted by Montessori, taking place in Adyar from November 1939 to February 1940. Montessori and her son, Mario was residing in India during the commencement of the Second World War. Being Italians they were incarcerated by the British colonial government in India, fixating them as an alien and enemy. Mario was incarcerated in a camp for civilians

in Ahmednagar, while Maria was confined to the walls of the Theosophical Society compound at Adyar. Maria was acquiesce to put in the hot summer months at the hill stations of Kodaikanal and Ooty. Being treated as prisoners, Maria and her son, Mario was very unhappy and felt low. Finally, on 31 August 1940 the British released her son, Mario. The mother and son duo spent the vestigial war years in India. Maria Montessori administered 16 Indian Montessori Training Courses between 1939 and 1949, with the assistance of Mario. This led to a very dependable establishment of the Montessori Movement in India. While in India, Maria and Mario, developed a curriculum for children aged from 6 to 12 years. Dr. Montessori named this curriculum as the Cosmic Education, since it was devised to cultivate the bottomless inquisitiveness of older children. An adequate part of the curriculum is lined up with the concern of the children in the Indian schools, as advertised for the plants and animals of the natural world as well as for the earth as a whole and its place in the universe. Montessori next, held training courses in Karachi, Madras, Kodaikanal and Ahmedabad. After the culmination of the war she recommenced her travels around the world and was honoured with many academic and public awards.

Dissemination of Montessori Education Internationally:

The acumen for private takeover of many Montessori schools and nurseries is coupled with the fact that they offer provisions for children of a pre-school age, preceding the compulsory education financed by many countries. The Netherlands funds Montessori primary education and there are Montessori public schools in the United States of America which are funded by the individual states. European countries such as Austria, Germany and Sweden also part finance schools who wish to supervene the Montessori curriculum. In the recent years, assorted countries have placed chances for Montessori education to be acquainted. For instance, the Czech government has financed numerous nurseries and primary schools, at the same time, the Bulgarian government catered for the influx of the Montessori approach in some of its primary schools and the Saudi government has piloted and financed a massive number of Montessori nurseries in Jeddah. The Tibetan government’s schools which operate in North India prefer adopting Montessori materials, specifically, the numeracy

and literacy materials, which support young children’s learning in these areas.

Hence, quite evident, in all of these countries the Montessori schools must particularly satisfy the requirements and objectives of local education boards. Thus the schools must ensure that their curricula of Montessori Method meet the local educational and regulatory requirements, particularly at the primary and secondary levels of education. This must also guide the children from Montessori settings to be agreeably groomed for national examinations and tests. Customary, children attending Montessori schools fare well in these tests and demonstrate that, apart from being academically capable, they also unveil positive attitudes to learning and respect for themselves, others and the environment around them. There are many Montessori school owners and teachers who feel the less structured and more open approach to learning, not dominated by preparations for examinations, is of benefit to children and their attitude to learning.

The Twilight Years of Montessori:

Montessori schools commenced to reinstate across Europe with Dr. Montessori continuing her work, touring Montessori schools, expanding her pedagogy, lecturing and acting as an advocate for children throughout the world. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was established in 1945, to rebuild and reshape the culture of peace throughout the world via education. Montessori was straightforwardly embroiled with it. She addressed the UNESCO General Conference of 1949, held in Paris. Montessori went to become a member of the Italian delegation in 1950 to the Conference held in Florence. Further in 1951, Montessori participated in the first ever meeting of the UNESCO Governing body held in Wiesbaden Germany.

Contemporary Scenario: Montessori Today:

Montessori’s approach has been acknowledged scientific because she used her medical, anthropological and pedagogical knowledge to assess children’s development, improvement and learning. For her primary research technique she domesticated the power of observation. While her methods and research may not have been as intemperate as those of today, we need to be obliged to acknowledge Montessori’s path breaking study of children at the beginning of the 20th century. This

was much before the coming of Freud’s work and thereafter, certainly before Piaget (1963) or Vygotsky (1978). Some of her statements relating to the nature of children were intuitive; however, their validity has been confirmed subsequently. In Bruner’s introduction to Lillard’s (1980) *Montessori in the Classroom*, he refers to her as both a mystic and a pragmatist. Montessori’s commitment to using observation as the key tool for getting to know children cannot be disputed. However, the information she offers about how to document these observations is scant. Equally, she says little about the tools to be used for their analysis.

Nonetheless, contemporary observations of children provide us with evidence for the validity and relevance of her approach, specifically if analysed not only in the context and lessons of Montessori’s own writing, but also with sharp reference to theories of developmental psychologists such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Erikson and Bowlby. The continued relevance of Montessori’s original and unconventional findings about children is mind-boggling even though some of her ideas are expressed in rather inaccessible language for today’s reader. Reflection and perseverance on her writing, aided with observation and knowledge of children, will lead the reader to a verification of many of the principles underlying Montessori’s approach. In the 1970s Covington Packard explained Montessori’s emphasis on learning through practical activities as follows:

“A child gains self-confidence as he feels able to participate usefully in the society around him ... In practical work self-discipline and competence are gradually developed. They come as the child and adult live in mutual respect ... The efforts to attain and successfully accomplish increasingly difficult tasks bring the self-discipline known as self-control. The efforts to respond to one’s own needs, to the environmental needs, and to the needs of others, as much as competence allows, bring the kind of self-discipline that is known as responsibility. From this kind of discipline comes a sense of true liberty.” (Covington Packard 1972: 60–61)

Conclusion:

Montessori communicated bounteously in her ensuing years about her educational methods, which was associated to the world peace. Montessori was nominated for the Noble Peace Prize for three consecutive years- 1949, 1950, and 1951. Her work continued until her

death at the age of 81 in Holland 1952. After her death Dr. Montessori’s son, supporters and colleagues continued her work on education. Maria Montessori reached adulthood in a country which was considered to be the most conservative in its attitude towards women. But this did not lead Montessori to let her down even against the considerable opposition. She pursued scientific education and became the first woman to become a physician in Italy. She initiated the Montessori Method of education buttressed by numerous experiments. Her methods advanced and achieved popularity throughout the world. Montessori was not only an avant-garde but also went on to become one of the pre-eminent educators of the world.

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