

Following the child – The Montessori Way

Reflecting on 100 years of Montessori education.

The Centenary of Montessori education (1907-2007) gives us an opportunity to reflect on the contribution made by the Montessori approach to early childhood education as we know it today. Montessori herself was aware of and influenced by the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel. She was particularly inspired by two Frenchmen Itard and Seguin, who studied children with special needs and focused their research on sensory learning. Her initial study of children with special needs stimulated thoughts and considerations for children's learning. Montessori pursued this interest further when she was invited to set up the first Casa dei Bambini in the San Lorenzo district of Rome. The name of the first nursery is significant, as it echoes Froebel's Kindergarten, and also highlights Montessori's interest in wanting the nursery to be a safe place for children, belonging to them, hence, House of Children or Children's House, the most frequently used name for many Montessori nurseries around the world.

Kramer (1976) in her biography of Montessori documents her deep commitment to feminist issues, the rights of women and concerns of mothers, as reflected in her speech made at the opening of the first nursery, which catered solely for children of migrant and impoverished workers. Initially, she wanted to create a place for the children so that their mothers did not have to worry about their safety whilst working. A place where the children have an opportunity to develop practical skills, to grow in independence.

Learning by exploration of the environment using their sense lays the foundation for later nurture of social skills and growing awareness of community. It was the mothers who

asked Montessori to teach their children how to read and write and count, and so give them access to education. It could be said that parental concerns as well as Montessori research into education and anthropology inspired what we know today as the Montessori approach.

Whilst the social, political and economic conditions of early 20th Century Italy were very different, the two key motivators were the support for the workforce and education of the very young. It is ironic that hundred years on, the same motivators drive the early years agenda of many Governments around the world, despite all the research and knowledge we have gained about children over the years. Currently the political agenda for education is overtaking the needs of children.

Montessori education has its roots in humanitarian European tradition focused on growth of the potential of individuals. Evolutionary perspective, pragmatic approach to liberty and nurture of the individual support the early years curriculum and are the key values underpinning the Montessori approach today. Montessori was a contemporary of Freud, Piaget and Vygotsky. She was aware of their writing but she honed in on teaching, this is where her contribution lies - in the pedagogy focused on the pre-school child. During the 20 century Montessori's approach gained global recognition and provided framework for education of hundreds of thousands of children. Montessori led both active and productive life, she lived to be eighty, and in the last year of her life was still planning a lecture tour of West Africa, according to BBC interview given by her son Mario after her death. She acknowledged the need to expand her pedagogy from the preschool focus to primary and secondary education and look at

the learning of infant and toddlers. Yet, it is the education of the pre-school child which has left a lasting legacy because it recognises that learning in the early years is closely linked with development and that small children learn by manipulation and exploration of their environment. She also acknowledged the pivotal role of a sensitive, well educated and reflective adult as the guide to the child's self-construction.

“Following the child” is the key to Montessori education. This means that adults are expected to support the child as an active learner, to respect the child's inner life and to trust in children's inner motivation. If the child is given freedom within limits self-discipline grows spontaneously. But what do we understand by these terms today? We have all seen the evidence of **children as active learners** – the curiosity of the young child drives them to explore – this means touch, smell, taste and examine. We need to give young children opportunities for this exploration – in the home and outside. In the early years learning takes place all the time - by touching a furry ball, feeling sand under ones feet, by seeing a beautiful flower or a smile of ones mother. Helping in the kitchen, making sure that ones books are back in the bookshelf, helping oneself to a drink are all part of the learning – children learn by imitation of the adults and peers – so our role is to be positive role models and encourage exploration.

This need to be an active learners reflects **children's inner life**. If given the freedom to engage with the environment children will manifest their own rhythms – their need to spent time repeating activities, watching friends as well as the rays of the sun reflecting in a puddle of water or on the surface of a swimming pool or a lake. Children need time to reveal their inner lives. And parents, carers and practitioners can see glimpses of this inner life in children's enjoyment of the environment such as when they

find a worm, or a beautiful shell on the beach.

Montessori believed that children need to be part of everyday life, hear conversations in the market, be part of games initiated by older or younger children, experience nature freely. To be part of daily life nurtures the children's **self motivation** and gives the children opportunities to reveal their inner self, these are also the beginnings of autonomy, initiative.

This freedom is not freedom to do what you wish, it is **freedom within limits**, where few but clearly defined ground rules are always observed. These ground rules focus on the collective interest and an environment free from aggression and meanness to one another. It is the role of the teacher to model and promote such an environment and to help and guide the children whose experiences of life may be different.

All the above qualities contribute to the child's growing and gradual emergence of **inner discipline**. In time, the children will grow into self disciplined individuals able to contribute to the communities in which they live as they are able to transcend the ego and see the needs of society.

To be able to create such learning environments we need pedagogy which celebrates the child as '*the father of human kin*', which celebrates the spirit unique to all human beings human creativity and imagination. - and for this we need a **pedagogy – the legacy of Dr.Montessori**.

In Montessori classrooms the above fundamental principles are facilitated by **empathetic adults** who must ensure: **mixed age classrooms** where three as well as six year old learn together and create a community of learners. The **three hour “work**

cycle” which allows children to manage their learning according to their individual rhythms, temperaments and learning dispositions. During these three hours children will paint, read books, make a collage, build towers, have a snack and sit and learn with the teacher as well as chat with friends and dig in the garden. And this learning may take place inside or outside, with friends, adults or alone. The key is that the child is given the opportunity to manage the time within these three hours of learning with as little interference as possible.

The mixed age groups and three hour work cycles work well when the environment is well prepared and organised. In practical terms it means that:

- ❖ the classroom has to offer rich and differentiated resources, ensuring that they provide wide a range of learning opportunities for the all the children, from the youngest at three to the oldest at six year of age and reflect the children’s interest. We have inherited big range of Montessori didactic materials, but they are only the starting point of the child’s learning and today’s classrooms will include other learning materials – some of which may be teacher made, whilst others might be commercially produced.

- ❖ the practitioners understand the children’s development as well as the benefits of the activities available to them in the nursery environment, so that they can use observation to plan and assess the individual child’s learning appropriately.

- ❖ the children need to be given time to explore the materials on offer within the prepared environment. Montessori recognised that young children learn best if they are given the opportunity to follow their own rhythm. Being able to select an activity of their own choice encourages concentration and develops autonomy, it also nurtures initiative and supports ability to take on new challenges. This is why the sessions are

organised in a relaxed fluid manner, facilitating individual learning as well as small group activities as children engage with a wide range of learning materials available during the three hour working period.

❖ observation is key to teachers assessment and planning of children's progress.

As children are encouraged to progress at their own pace, individual learning plans focus on children's needs and interests. These interests give the teacher the opportunity to modify the learning environment and to develop learning materials.

The challenges of today are universal – not to forsake the spirit of childhood for the political agenda and global preoccupation with academic achievement. Generally, young children are robust and resilient. They will survive many initiatives and aspirations of educationalists to measure their achievements, but should they be subjected to these experiences at such a young age? Especially since we know so much more about the physical and psychological development of children at the beginning of the 21st Century. Whilst there are specific challenges for the Montessori movement such as consistency of training and provision, regulation of quality and meeting the needs of parents, the bigger challenges for Montessori teachers are shared with other early years practitioners.

Young children need, above all, inspiring challenging and appropriate activities, activities which reflect their maturation process. Children's learning at this age cannot be compartmentalised or organised into neat parcels. Interactions with their peers and sensitive, informed adults in a well organised sensorially rich environments will provide many opportunities to play and learn.

In England, over the past ten years reading and writing and introduction to mathematics became the key focus of nursery practice. But what about the emotional wellbeing of the child, social interactions and growing cultural awareness? Have we forgotten the main purpose of nursery education? Young children need the opportunity to be introduced to the community outside the home environment? As nursery education develops in the Gulf region I must urge practitioners **to follow the child.**

Despite the legacy of rich early years curriculum the Montessori community voice the same concerns as thousands of other Early Years practitioners around the world. We must not forget that the first six years of life are a unique stage in human development that needs to be valued and understood. If we want to help children grow into adults who are emotionally strong, physically resilient, who approach challenges with courage and learning with joy not trepidation, we need to let them be children and give them time to play and explore their environments in their richness, in company of friends, supported by well educated adults.

Further reading:

- Montessori, M., (1966) *The Secret of Childhood*
Balantine Books, New York
- Montessori, M., (1988/1949) *The Absorbent Mind*
ABC-Clio, Oxford
- Stoll-Lillard, A., (2006) *Montessori, the Science behind the Genius*
Oxford University Press, New York
- Wolf, A.D., (1996) *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-sectarian Classrooms*
Parent Child Press, Hollidayburg, PA, USA

MONTESSORI INFANT TODDLER PROGRAMMES

Whilst Montessori education is generally considered to be the domain of the nursery school and most of the Montessori schools operating around the world take in children between the ages of three and six years, Dr. Montessori herself advocated as early as 1920's the need to nurture babies and toddlers in a developmentally appropriate environment. For Montessori education is synonymous with development and her whole approach to learning is closely linked with children's physical and psychological growth. As a physician she was well aware of the importance of healthy development of the physical embryo and she also recognised that there will be psychological impact of the mother's emotional well being during pregnancy. Further research has confirmed that babies are able to absorb a range of sensorial impressions of the world whilst still in the womb – for example they are aware of sunlight from the 7th months of gestation, recognise the mother's voice from the 8th month. Some mothers believe that their babies, when born, are able to recognise pieces of music the mother's played during pregnancy. Considering all these factors it is not surprising that Montessori believed that education begun at birth. By education she certainly did not mean formal instruction, what she considered to be appropriate was more a rich experience of life within the immediate family and supported by the circle of the extended family and friends.

Like Piaget, Montessori (1988/1949) recognised that children develop in stages, each stage with its unique characteristics. She advocated that the first part of life is the most fundamental in the child's life., far more important than university education. This

she declared long before we had access to the Headstart research from the USA. She further considered that the young baby undergoes a series of significant changes, as significant as the original birth, each of these re-birth heralds a new embryonic stage.

The nine months gestation in the womb, during which the **physical embryo** develops, culminate in the birth. The next stage in which the baby comes to know his/her prime carer and the immediate family, Montessori entitled the **Spiritual Embryo**. She chose this term to highlight that newborns carry within them the spirit unique to all human beings – the **human tendencies** (Lillard,1995) by which the human species are identified – such as language, orientation, exactitude, gregariousness and sociability as well as creativity and imaginations. These tendencies become evident in the sensitive periods (19 secret) such as language, movement, order, attention to detail. According to Montessori during the **Spiritual Embryonic Stage** the child's personality is revealed through exploration of the environment which the child discovers through his/her senses - such as taste, touch, smell, hearing and vision. The third embryonic stage brings the child from the secure base of the home to the wider community and is appropriately entitled the **Social Embryonic Stage**. Sensitive period for language continues to have a significant effect on the development of the child at this stage, as does the opportunity to refine the sensorial experiences gathered in the early stage into a more coherent conceptual framework . Above all, at this stage, young children grow in their social awareness, both from the point of view of social conventions unique to their community, and as they decentre, and begin to consider the needs of others.

The human infant has the potential to learn from the moment of birth, but the role of the adult in this process cannot be under-estimated. At the moment of birth the human

infant is totally dependent on the mother, the bond which develops from this relationship is fundamental to how the child comes to view the world and will effect the potential of that individual. The child needs to be nurtured physically as well as emotionally.

The prime carer needs to create a **secure base** for the infant which will give him/her a sense of well being at a time of great vulnerability. During the first year of life the prime carer must be available to the child both physically and emotionally. The baby needs to know that the adult can be relied upon for consistency and predictability of care which form the foundation for later life as they underpin the developing trust the infant places in life and what it has to offer.

Part of this secure base will be creating opportunities to move freely in a safe environment. As the child develops his/her movement during the first year of life, restriction of movement will be detrimental to the child's development, not only in physical sense, but also cognitively and emotionally. For example if the child's persistent struggle to crawl is not supported by the prime carer, the restriction may result not only in poor co-ordination and delayed development of gross motor skills, it will also effect connections and synapses created in the brains and send messages to the child such as: crawling is not desirable, could be dangerous. It also heralds the first conflict between the child and the adult. We need to recognise that the child is driven from within, Montessori (1988/1949) calls this inner drive **Horme**. The child is driven by this inner need to move, yet this strong urge is being challenged by the one person the child loves and depends upon. The urge to move is the infant's first step towards independence and we as adults need to support this urge not swart it. We need to recognise that giving infant this independence is the key to his/her well being. It requires understanding,

patience, organisation as well as vigilance on the part of the adult.

So how can we help infants in their quest for independence which will lead the child towards experience and learning?

From first days of life:

❖ **Develop a relationship with your baby** by talking to him and her during mealtimes and at bath time. Sing songs, recite rhymes, say sweet expressions of admiration and endearment. Stroke their forehead during feeding, their limbs before and after changing, given them a massage after bath. Physical contact with your baby gives you the opportunity to express your love and consideration for this tiny infant – in the early days of life it is also language of love.

❖ **Ensure that the child is surrounded by interesting objects** – black and white images to start with as the eyes recognise these first, then black and white books, cloth books, this with time will allow for pages to be turned and motor movement co-ordinated. hang up mobiles above the baby's basket or cot, play music both from tapes and music boxes. When the baby starts to stretch and grasp make use that you offer which can be reached with some struggle and which are changed regularly, to continue interest and provide challenge – interesting textures – objects made from fur, silk, sheepskin, tweed; objects filled with beans, herbs as well as soft and hard materials.

❖ **Make your baby is part of your life**

Include your baby in what you do - make them part of your life by putting them in the sling or in a bouncer so that they can watch what you are doing, hear your discussions with shop keepers, friends, children and other adults – generally be part of everyday life.

❖ **Once they become mobile let them move**

Initially babies need space to move freely within their clothes and in their baskets and

cots, when they roll over having a free space to move on the floor is a bonus, when starting to crawl, ensure that babies can follow you remember that they will crawl backwards as well as forwards and that they will want to crawl up or down stairs. Having an unrestricted floor space is ideal at this stage. Try to avoid baby bouncers, high chairs, enclosures of any kind, unless they are used for short periods of time and provide a safely for the child whilst you are temporarily occupied.

❖ **When they start sitting offer babies treasure baskets:**

Flat round baskets (Goldschmiedt 1991, Hughes, 2006) of about 50/60 cm in diameter about 10cm high filled with 60 -70 everyday objects of variety of textures, feels and purposes; for examples include a lemon/tangerine/kiwi fruit/head of garlic, kitchen objects such as wooden spoons, small ladle, lemon squeezer, metal chains of varying thicknesses and length, small leather hand-bags and purses as well as a variety of boxes and bottles filled with different materials for visual and auditory stimuli. Bags filled with herbs and beans of varying textures and smell.

The treasure baskets stimulate children's interests by experiencing their smells textures, tastes and sounds, they need to be safe and hygienic, but they also require an adult who will supervise children's safely as they use them. The adult role is not to offer objects or talk about them, the adult is there to observe and note the child's interests and to ensure their safety.

The baskets respond directly to Piaget's first stage of development the sensori-motor stage which support exploration of the environment through the senses. Manipulating the objects in the basket supports the child growing co-ordination of movement as well as sensory experiences, so supporting the formation of mental frameworks and contributing

toward concept formation. The child will have the opportunity to learn about object permanence as well as adapt a range of experiences into their existing schemas or mental frameworks.

❖ **As toddlers begin to walk offer heuristic bags**

The baby who is learning to walk needs a great deal of experience and a variety of opportunities to exercise his/her limbs. These opportunities should be offered outside as well as inside the house. Walks in the park, to feed the ducks, to the swings or sandpit should be the features of the child's everyday existence. What adults need to remember is that the pace will not be at adult speed and that there will be as much going backwards as well as forwards. This is the time when we can see the sensitive period for small detail very clearly as toddlers notice or pick up objects not stopped by adults. Toddlers will also welcome opportunities to carry bags and baskets and to push and pull trolleys and toys on wheels. Montessori (1988/1949) called the toddler between the ages of one and two the little porter.

Heuristic bags offer such an opportunity to carry large bags inside the house. Each bag is filled with a collection of the same objects of different sizes such as paper rolls, boxes, rollers, wheels or napkin rings.. The bags can also be accompanied by containers such as large tins into which the objects from the bags can be posted. Children of this age love to empty and fill containers, they also like to mix them up and sort them and explore their properties.

❖ **As the children approach two we can introduce them the early practical life exercises** such as opening of boxes and bottles, folding or rolling of napkins, pouring

sand from jug to jug. They will delight in washing their hands, helping with food preparation, such as washing potatoes or carrots and with washing of dishes. In the sensorial area they will also enjoy the pink tower and broad stair using five pieces only as well as the geometric solids and the presentation tray, colour box one and the touch boards.

❖ **Sensitive period for language** will be at its height and so listening to stories, reading books, reciting of rhymes as well as naming of all objects and of the child's experiences becomes the focus of adult support. It is also possible to make collections of objects with matching photographs such as the child's bathroom possessions – toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, face cloth, the duck from the bath the child can match the pictures to the objects and name them as they are matched, thus practicing the names and engaging in a focused activity.

❖ Where ever possible the adult will keep the environment simple and consistent in its organisation so that the child learns where to find things and is able to return them to their place. This order supports freedom for the child but also encourages toys and activities to be returned where they belong. The child is free to choose but there is an expectation that they will act responsibly by replacing objects in their place.

You will find similar activities in many Montessori Infant Toddler communities but you should be able to apply all these principles in your own homes and support the development of your child using the Montessori approach.

- Gerhardt S., (2004) *Why Love Matters – How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain*, Routledge, London
- Goldschmied E., and Jackson S., (1994) *People Under Three – Young Children in Day care*, Routledge, London
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- Lillard, P.P. (1996) *Montessori Today*
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