

Maria Montessori

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BED100: Ideas in Education

Assignment 1b: Essay

Maria Montessori

In this essay I will discuss pediatrician and educator Maria Montessori's contribution to educational practices and thought, including her observation of children as having absorbent minds, didactic materials and demonstrations, a prepared environment, methods of guided play, and the role of teacher. I will also discuss the significance of these contributions, their relevance in contemporary Australia and its significance to me as a future educator.

Montessori education is based around the concept that children have unconsciously absorbent minds between the period of birth to age 3, and consciously absorbent minds from the age of 3 until 6 (Montessori & Chattin-McNichols, 1995). During both of these stages children seek sensory stimulation, choice of movement and choice of activities (Edwards, 2002) and within these stages also experience 'sensitive periods' during which they are more receptive to receiving and retaining information.

Montessori's innovative observation of children as having 'absorbent minds' (Montessori, 1967) not only had great significance to her own practice and research but also encouraged schools to create multiage classrooms, typically grouping children aged 3-6, 6-9 and 9-12 together. This allows the younger students within the group to learn by observing, and the older students to learn by demonstrating. This model of class structure has been adapted to suit teachers and students

across the globe, whether due to one-room schools, problematic year group size or simply pedagogical decision, there are proven benefits to composite classrooms.

In 2006 to 2009 a rural school in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia trialed a Montessori program with 7 students aged between 5-7 and taught all students simultaneously. Within 4 years the number of students in the program increased to 20 and their attendance, literacy and numeracy had improved dramatically as well (Erskine, n.d.). As a future educator it is likely I will experience classrooms with mixed age groups, whether it is only a 2-year difference, such as years 3&4 together, or a composite rural class catering for all ages. Montessori's contribution of theory and practice regarding class arrangements will assist me in my own teaching career as I will likely come across untraditional class sizes and formations.

Additionally, if we view children as having absorbent minds we understand that they therefore learn through their environment. Montessori developed what is known as the 'prepared environment' occasionally referred to as the "revealing environment" (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005) a term coined to represent a carefully designed and well thought out place of learning. The aim of a prepared environment is to enhance the child's surroundings and therefore maximize their opportunity to learn independently within a realistic setting. Principles of Montessori's prepared environment include; freedom (of activity, movement, interaction, exploration and choice), order, beauty and reality, as well as the social and intellectual (Irinzi, 2009). The social environment depends on the child's freedom to interact. It encourages children

to become socially aware, and is supported by the multi-aged classroom structure. The intellectual environment relies on all of the principles of the prepared environment and focuses on the child's intelligence. As a whole the prepared environment should assist and support the child's entire development.

A typical Montessori classroom begins the year neat and simplistic. Materials such as books and didactic objects are collected over the course of the years in order not to overwhelm the children. The objects and materials are child sized for accessibility and ease, and resources are readily available to the children. During the day there are several stations for student directed activities and students choose which activity to work on and for how long. All of these aspects of the environment invite the child to learn. The theory of the prepared environment can be applied not only in the classroom but also in the home and other learning settings. Therefore, this contribution to educational thinking is relevant to anyone seeking to create optimized learning environments and is used commonly by teachers. All educators, to an extent, prepare the environment in which their students will learn. I believe it is essential to create an inviting and encouraging atmosphere to facilitate learning, and as a future educator aspects of Montessori's prepared environment will be essential to my teaching preparation.

Guided play, developed by Montessori, is a teaching method that guides a child's natural curiosity in pursuit of developing skill or understanding. This technique allows the child to play freely within a prepared environment, exploring carefully selected didactic materials which

encouraging and enabling them to learn. Before the child commences a session of guided play the use of the material(s) is often demonstrated by the educators until the child shows understanding. The child is then encouraged to repeat the activity until they begin to show signs of boredom which indicates the child is ready to move on. Characteristically Montessori materials are self-correcting (Edwards, 2002) and allow the child to isolate the error and resolve it themselves, rather than relying on teacher assistance. However, Montessori did not support fantasy play which encourages the imaginary, as she believed it was “developmentally irrelevant” (Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983 as cited in Lillard, 2013, p.158).

In America several trials have been conducted to determine if Montessori style materials and activities can assist elderly people with dementia. Case Western Reserve University with Menorah Park Center for the Aging in Beachwood, Ohio, conducted a 4-week long study which saw elderly people with dementia integrate with children and participate in Montessori style activities. They conducted lessons for the elderly with and without the children and completed motor, sensory, and abstract activities. Their findings concluded that the elderly participants could successfully mentor and guide the children. They also found when the elderly worked alone, without the children, they showed signs of disengagement, confusion, anxiety, or aggressive and disruptive behavior. However, when the elderly worked with the children the research team did not observe these behaviors (Camp, Judge, Bye, Fox, Bowden, Bell, & Mattern, 1997).

Montessori's theories on guided play are in practice within many educational centers across the globe and still have a high degree of relevance. Guided play aims to capture children's natural curiosity and openness to learning, and direct in a way which develops skills such as motor, sensory or abstract. As demonstrated by Case Western Reserve University, guided play isn't unique to early childhood education within a Montessori school, but can be adapted to suit all types of education within a variety of settings. I believe guided play is an excellent way of allowing children to explore their own natural desire to obtain knowledge. As a future educator I will likely come across schools employing guided play to assist students in developing skills.

Perhaps the most significant contribution that Montessori made to education was her views on the role of the teacher. Unlike traditional education, where teacher control and direct instruction guide the lessons, a Montessori teacher's role is to facilitate children's learning. The role of the educator in a classic Montessori class is to prepare, organize, observe, evaluate and reflect. Montessori suggests that the most essential part of the teaching role is to maintain the environment of which they are the "keeper and custodian of" (Montessori, 1967) and in doing that, all else will follow. In support Nuebert, states that the teacher is the "dynamic link between children and the prepared environment" (Nuebert, 1973 as cited in Irinyi, 2007).

A study undertaken by Auckland University of Technology examined the beliefs and practices of teachers within Australia and New Zealand (McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour, & Kumar, 2006). The study breaks down the aspects of the teaching role and how important educators

consider each to be. Of the 107 teachers in the study, with a variety of age, experience, and backgrounds, 37.4% agreed that their role in the classroom is to support and guide children, while only 3.9% believed it is to give direct instruction. This report shows that teachers value students own ability to learn and understand they don't need to rely on direct instruction to do so. Therefore, Montessori's contribution of her understand of the teacher's role still has great relevance. Whether this pedagogy is being used deliberately within a Montessori environment or simply due to personal or school beliefs, the role of the teacher as an observer and facilitator is widely accepted practice.

It is agreeable that Maria Montessori revolutionized modern pedagogy. Her educational practices and thinking as a whole, which have adopted the term of the Montessori method, have been implemented globally. Although there is a broad spectrum differing extensively in the use of the Montessori method, it is estimated that globally there are more than 7,000 certified Montessori facilities, 4,000 of which are in the United States (Olaf, n.d.). Montessori Australia claims there are more than 300 schools within Australia, and this number is growing (Montessori Australia Foundation, n.d.). The extensive use of the Montessori Method highlights the significance and relevance of Montessori's contribution to educational thought and practice. The American Montessori Society (AMS) and the Association of Montessori International (AMI) along with many other organizations now maintain and promote the Montessori movement. What started with the Casa dei Bambini has now spread to all corners of the globe, including a Montessori project currently underway in the Gibson Desert, Western Australia (Association Montessori International, 2016).

Montessori's contributions to educational thought and practices that I have discussed above include, the absorbent mind, didactic materials and demonstrations, a prepared environment, methods of guided play, and the role of teacher, all of which are essential aspects of a Montessori education, and are often used outside of a traditional Montessori environment. Montessori's method is significant to me as a future educator because her pedagogy is one I appreciate and hope to one-day practice. I believe all children are naturally curious and receptive to learning, and with Montessori's practice I believe this natural desire can flourish.

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