

The Secrets of Childhood, a Perspective to **Montessori's** Theory of Early Childhood Education

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Abstract Maria Montessori founded a theory of education that has had a profound influence on the lives of thousands of children throughout the world since the beginning of the 20th Century. Her theory about education directed to implement the theory. The established of Casa dei bambini, a school in a slum area in Rome, was an important opportunity for her career that came in 1907, and it became an important starting point in her deep observation that led her to find lots of astonishing children's secrets as well. Montessori's theory of education was based on her conception of science, on her observation of children, and on her extensive research in anthropology, psychology, and pedagogy. To have a perspective of her ideas, it will be discussed in this writing about Montessori's concept of a child as learner. That will lead us to have more comprehension of Montessori's ideas of what she means of children's secrets.

Keywords: Montessori's Theory, secrets of childhood

Introduction

The aim of this writing is to have a special perspective toward **Montessori's** theory of education. To examine her theory, we begin with a brief history, **Montessori's** concept of the child as learner, and lastly by the secrets of childhood. There should be seventeen secrets of childhood, but in this writing will only be discussed four of them.

Maria Montessori was born on August 31, 1870, in Chiaravalle, a hill town overlooking the Adriatic Sea, in Italy's Ancona Province (2004). She was the only child of Alessandro Montessori, a business manager in the state-run tobacco monopoly; and Renilde Stoppani, the well-educated daughter of a highly respected family. Maria's parents carefully monitored their daughter's education. In 1883, thirteen-year-old Maria Montessori enrolled in the Regia Scuola Technica Michelangelo Buonarroti, a state technical school. Montessori graduated from the technical school in the spring of 1886 with high marks in her subjects and with a final cumulative grade of 137 out of a possible 150.

Upon completing her studies at Scuola Technica, Maria next entered the Regio Istituto Technico Leonardo da Vinci, in which from 1886 to 1890 she studied subjects

related to engineering. In 1890, an important career decision, she decided to leave her **engineering studies to study medicines**. Her application to the University of Rome's School of Medicine was at first time rejected by the all-male-faculty. The highly determinate young woman persisted, and the faculty agreed to admit her to the University of Rome in the fall of 1890 as a student of physics, mathematics, and natural sciences. She passed the examinations for the Diploma di Lizenza in 1892, earning a final grade of eight out of a possible ten points. She was now eligible to begin the actual study of medicine, anatomy, pathology, and clinical work. Montessori was the first woman to be admitted to the medical school. During her last two years of medical school, **Montessori studied pediatrics at Children's Pediatrics Hospital, an experience** that moved her toward what would be her lifelong calling. In 1896 she achieved another distinction. She was the first woman in Italy to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine.

Montessori achievements in education and medicine had made her a woman of distinction in-turn-of-the-century Italy. In February Montessori was on a lecture tour, **speaking on the "new woman"**. In 1900, the **Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica**, the Orthophrenic School, opened with Montessori and Dr Giuseppe Montesano as co directors. Based on her own medical education, which was based on extensive work with mentally deficient children and on her reading of Itard and Seguin, Montessori concluded that the methods used in training children with mental deficiencies could be applied to normal children, especially those of young age. Her **study on children's** mental illnesses motivated her to study education as a more general field. She decided that she needed to pursue more advanced studies in the foundations of education. She returned to the University of Rome, where she studied psychology, anthropology, educational history and philosophy, and pedagogical principles.

The Casa de Bambini

An important opportunity in Montessori's career came in 1907, when Edoardo Talamo asked her to establish a school in a slum area in Rome. At the time, Talamo was director general of the Istituto Romano di Beni Stabili (the Building Association), a **philanthropic society established to improve housing conditions of the poor**. Talamo's invitation was an attempt to resolve a very practical problem. When parents who lived in the remodeled housing development went to work, their children, under-school-age, were left alone and unsupervised. The association decided to establish the school as a kind of day-care center for these children. Montessori however, now had opportunity to create a school that could serve as a laboratory to test her ideas.

Montessori then had several motives in mind when establishing the Casa de Bambini, the prototype of all later Montessori schools. First, it was the social and economic motives of social reform, especially the improvement of the condition of the working class. Second, the motive that the school was a means of aiding working

mothers who would contribute to the general movement for woman's equality and rights. However, the Casa de Bambini was primarily a place for children's education. It was not a design to create a social utopia, nor was it merely a center for children's day care for working mothers. As the new school for the new age, it offered education based on the principles of scientific pedagogy.

The Nature of a child as a learner

A child is universal. This idea underlies the whole concept of early childhood education which was conceived by Montessori. Montessori stated that a child is present in all times and will continue to be born until the end of time. Basically there is only one kind of children at all times, in all races, in all traditions. "Basically, the task of the child is to construct a man, directing the environment, adjusting its time, place and culture. If we think of a newborn child and a child who was three years old, it is an important difference between the two, whether the major changes that have occurred. This is the secret of childhood". What Montessori did, as Stephenson stated, (2004) was to demonstrate the inner powers of a child that seem to be unknown. What Montessori struggled along her life is helping the child's development toward the fullest realization as possible as could be from its individual potentials. In order to make the Montessori ideas work in helping the today's child, it can only be done if the principles and values of Montessori theory of education handled and understood correctly.

Everywhere a child was born, he will be completed by what Montessori called with the 'absorbent mind'. This absorbent mind is different with which adults' have. What kind of a creature it is who only sit along a half and two years while hearing a language that he never heard before are uttered around him, in a set of explosion could reproduce the language in whole, in a perfect pronunciation, in perfect patterns, and in all intonations and senses that become part of the native speaker? The absorbent mind does not only absorb a language and reproduced it. It absorbs all aspects which develop culture of the country and create a civil, a human being from a time and place.

A child in Montessori class is not forced to chase after intellectual achievement. What is opened to him is universe, and he is given keys to explore the universe through materials that practice senses which useful to help to classify and organize the impression that entering into his mind. If the senses do not use to be practiced, then they will be closed and will not be able to be used. It is a real world that gives him, not a fantasy or imagination, because in this real world he will live his life. How could someone learn, from the group game, what is the meaning to be a mother, father, pilot of aerospace, dog, if he never been yet known of the meaning to be he himself.

It is stated by Stephenson (2004) that, because of Montessori based her study on life, it is a pure creativity, as well as all the creatures are creation. A child is like other living-things, steps through stages of development, with the guidance of what Montessori called by 'sensitive periods'. The sensitive periods are seen in the children

from all races, all cultures, as a child to be part of universal creatures. During some sensitive periods, a child shows a strong willingness or need to master some knowledge or skills.

A view of a little child at Montessori class who patiently repeated the exercises of inserting and removing cylinders into their holes into wooden blocks- and repeated more and more-is one of strong usefulness of Montessori materials. As it is known that in Montessori classroom there are lots of materials used to work by all children in mastering all concepts of knowledge. Repetition of an exercise, without any commando or encouragement from an adult, is another example of an event that generally happened in Montessori school around the world. Repetition of exercises aims at gaining an understanding, showing a concentration, showing of the power of intelligence of a human.

An example of a half two-years-old-child who have learned geometry shapes and on the next day in breakfast time, holding an egg in his hand, will able to say the shape of the egg is oval. Another child that interested in flowers and went to a garden to get as many kinds of flowers as possible she could find and gave a question to her teacher how she would be able to save the flowers forever –lead to new activity of draining the flowers. Other children were asked to give their best when a new guest came to their class. At the time the guest entered the class; **the children greeted her, and said ‘it’s nice to see you. Thank you, hope you would come again next time, good bye’** without asking or instruction by their teacher before. The only asking for them is the request from their teacher that the children have to give their best.

Those examples are to explain that the inventions are going on-in all aspects of knowledge-because the child is in the environment which is supplied with all motives of creativities. At this point, Montessori wants to show in front of us that through her observations, through her clinical and scientific approach toward the living organism as her research subject, she works with the children for years. She wants to show that in order to help children in their task of shaping the perfect humans; we also have to do different approach toward this research from another point of view with them who think that they know more. Montessori shows us that if we want to help the life, we have to learn it first. By learning it, it means that we are trying to teach it, even we learn from it. We learn from the living organism, the children, their needs and their tendencies. **Only when we know what the children’s needs** are; then we will be able to start to learn how to fulfill them.

The Secrets of Childhood

The secrets of childhood are the secret of the life itself-the creative power that supports human being since he was in **mother’s** womb. Stephenson (2004) stated that in order to start toward ‘**the secrets**’, **then, we have to be able to see a child as someone who handle** on his own hand the mystery inside him which is the potency of every human. We have

to be prepared to cope with the mystery of the life, the mystery of creation- that we have to face with ideas that are not ours, a power that is not ours, perspective that is bigger **than anything else that we could feel. Look at children with uncovered by adult's prejudice; with a free thinking of felt prejudice, we have to be more able to fully help a child in helping himself.**

It is the power of love that is possibly for an adult to get closer to a child and to understand him. Love and- what Montessori called by *vesture of humility*-that will be **able to open 'the secrets of childhood' and to understandable the deep meaning of Montessori's work.**

The first secret of childhood is **identified with the contribution of psychoanalysis's** discovery of the subconscious. One of the discoveries is that the subconscious influence **human's actions, attitude, and behavior.** Another invention of psychoanalysis is that psychosis or mental illness- a psychiatric disease in a human-maybe rooted in childhood. Some incidents that happened in the past- which happened in the subconscious- show that children have hidden suffering. This discovery is impressed, yet, annoyed, because this is contrary with the general opinion to what is generally believed. The hidden suffering of childhood are lasted slowly and continuously, and they never been recognized as a potential cause of some psychiatrics illnesses in adults. They appear as the pressures to a **child's spontaneous activity** done by a dominant adult. The consequence is related to the adult that has biggest effects, who is a mother of a child.

The illnesses that can be traced at the childhood are the most difficult to cure. The **reason is the pattern of adult's life is formed in childhood.** The consequence -when dealing with children-more observations are needed rather than investigation. Fortunately, a new study was born; it is a study of a child. Similar but different with psychoanalysis, it deals with what a normal rather than abnormal and trying to help the psychic life of a children. It aims at increasing and raising awareness of adult bad attitude towards children that their attitudes are products of their own unconscious self.

The second secret is that the child cannot expand in the manner required by a being in process, for the adult represses him. **The 'adult' is an abstract word a child.** The child is isolated in society, so if the adult influences him, that adult is a given adult, the adult closest to him-his mother first, then his father, then his teacher.

The first reaction is one of self-defense, of protest, **"We did our best. We love our children. We sacrificed ourselves for them."** And this juxtaposes **two conflicting** attitudes, the one conscious; the other rising from what is unconscious. The defense is familiar; it is old and deep rooted and holds no interest is the accusation, or rather those whom it envisages. They struggle and strive to perfect the care and education of their children, and they find themselves caught in a network of problem, for they do not know the error they harbor in themselves.

Now if the a child is to receive a different treatment from what it receives today-in order to save it from conflicts endangering its physic life, there is a first, fundamental,

essential step to be taken, from which all will depend—the modification of the adult. Indeed if the adult is already doing all he can, and as he will say, loves the child to the point of sacrifice, he acknowledges that he is faced by an insuperable problem. He must necessarily seek beyond what is known, voluntary and conscious.

The third secret is related to biological prelude of human being. When K.F Wolf announced his discoveries (2004) on the segmentation of the germ-cell, he threw new light on the process of the creation of living creatures, and at the time made it possible to verify, by direct observation, the existence of inner forces working in accordance with a pre-determined pattern. It was he who overthrew certain philosophical ideas, like those of Leibniz and Spallanzani (2004), by which the germ was supposed to contain in miniature the complete form of the future creature. They supposed that in the ovum, that is to say from the beginning, the being that would develop if brought into a favorable environment was already formed, albeit imperfectly and in infinitesimal proportions. This idea came from the observation of the seed of a plant, which contains, hidden between the two cotyledons, a tiny plant in which we can recognize root and leaves and which, set in the earth, develops into the new plant. It was supposed that an analogous process held good for animals and for man.

But when Wolff, after the discovery of the microscope, was able to observe how a living being is really formed (he began by observing the embryos of birds), he found that the first stage is a simple germ-cell, in which the microscope, by its very power to render visible what is invisible to the naked eye shows that there is no pre-existent form at all. The germ-cell, which results from the union of two cells, male and female, consists simply of membrane, protoplasm and nucleus like every other cell, indeed, it is merely a simple cell in its most primary form, without any visible differentiation. Every living creature, whether plant or animal, comes from a primary, simple and undifferentiated cell. The tiny plant within the seed is an embryo that has already developed from the germ-cell, it completed its earlier stages in the fruit, from which the ripened fell to earth. In the embryos of mammals, and hence of men, the first organ to appear is the heart, or rather, that which will become the heart—a viscicle that begins at once to beat in a regular rhythm, beating twice for each beat of the heart of the mother. And it will continue the beat unwearying, for it is the vital motor that enables all the vital tissues to form, pulsing to them through nourishment the need for life.

All this labour is hidden, and is wonderful precisely because it is done thus alone. It is the miracle of creation from almost nothing. Those wise little living cells never make mistakes, and find in themselves the power for far-reaching transformations, some becoming cartilage cells, some nerve cells, some skin cells, and each tissue finds its exact place. This marvel of creation is one of the secrets of the universe. Nature envelopes it in impenetrable veils and sheaths, and she alone can part them, when finally, matured and complete, a new creature is born into the world. And therefore—if we discuss about a child of human being—only a child can bring revelation of the natural pattern of man.

But because of the delicacy of all creation from nothing, the psychic life of the child needs a defense and an environment analogous to the sheaths and veils that nature has set round the physical embryo.

The fourth secret is a new-born child that does not come to a natural environment, but into the civilized environment of the life of men. Montessori stated that the care of the new-born baby should not be limited to preserving it from death, to isolating it from infection, as is done today in the more modern clinics where the nurses who approach it – cover their faces with bandages so that the microbes from their breath shall not reach it. There are the problems of the “psychic care of the child”, from the very moment of birth—and those of facilitate his adjustment to the world. To this end, experiments have still to be made in clinics, and propaganda is required in families in order that the attitude towards the newly born should be changed.

Conclusion

What is the connection between the fourth secrets of childhood, then, to the practical education? Let's take a look at the first secret. The subconscious influence human's actions; and a psychiatric disease in adults is possibly caused by the existence of suffering in one's childhood. The illnesses that can be traced at the childhood are the most difficult to cure. The reason is the pattern of adult's life is formed in childhood. The consequence -when dealing with children-more observations are needed rather than investigation. The second secret is that the child cannot expand in the manner required by a being in process, for the adult represses him. The modification of the adult in dealing with children, therefore, is need to be done voluntary and conscious. From the third secret, only a child can bring revelation of the natural pattern of man. But because of the delicacy of all creation from nothing, the psychic life of the child needs a defense and an environment analogous to the sheaths and veils that nature has set round the physical embryo. Therefore, the environment in which the children learn to master knowledge must be as natural as the process of the development of the embryo. Based on the fourth secret of childhood-and this also shows clearly that the three secrets before are also make it clearer that the needs of a child should be met as natural as a child was born in to the world. There should be seventeen secrets of childhood from the view point of Montessori, but those will be discussed in the next writing.

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