

## **A Modern Approach by Paula Lillard – Brief Book Review<sup>1</sup>**

Lillard begins by narrating Maria Montessori's career that meandered from interests in mathematics to engineering and then to biology which finally settled her into medical school to become the first female medical graduate from the University of Rome in 1896. She had shunned teaching – the only profession open to women in those times. Incidentally, however, it was during her visits with children in permanent asylum wards that made her venture into education as she later realized that the special education provided for them was insufficient. She then went to study with Itard and Seguin who were leaders in the field of special education and had started on a curriculum of manipulative hands-on materials for instruction. Through further study that resulted in translating the works of Itard and Seguin by hand, Montessori's observations and creation of materials to educate the idiot children and their resulting success in local examinations<sup>2</sup> led her to dedicate the rest of her adult time to the education of children. Through her work she became involved with the Ministry of Education in Italy for a Lecture Series and also, became a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Rome to extend her research to normal children whom she observed to be just as interested and not only showed serious concentration on materials but exhibited 'satisfaction and happiness in the work' (Lillard, 1988). Though extremely excited about her continuous findings, she faced serious criticism from Professor Kilpatrick's book entitled 'The Montessori System Examined'. Kilpatrick, a protégé of John Dewey, essentially 'dismissed Montessori's techniques as outdated' (Lillard, 1988:40) and

---

<sup>1</sup> All content is from the Lillard Book – as such if there are phrases that are as exact as the text in her book and have not been cited it is simply to reduce the redundancy of constantly citing the same author; where I used a direct quote I have cited the year and page as per usual.

<sup>2</sup> "I succeeded in teaching a number of the idiots from the asylums both to read and to write so well that I was able to present them at a public school for an examination together with normal children. And they passed the examination successfully."

— Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in 'The Children's Houses' with Additions and Revisions by the Author*

felt that the social aspects of the classroom were lacking due to the individualist nature of the work in the Montessori environment. In 'contrast to this individualistic approach Kilpatrick would put children into such a socially conditioned environment that they will of themselves spontaneously unite into larger or smaller groups to work out their life's impulses as these exist' (Lillard, 1988:11). He also felt that the materials did not have enough variety nor stimulate the imagination enough. On a slightly positive note he felt that practical life activities held value as 'having immediate utility and meeting an actual immediate social demands such as cooking food for meals...' (Lillard, 1988:14). His opposition, however, coming from someone so closely linked to a champion of education thought as Dewey meant that Montessori's work was stalled for many years in America compared to other parts of the world until it was rescued by Nancy Rambush who introduced the work in earnest. Once her work started being confirmed through other works by researchers like Harlow<sup>3</sup> it began to catch traction and her observations about the importance of sensory perception, the idea of the teacher as a guide and need for intrinsic motivation in children amongst other things, brought success to America which is still growing today.

Lillard describes Montessori's philosophy that deviates from previous educational philosophies which saw the child as in progress to adulthood instead of seeing childhood as a separate period that stands on its own - with both adults and children being interdependent. Freedom for the child within the environment is stressed to allow the child to choose his own activities in what Montessori termed the Sensitive Period from 0-3 years. Within this period children can be seen repeating the same action until they gain a new skill. They are accumulating

---

<sup>3</sup> Fredrick Harlow conducted studies on the intrinsic motivation of monkeys that was similar to Montessori's observation in children – lending credence to Montessori's work which could very well have been affected by the fact that she was a woman at a time when very little was expected from them.

a lot of information from their environment that in turn builds their memory, understanding and reason. This philosophy extends explanations beyond the 0-3 Sensitive Period best summarized by Lide (2012:7) as

First Plane (0-6): language, order, sensorimotor

Second Plane (6-12): moral awareness, imagination and abstraction, culture and knowledge

Third Plane (12-18): physical transformation, money/finances, work

Fourth Plane (18-24): spirituality, purpose

The individuality of a child completing a freely chosen task (independence) on their own with great interest since it is what excites and interests them and hence the unparalleled focus (attention) on the task are discussed in light of also strengthening the will through repetition of the process, intrinsic motivation (also seen as self-discipline) and the power to obey on their own. Also discussed is the need for order in the development of intelligence to avoid chaos – hence the need to have a neatly organized environment for students to aid them in that process. The environment, discussed further in this report, must cultivate the development of imagination and creativity as children freely chose materials therein. The development of morality is also discussed at length – the need to allow the child to realize further the difference between right and wrong. An absolute essential part of the philosophy is to observe – which would allow adults and educators to know how to allow the students to unfold as best as they can.

Within the extensive philosophy Montessori developed the Method for implementation which focuses mostly on the teacher and the environment. The teacher is expected to exercise patience and humility in the art of teaching which entails a great amount of observation – which is how Montessori arrived at her findings; the class, in a sense, become a scientific laboratory. The teacher, who prepares the environment for the unfolding of the child, must be trained and be

perpetually learning. Amongst the key lessons is ‘silence’ – which is imperative in observations and hence making the right /correct changes to the environment. This would necessarily help the teacher to know when to invite a student to a lesson and also, focus on encouraging the student in such a way that intrinsic motivation may be maintained.

Lillard notes 6 basic components of the Montessori environment – freedom, structure and order, reality and nature, beauty, the materials and the development of community. The *freedom* to explore various materials is given after a lesson – which allows the student to make the most out of that given material. Their freedom to choose and move around is restricted by not infringing on the freedom of others; adults/teachers in this case must set firm limits against destructive behaviors. Most importantly, the students must have the freedom to unfold and not be told how to by an authority figure. The *structure and order* of the environment settles the student to work individually without too much help. It should also help him to begin to see the structure and order of the universe as he proceeds through Montessori. It is important to allow students to be keen observers of *nature* whenever they can, to allow them to appreciate the complexity and beauty of the world they live in. By having one of each item of material in the environment we allow students to get an idea of the *reality* of life that not everyone can get everything all at once; waiting is a necessary virtue and this also grows their initiative as they will be encouraged to do something else in the meantime. *Beauty* is based in simplicity and things should be designed beautifully and in a warm relaxing atmosphere. *Materials* must provide stimuli to capture attention and concentration. As discussed briefly above, they need to be introduced to the child when he is ready – hence the need for careful observation. As children develop a sense of ownership in and around their classroom and their need for each other, a

*community* based on mutual respect begins to develop; concern and desire to help becomes spontaneous.

On Montessori and Parents, the latter are encouraged to allow free exploration for children, especially in the first 3 years of their lives – those being the most important. Daily chores should be encouraged – as they give children better self-esteem through being engaged in real work. Parents need to prepare the child's home environment so that they may indeed become independent. Children need the freedom discussed in parts above and parents need to understand that and set reasonable boundaries to avoid stunting the child's development. Yet another important aspect discussed here is the need for parents to allow for an organic development of each's child's own progress instead of trying to compare them to other children.

The approach to reading and writing must also been introduced for each individual child when they are ready – not wholesome as a group. Reading, together with helping children to note the symbols of writing, should be encouraged at home. The nomenclature for various lessons in the Montessori have an intensive vocabulary that is constantly being introduced to students to aid their reading and comprehension. The Montessori environments are designed to encourage reading at an early age. Once again, writing should also be introduced when the child is ready. Many practical life activities - cutting, pouring, carrying, inserts and such are all designed to introduce children to writing.

In answering the question of 'Why Montessori Today', Lillard points to what seems to be the deepening crisis of consumerism, overpopulation with its related ills, school drop outs and increased unemployment as adding to seemingly unmitigated chaos in the egregious pollution of the environment. Montessori establishes the need for order and allows children to see the big picture, the connectedness of things and hence, hope. Whilst the traditional environments do not

take the child's need for work seriously and tend to encourage play all day, Montessori values practical work and encourages it every turn; there is a belief that positive self-images can be created through learned skills and real accomplishments. An emphasis on the environment allows the Montessori child to be more aware about their own part in keeping it as clean as possible. The concept of intrinsic motivation helps the Montessori child to love learning and hence the idea of dropping out becomes redundant. Montessori Education, with its open door policy, necessarily encourages positive parent-child engagement as the former are allowed to observe their child's development in real time whenever they wish (this depends also on some Montessori Schools – there are some that do not have an open door policy but would still permit a parent to come in on appointment). On the whole the book offers a balanced and clear overview of how Montessori came to be and what can be expected in a classroom and beyond.

#### References

- Lide, A. (2012). *Montessori Education: What Is Its Relationship with the Emerging Worldview?* Journal of Conscious Evolution Issue 8, 2012
- Lillard, P.P. (1988). *Montessori: A Modern Approach* Schocken Books, New York.