

Montessori philosophy and method essay sample



“ He is an embryo in who exists nothing but nebulae which have the power to develop spontaneously certainly, but only at the expense of the environment – an environment rich in greatly different forms of civilization. That is why the human embryo must be born before completing itself and why it can reach further development only after birth. It’s potentialities in fact, must be stimulated by the environment.” Formation of man

Comment on this quote with reference to the Montessori Philosophy and Method.

“ We must take into consideration that from birth the child has a power in him. We must not just see the child, but God in him. We must respect the laws of creation in him.” Maria Montessori, 1935 (1989a, p. 98) By Dr. Maria Montessori The Child as Spiritual Embryo For Montessori, the Word is made flesh in every child born in the world; each human being has his or her path of incarnation to follow, his or her destiny. Montessori, like Emerson, referred to the “ secret” within the soul of every child—the personal spiritual imperative that transcends whatever social prejudices, ideologies, and mundane educational curricula that adults seek to overlay onto the child’s personality.

Montessori often compared the process of psychological and spiritual development to the physical unfolding of the human organism. Just as the material body first takes shape as a self-forming embryo, requiring during its formation the protection and nurturance of the womb that envelopes it, the human soul first appears in the newborn child in an embryonic form that requires nourishment from a psychic womb—the protective environment of

loving, caring parents and a spiritually responsive education. Montessori's distinctive notion of the child as a "spiritual embryo" emphasized her key principle that the growing human being is not simply a biological or psychological entity, but a spiritual energy seeking expression in the form of a human body within the physical and cultural world. She compared the mysterious emergence of spiritual life in the child to the Incarnation of God in Christ described in the New Testament, "when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Montessori, 1972b, p. 29).

Reflecting on the unusually lengthy period of physical dependence that human infants (compared to other species) experience, Montessori was convinced that early childhood is designed to be a time of intense psychic receptivity. The young child takes in the world through an "absorbent mind," literally incarnating (taking into its body mind) the sensations, impressions, and feelings it receives from the surrounding environment. One of the guiding principles of Montessori pedagogy, the concept of "sensitive periods," expresses her observation that young children move through periods of development during which they are especially attuned to particular characteristics in the environment. When they are ready to acquire language they hungrily, effortlessly absorb it by hearing it spoken around them; when they are ready to develop fine motor skills they begin to act on their surroundings accordingly.

It is the task of parents and educators to provide the stimulation and resources the developing child needs at these critical times. Keep in mind that for Montessori this is not simply a biological or pedagogical responsibility, but a profound spiritual task, because the child is being

directed by its embryonic spiritual energies to reach out to the world to fashion a personality. Careless parenting or education, by stifling optimum development, frustrates the child's spiritual formation. Montessori frequently commented that the child creates the adult—not, as our modern common sense has it, the other way around. The spiritual energy seeking expression through the child's encounters with the world is engaged in building a person in a way that no adult education or conscious effort can achieve. By adulthood an individual's psychological identity is deeply engrained, and learning no longer takes place through “incarnation” or absorption.

Therefore it is crucial for parents and educators to allow the child's own inherent nature to emerge and act within the world. As Montessori put it in 1915, We must believe that all beings develop by themselves, of themselves, and that we cannot do better than not to interrupt that development. We must confess to ourselves that the psychic life of man is full of mysteries.... The preparation for the teacher is twofold: to be sensitive to the mystery and to be sensitive to the wonder of life revealing itself. Montessori called the spiritual embryo humanity's “most precious treasure” because it was only this divine formative power that could transform the world: “The child promises the redemption of humanity, and we might say that this truth is represented by the mystical symbol of the Nativity” (1972a, pp. 36, 104).

By failing to appreciate the value of this treasure, and educating young people only to participate dutifully in a materialistic, mechanistic system of economic production, modern societies are diminishing the visionary creativity, the moral insight, and above all the loving compassion that divine energies promise to bring to bear on the problems of human life. Montessori

was convinced that through the child, these energies could be released into the world as a powerful source of good. It is evident throughout her work that the heart of Montessori's educational mission was not to introduce special techniques or materials into pedagogical practice but to make a fervent plea to the modern world to become "sensitive to the wonder of life revealing itself" through the life of each child. That was the appeal she made for fifty years to audiences and readers throughout the world. "Man seems to have two embryonic periods.

One is prenatal, like that of the animals; the other is postnatal and only man has this." *The Absorbent Mind*. p. 55, Chapter 7 Newly born human beings are particularly vulnerable to their environment. They remain reliant on others for an extraordinarily long period of time, unlike other young mammals that can, within a short period after birth, stand, walk and find food for themselves. Animals have fixed and pre-determined guiding instincts that dictate their development. Human children alone are given free will to move away from their instincts. Each child, therefore, is given the possibility of becoming a unique individual in his own right. Montessori recognized that children held within them the key to the development of their own personalities and that the sensitivity that they were born with exposed them to unique dangers. She felt that they were born with a spiritual nature that had an innate expectation of freedom, warmth and love and that it was of great importance that they experienced these qualities in order to feel secure.

At such a young age she saw that the child didn't simply remember his experiences, but he actually formed himself through them. "The things he

sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul.” (The Absorbent Mind. p 56, Chap 7). She saw this particular absorbent quality of human beings as being the single most important feature of their development: “ On this, the whole of our study is based.” “ It follows that the newborn child has to do a piece of formative work which corresponds in the psychological sphere to the one just done by the embryo in the physical sphere. Before him there is a period of life different from that which he led in the womb; yet still unlike that of the man he is to become.” The Absorbent Mind p. 55, Chap 7 “ Man seems to have two embryonic periods. One is prenatal, like that of the animals; the other is postnatal and only man has this.” The Absorbent Mind. p. 55, Chap 7 “ If the work of man on the earth is related to his spirit, to his creative intelligence, then his spirit and his intelligence must be the fulcrum of his existence, and all the workings of his body. About this fulcrum his behaviour is organised, and even his physical economy. The whole man develops within a kind of spiritual halo.”

“ A child’s different inner sensibilities enable him to choose from his complex environment what is suitable and necessary for his growth. They make the child sensitive to some things, but leave him indifferent to others. When a particular sensitiveness is aroused in a child, it is like a light that shines on some objects but not others, making of them his whole world.” The Secret of Childhood p. 42, Chap 7 A sensitive period refers to a transient state that children go through that is focused upon one particular area. Montessori had read about these periods of sensitivity in the development of animals, but soon realised that she was seeing similar qualities in the interests of the children. “ A child learns to adjust himself and make acquisitions in his

sensitive periods. These are like a beam that lights interiorly or a battery that furnishes energy.” (The Secret of Childhood p40)

She saw that during these periods the child could learn at a particularly intense rate and that such learning appeared to come very easily. “ At such a time everything is easy; all is life and enthusiasm. Every effort marks an increase in power.” (Ibid p40). The sensitive periods that she noted were not linear, i. e., they did not follow one after the other; some overlapped and some were continuous. They included a sensitive period for order, refinement of the senses, language acquisition, walking and movement, small objects and involvement in social life. We were therefore alerted to the existence of these periods of sensitivity and encouraged to observe them in the activities of the children. “ A sensitive period refers to a special sensibility which a creature acquires in its infantile state, while it is still in a process of evolution. It is a transient disposition and limited to the acquisition of a particular trait. Once this trait, or characteristic, has been acquired, the special sensibility disappears.”

The Four Planes of Human Development Montessori believed the child from the first hour of birth had traces of the existence of psychic life (Montessori, 1961). In other words she believed there was evidence of the functioning of the mind in those hours, and from there she observed a plot of development influenced by sensitive periods and driven by miraculous forces to eventually create man. The purpose of the child she believed ‘ is the construction of the man in the fullness of his strength and in the fullness of his life’. (pp 26 Montessori, 1949). Montessori defines the four planes of development in part by the physical characteristics of the child. At around 6

years old the child's milk teeth are replaced. At 12 years old the child begins puberty, and at 18 years wisdom teeth appear signalling the physical maturation of the man.

The first plane goes from birth to six years old, Montessori gave it the name, Infancy. Montessori delineates two subdivisions in this plane, 0-3 where the adult can exercise no influence and 3-6 when what she calls the psychic entity becomes approachable albeit only in a special way (Montessori, 1946). Where as the first plane is characterised by great transformations that take the inert baby to a conscious intelligent child, the second plane six to twelve years is usually marked by serenity and docility. It is however a period of growth, physically and intellectually and also serves as a period of consolidation of all the information he/she absorbed in the previous six years. Montessori called this plane, Childhood. The third plane, Adolescence, is again one of great transformations, psychic and physical. Montessori (1946) remarks this period as unsteady at times, characterised by some indiscipline via an inclination to rebel.

The fourth and final plane Montessori (Montessori, 1946) recognised as university time. A period when study becomes intensified, physical maturity has been attained but the will and judgement of the individual is continuing the develop. Montessori called this period Maturity. With all of these pinpoint demarcations of age Montessori is quick to highlight there will always be exceptions. The ages are defined as an average only, and she also points out noticeable gender differences on occasion too. " Infancy" Montessori likened the new born child to a spiritual embryo. The appearance of the baby is inert but hidden from view are the psychical powers building the organs

(Montessori, 1955). When the child arrives it's new world is unrecognizable compared to it's previous address. Despite this, it's psychic life begins and the process of forming the individual is undertaken by the child. After one year he/she knows how to walk, talk, think and recognise objects. In the second year the child builds himself up further, increasing his understanding of his environment and around eighteen months uses language to form is personality (Montessori, 1961). The third year is one of consolidation of these conquests, and this has all been achieved using a creative inner impulse.

Montessori observed this to be achieved through sensitive periods in the child which will be described in more detail shortly, but one example relating to the formation of the child's organs behind the scene is the hearing sense. The ear of the baby seems to discriminate sounds of human speech from it's environment to help build up the understanding of language. So the organ is not just picking up sounds, it has a special sensitivity to peoples voices and is able to order these sounds using it's eyes on the mouth as well to form the first syllables it produces via another organ, the tongue and voice box.

Montessori's other key observation of the child in the first plane is the absorbent mind. Again this will be expanded upon below through various descriptions of unconscious adaptations which build the child's personality, but the primary example to give here is the unconscious acquisition of language.

In a radio interview given in 1950 Montessori discussed the then popular notion of maturity theory which suggested educating children under six years old was abusive because their minds could not handle abstract ideas. She emphatically argued the mistake people were making with this notion

was to pay attention only to the conscious mind. She then cited the acquisition of language as achieved completely by the unconscious mind of a zero to six child. Nothing she said can be more abstract than language (Montessori, 1979). Montessori refers to a child as a spiritual embryo – a hidden living being, who must be liberated. Montessori believes that psychic development does not come about haphazardly and it does not originate as the result of stimuli from the outside world, but is guided by transient sensibilities and temporary instincts connected with the acquisition of certain characteristics.

Therefore, the first task of this new education is liberation through knowledge and discovery of the unknown in a child through observing the child's sensibilities or sensitive periods. These sensibilities enable a child to orient itself in his environment and to move. If the child has not been able to work in harmony with his sensitive period, "it has lost its chance of a natural conquest, and has lost it forever" (Montessori, 1978, p. 40). In their ignorance, adults fail to see the miracle of a child's growth – "the miracle of creation from almost nothing" (Montessori, 1978, p. 14), and because of it they cannot help a baby.

This, Montessori argues, calls for a new way of caring for children where adults must consider not only what exists (the physical body) but what is still to come (psychic potential) by observing early developments and encouraging the positive. For Montessori, "the human personality forms itself by itself, like the embryo" (p. 32), and then the child then becomes creator and parent. Central to Montessori's theory of education is the environment. A child – the 'spiritual embryo' – is like the physical embryo,

which needs a living environment in which to develop. It is necessary, Montessori believes, to establish an obstacle-free environment for the child and right environment to stimulate the liberation of a child's hidden characteristics. This is achieved by establishing a proper environment in which a child can flourish. In such environment, adults must take second place, doing everything possible to learn about the children, supporting and helping in the development of their lives.

The physical environment, Montessori recommends, should be pleasant. It should be in proportion to the size of a child, including low little windows, small furniture, little tables, and armchairs, and low cupboards that are within the child's reach. Montessori instructors are somewhat 'passive teachers' who hold back their activities in order to allow the children to act for themselves. Like other progressive educators, Montessori argued that children should be at the centre of all activities, learning by themselves, free to select any activity they want. The teachers are initiated to their "inner preparation" and are asked to correct any inner dispositions which are thought to be damaging to the child. Teacher must prepare themselves inwardly by seeking out their own faults, such as anger and pride, which may become obstacles in the education of the children. These obstacles need to be corrected by embracing humility, charity and respect for the child.

In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori showed a genuine care for the well-being and proper development of a child. She firmly believed that key to a new epoch in children's education was the observation of children's inner sensibilities and their environment, the passive role of a teacher, and most of all a respect for the child's individual personality. She goes as far as to say

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that a mind denied of proper development is a ‘darkened mind’, undeveloped and incapable of true expression. Should the child lose the opportunity to develop according to his or her own nature, he or she can be compared to a person who has landed from a balloon in a desert, and who all at once sees the balloon carried away by the wind and is not able to do anything to guide it (p. 95). In retrospect, *The Secret of Childhood* was a valuable contribution to the progressive education movement, and provided a good summary of Montessori’s philosophical and pedagogical approaches.

Reference:

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Course Manual DMT 101 Montessori Principle and Philosophy