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# As Stars For All Eternity

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IT WAS the end of a century — 1896 — when Maria Montessori received the coveted degree in medicine. Not only was she honored to have attained this high goal, but also because she was the first woman in Italy to have achieved a medical degree. Such attainments brought her eminence and fame but today she is best remembered as an educator, a reformer, a philosopher who put her theory into practical experience by the founding of a new system of education.

Of a family, noted on both maternal and paternal sides for contributions to philosophy, military science, and religion, Maria Montessori was born on August 31, 1870 — the year that Italy first became a united nation. Her childhood was a happy one, yet early in her life she exhibited interests uncommon to girls her age. Scholastically her grades were not spectacularly different from those of the other scholars attending the state day-school in Ancona. Realizing that a large metropolis would offer educational advantages, the Montessori family moved to Rome. Maria, because of an aptitude in mathematics decided first upon a

career in engineering, changed to a major in biology, and finally concentrated on the field of medicine. Thus, she became in 1896 the first woman to receive a medical degree in Italy.

Fully a decade was to pass before Dr. Montessori was to arrive at her true vocation. During these years crowded with activities involving research in psychiatric work, lecturing on the continent, championing the cause of women's rights, and the elimination of child labor, Maria Montessori influenced by the humanitarianism of Dr. Jean Itard and Dr. Edouard Seguin, medical men devoted to the education of the mentally and physically defective, was conscious of the lack of care — socially, morally, and intellectually — given to the feeble-minded child in Italy.

In 1899 she delivered an address on *Moral Education* which aroused the interest of the Minister of Education, Dr. Guido Bacelli, who asked Dr. Montessori to deliver a series of lectures on the training of the feeble-minded. This was the foundation stone of what was to become for Dr. Montessori a science, valid and reliable, centering attention on those children who deviated from the average even into the strata of idiocy and imbecility. Thus came into existence a state orthophrenic school wherein

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Dr. Montessori's interest in education was born.

However, her work with the lowest levels of mentality flowered out to embrace all children. Realizing the latent abilities of children and following the path laid out by Dr. Seguin, Dr. Montessori through skillful and planned direction succeeded in developing these low ability children to a proficiency in reading and writing. Concomitantly, during these years of practical work, Dr. Montessori prepared herself professionally by attending and teaching university courses in pedagogy and experimental psychology, visiting clinics and schools for the feeble-minded, such as Bicetre in Paris, and reading and translating the original works of Itard and Seguin. Dr. Montessori gave the title of "Founder of Scientific Pedagogy" to Dr. Itard. What title can be given to Dr. Montessori? Time must play its part but may she be aptly called "The Liberator of the Body and the Mind of the Child?"

Fundamentally, the so-called Montessori Method, applicable with all levels of mental ability, rests mainly upon a developmental use of prepared sensorial materials. Perhaps, the significant contribution to the education of the child is precisely along these lines. Although Seguin had similarly prescribed a text and teaching materials, nevertheless, the failure to make an optimum use of them resided mainly in the disillusionment of the teachers. Realizing this drawback Dr. Montessori stressed the role of the teacher in her prep-

aration for, understanding and evaluation of the material, and method coupled with a keen knowledge of the growth and development of the child.

Sensing that the low ability child had been assisted and had shown marked improvement in mental development, Dr. Montessori reasoned further by saying that the normal and bright child could produce more academic-wisdom. To a degree, Dr. Montessori was a pioneer in the field of the education of the gifted which appears to be the current topic of administrative conferences concerned with optimum achievement from kindergarten to university levels. This writer has observed four, five and six year old children reading fluently and with comprehension, doing arithmetic problems meaningfully and rationally, sensing geographical placement by inserting countries properly identified by name, along with other intellectual activities found for the most part, three or four years higher in the curriculum. Do the schools underestimate the capabilities of the young child and attempt to keep him at tasks devoid of challenge? Parents and school personnel are justly aroused by a seemingly watered down diet of scholastic fare.

It was on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1907, a festive day for young children, that Dr. Montessori saw her dream realized, by establishing in the slum area of the San Lorenzo Quarter in Rome a school so appropriately called "The Children's House." The first class was com-

posed of about fifty children — poor, undernourished, timid, unresponsive. This school became the mecca for thousands from India, Europe, and America — those interested in the method so successfully adapted from Dr. Itard and Dr. Seguin and brought to a greater degree of practicality by Dr. Montessori. The pupil grew not alone in body through the care of the devoted teachers, but more especially in the unfolding of the facets of the intellectual life brought about by the systematic and individual preparation of each child for the lesson at hand.

During the decade of 1910-1920 the Montessori Method saw its rise in Europe, India, and especially in the United States. Individuals from universities, colleges, and teacher training institutions fired by the enthusiasm for and dedication to the new kind of education as engendered by Dr. Montessori would return to their centers to emulate and carry on her work.

The main characteristics of the method distinguishing it from the curriculum of the nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary grades are many. The goal is to use time most profitably, and never to give work for the sake of keeping busy. All programs of work beginning at the earliest stage have been carefully devised and adapted by Dr. Montessori. Perhaps the outstanding contributions of the method may be summarized as follows:

1. The underlying pedagogy of

the method is scientifically sound based upon study and research.

2. The anthropological research used by Dr. Montessori is significantly more comprehensive and objective than that used today in our schools.

3. Correct, orderly habit formation becomes the *sine qua non* of all subsequent learning.

4. Children are permitted to talk and express themselves freely thus giving a sincere rapport between teacher and pupil.

5. All materials planned by Dr. Montessori are such as can be adequately handled by the children. The chairs, tables, toilet facilities are in keeping with the size and age of the child.

6. A complete lack of immobility, unnatural silence, and rigidity is apparent. These can hinder learning and thus do not contribute to growth of behavior.

7. The difference between right and wrong behavior become an essential part of the method.

8. Each child works independently and at his own pace. He is rewarded by having his work well done. There is no compulsion to work nor is there comparison of one child with another. The teacher truly fulfills her role as a guide.

That Dr. Montessori had critics is to be expected. Unfortunately, her system of education began to expand concurrently with that of John Dewey. Many educators confusing the two methods upon hearing, automatically castigated Dr.

Montessori as encouraging a chaotic kind of learning. The largest share of criticism emanated from the ranks of the very strong Progressivists who were at their zenith. William Heard Kilpatrick, a disciple of John Dewey at Columbia University, in a text, *Montessori System*, published in 1914, attempted to analyze the method, highlighting the short-comings as he saw them. Thus, with the unhealthy flavor of the results of the pragmatic philosophy of Dewey, *et al.*, the Montessori work did not gain a strong and lasting foundation in the United States as compared with that in India and Europe.

Within the past decade there has been a re-birth of interest in the method. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Providence, Rhode Island, have conducted a Montessori school for the past twenty-five years. The directress was trained by Dr. Montessori.

The equipment is strictly that advocated by the method. Case by case, the laboratory school of Rhode Island College has always used the method and because some modifications have been introduced it is called the Barnard method. In Bedford, Connecticut, a private school operated by a layman offers teacher-training in the method along with the directed observation of the pupils.

Dr. Montessori's long and dedicated life on behalf of the education of children came to an end on May 6, 1952, in her eighty-first year. She is buried in the cemetery attached to the Catholic church in Noordwijk, Holland. Today with the renaissance of interest in her method, her spirit lives on in the lives of those happy children who learn in a serene, joyful and liberated atmosphere. Thus her work and deeds shall shine as stars for all eternity.