

Far Western Philosophy of Education

Honolulu, Ohua

January 17, 2003.

Maria Montessori

on the natural formation of character in young children

Madonna Murphy, Ph.D.

University of St. Francis

Joliet, Illinois 60435

mmurphy@stfrancis.edu

Our schools have become violent and unsafe in this past decade. Young children shooting other children is not a phenomena only found only in the United States, but also round the world, i.e. France, Afghanistan and Japan. Cheating, plagiarism, and other unethical behaviors are found in Argentina, China, England and the United States. What is the root of this problem one might ask? Have children always been this way? Are they born with some inherited tendency towards evil? or are we raising our children today in a way that is dramatically different from the past? In this paper, I will examine this issue of character formation from the perspective of Maria Montessori. Her method has much to offer in developing more peaceful classrooms and helping to develop compassionate and caring citizens. However, for it to work we may have to change what has become the status quo – young children raising themselves before television, computer and video.

Maria Montessori developed a complete philosophy of education based on her discovery that the child has a mind able to absorb on its own. This discovery revolutionized early childhood education because she found that this special psychic force which helped the little child to develop- not only language, but also their whole personality - was common in all children no matter what their culture, nation, society, and religion¹. Maria first developed her method in Italy where she worked first with retarded children in the Orthophrenic School in Rome and then with poor street urchins, ages two to six in the Casa del Bambini. Using special teaching materials, Maria observed how these sullen, withdrawn and rebellious children became interested in working with the materials and soon became active, happy, and productive. Education, she proposed, is not something that the teacher does but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being.²

In Montessori's opinion the first two years of life are the most important, for in it the child has laid down the foundation of his personality as a human being. "All that we ourselves are has been made by the child we were in the first two years of our life," she says.³ Montessori proposed the idea of sensitive periods, special time in human development in which there is a burning intellectual love between the child and the environment.⁴ There are sensitive periods for language, order, sense refinement, and grammar. The sensitive period towards external order appears in the child's first year and continues through the second. The child has a joy and enthusiasm to see things in their proper places. According to Montessori, order is one of the needs of life which when it is satisfied produces a real happiness. Her three and four year olds put the things they have used back in place. Order consists in remembering where each thing should be. Later the child also develops an inner order.⁵

Montessori referred to the period from birth to age six as the "stage of the absorbent mind," a time when the child appears to almost absorb his environment. When he is given the freedom to explore, examine, experiment and interact with the multitude of objects and situations in his environment, the child is stimulated and energized, and gains a sense of power in a period of literal self-creation. Montessori noted that a child would concentrate extremely hard, persistently repeat actions, and exhibit self-discipline as he worked diligently toward mastering a particular activity. It was Montessori's conviction that if children are to progress successfully through these sensitive periods of development they must be free to act on objects or tasks in their environment when their interest arises. The power of a child's internal motivation is so intense that the need to reward or punish as a means of directing or motivating a child's educational efforts is not necessary. Montessori saw this first sensitive period as the

most important for it is the period in human development in which the child's character is formed and developed naturally.⁶

Montessori defines the school as "a prepared environment in which the child, set free from undue adult intervention, can live its life according to the law of development⁷." The Montessori method emphasizes that practical sensory, practical life and formal skills be included in the prepared learning environment of an effective classroom. Preplanned didactic materials are provided for the children to manipulate in a self-directed manner, so the child can attain mastery through individualized activity. The materials address, in a holistic nature, the child's physical, mental, and moral aspects. Certain materials promote competence in practical life skills that liberate the child by enabling him/her to independently handle ordinary tasks such as getting dressed and undressed, serving a meal, washing dishes, and displaying proper manners. Montessori presents a nobler conception of work as something essential to the dignity of every human being; work gives joy to children and that is why they enjoy the Montessori school so much⁸. The child naturally develops virtues related to working hard: diligence, perseverance, cooperation, responsibility, etc. The child achieves sensory development and muscular coordination through repetition of exercises. The child then proceeds at a rapid pace, almost like an explosion, into the development of the formalized skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

During her life-time, Maria taught teachers who then opened schools in Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Australia, Africa, England, the United States, the Philippines, Panama, and Canada as well as in Holland, France, Spain, Austria, Latin America, India and Pakistan.⁹ Later going to visit many of these countries, Maria could attest to the global relevance of her discovery of the child. "We see these phenomena repeated

unfailingly in all our schools with children belonging to different social classes, races and civilizations.”¹⁰ . For her in promoting the special dignity of the child, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize; and went to speak at the UNESCO conference in 1950.

Her studies led her to visualize the development of character as a natural sequence of events resulting from the child's own individual efforts, which, in her words, have no reference to any extraneous factors but depend on his vital creative energy and on obstacles he meets in daily life. For rooted in the unconscious mind, she taught, natural laws undoubtedly exist which determine psychological development and are common to all men.¹¹

The first sensitive period is one of creativeness in which the roots of character lie, even though at birth the child has no character. From 0 to 6 is the most important part of life, and this applies to character development also. "Before six the child develops character and its qualities spontaneously. "All know," Montessori said, "that the infant in arms cannot be influenced either by example or external pressure, so it must be nature herself who lays the foundation so character. The small child has no sense of right and wrong; he lives out side our notions of morality."¹² She felt that every defect of character was due to some wrong treatment sustained by the child during his early years. And if owing to negligence or wrong treatment, the defects cause between 0 & 3 are not corrected, not only do they remain but they get worse. Thus at six one may have a child with deviations produced before three years and others acquired since.¹³

According to Montessori, children construct their own characters, building up in themselves the qualities generally admired. This does not spring up from adult example or admonishments, but results from a long and slow sequence of activities carried out

by the child himself. At this time no one can "teach" the qualities of which character is comprised but one is to allow the child to work effectively without being disturbed or impeded.¹⁴ The concentration shown by the little ones doing their work brings about the formation of character. They will concentrate on their work. By repetition the child develops the ability to carry through what he has begun and this will lead to perseverance - another trait of character and another stage in human character formation.¹⁵

Maria presented an entirely new concept of the teacher's role. The directress was not to "teach"; she was to present and observe and allow the children to teach themselves as they worked with the materials that made up the properly prepared environment for their spontaneous activity¹⁶. Montessori believed that the essential instrument of effective teaching was observation; it was the tool that enabled teachers to determine the needs and interests of their students. The authority role of the instructor is replaced by that of facilitator whose major responsibility is to create a learning environment that, through careful observation, of student movement and behavior, meets the needs and interests of the students and allows them to develop and achieve satisfaction. The directress helps the child's character to develop naturally as they are guided in their learning.

Discipline thus springs up spontaneously in children. The answer lay in obtaining discipline by giving freedom. When children are placed in surroundings that permit them to evolve an orderly activity they come to have this aspect. Some have a mistaken notion of freedom according to Maria. Real freedom is a consequence of development, the development of latent guides aided by education.¹⁷

Maria relates an incident that illustrates the real freedom found in her schools. A

lady said to a child in one of her schools, " So this is the school where you do what you like?" "No ma'am" said the child, "It is not that we do as we like, but we like what we do."¹⁸

It is in the second period, from 6 to 12 that the child begins to become conscious of right and wrong, not only in regards to his own actions, but also the actions of others. Problems of right and wrong are characteristic of this age; moral consciousness is being formed and this leads later to the social sense. During this period that the conscience begins to function in the child. Third Stage from twelve years to eighteen years is a period of transformation, first puberty, and then adolescence. In this period the love of country is born, the feeling of belonging to a national group and of concern for the honor of that group.¹⁹ According to Montessori, the child is almost a different being at different stages of life and so there must be different educational methods for each stage²⁰. However, the character qualities formed in one period carry over to the next as the child is exposed to more complex relationships with his/her environment and with others.

What advice did Maria give to mothers? She told them that if the child was placed upon a path in which he can organize his conduct and construct his mental life, all will be well and his troubles will disappear. Montessori did not see it as a problem of moral education, but of character formation. Lack of character, or defects of character disappear of themselves if the child is allowed to work for that is to follow their inner guide and busy themselves with something which gives them serenity and joy²¹.

What advice would Maria give us today? She considered herself a citizen of the world with a message for all humanity. I think she would tell us that we do not allow our children to do meaningful work. Too much time is spent in front of the television, the video games and on the computer. Children pass their time but they do not engage in

real work or creative play. They do not develop their own character, instead they are bombarded with examples of poor characters. Is it any surprise that children become violent, withdrawn and listless? Children at each period should be allowed to work in meaningful way and make a contribution to society. Children should yearn to serve others and to make life more pleasant for others through their work. In this way we will find our classrooms purposeful and peaceful and we will develop compassionate and caring citizens.

References

- Kramer, Rita. 1976. *Maria Montessori: A Biography*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Montessori, Maria. 1971. *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.
- Montessori, Maria. 1974. *The Secret of Childhood*. New York: Ballantine Books, Random House.
- Standing, E. Mortimer. 1998. *Maria Montessori, her life and work*. New York: Plume.

¹ Montessori, 1971. *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, p. 6S

² *ibid.*, p. 8

³ *ibid.*, p. 6

⁴ Montessori, 1974. *The Secret of Childhood*. New York: Ballantine Books, Random House, p. 38

⁵ *ibid.* p. 49-52

⁶ Montessori, 1971. *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, p. 28

⁷ Standing, E. M. (1998). *Maria Montessori, her life and work*. New York, Plume. P. 118

⁸ *Ibid.*, 147

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁰ Montessori, 1971. *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, p. 204

¹¹ *ibid.* 193

¹² *ibid.* 194

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 196

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 208

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 216-218

¹⁶ Kramer, 1976. *Maria Montessori: A Biography*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 178.

¹⁷ Montessori, 1971. *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, p. 205-6

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 254

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 194

²⁰ *ibid.*, 19ff

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 202