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archival treasure publication

Lecture 1 of the Advanced Course Kodaikanal, 1943

Maria Montessori

Some Thoughts on the Importance of Presenting the Universe
to Six to Twelve Year-Old Children



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Introduction

Kodaikanal... so much more than a name with a rhythmic quality to it. In the Montessori world and literature, Kodaikanal, that Indian hill station, has acquired something of a “mystic and intriguing status”. It was here that Maria Montessori moved to escape the tough times the city of Madras (now Chennai) faced during 1942 and 1943, when it lived in the fear of Japanese planes.¹ It was also a place that offered a better and cooler climate for her health.

It is in this beautiful place, with verdant hills,

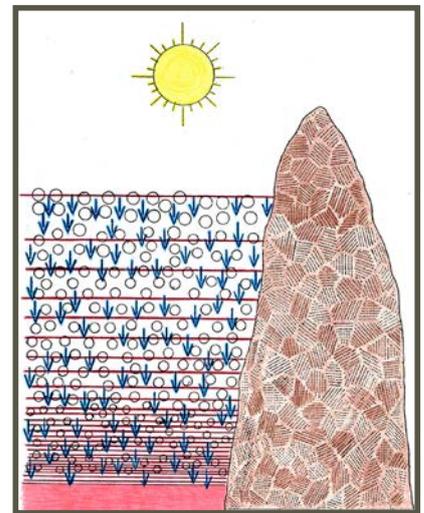


The inspiration for the Elementary Chart to the right is very clear from this Kodaikanal rock formation.

flowers and spectacular rock formations where her ideas on Cosmic Education received a revolutionary fresh impetus. Maria Montessori and her son Mario, together with some of their collaborators, were inspired to develop new materials and fascinating narratives in order to present to the children of six to twelve a fullness of knowledge of life, the history of our environment, and the history of how human beings made their “appearance” on Earth and have since acted upon their environment. As Montessori argued, in the second plane the child is most receptive to culture in all its many facets spanning human relationships, and our greater environment, going to the beyond: The children should be offered the Universe. This year’s Treasure Article from the Maria Montessori Archives

offers a preliminary sketch of how Montessori envisioned Cosmic Education, initiating the children in the first principles of all the sciences. We are delighted to gift you with this article, which was the opening lecture of Maria Montessori’s first Advanced Course in 1943.

As Mario recollected later in an interview with David Kahn, ‘We had included some advance techniques in previous courses. But it was at Kodaikanal where Dr Montessori developed certain visions, and through these visions applied and planned classes for children.’²



This opening lecture has been edited for the first time, with the greatest care, and will form part of a book on Cosmic Education currently in preparation with the Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company.

Featuring this lecture also celebrates the work developed at Kodaikanal and continued today by the offering of AMI’s adolescent training programme started in “Kodi” in October, 2022.

The editors hope you will enjoy Maria Montessori’s observations.

For a statement on our editorial approach, please see page 3.

Alison Awes, Carolina Montessori, Joke Verheul
editors

1 The Kodaikanal Experience, Chapter I, interview Lena Wikramaratne with David Kahn, The NAMTA Journal, Vol. 38, No. 1 - Winter 2013

2 The Kodaikanal Experience, interview Mario M. Montessori with David Kahn, The NAMTA Quarterly 5, 1 (1979, Fall)

Editorial policy to not change some of Montessori's gender language

Maria Montessori studied and pioneered her revolutionary approach to education in a male dominated world, a world in which recognition of female achievement did not come easily. Being trained in the traditions of academia, Montessori naturally adopted the language that was customary in her fields of research. In her time, gender-fair language was not on the agenda: male words were often used to denote the universal concept; Montessori would use the Italian *il bambino*—the male child—to refer to all children. The same observation can be made for her use of *man* (*l'Uomo*), men and humankind, by which words she refers to all human beings: the human individual as representing the species, the human race without reference to gender.

In our times we have become much more sensitive to gender-fair language to help reduce gender stereotyping and discrimination. Neutralization is essential, but where Montessori's language could perhaps not yet reflect this deeply felt necessity, her work and offerings, both approach and educational tools, offer equality in all dimensions.

The editors of this article have decided not to change Montessori's language to better reflect today's positions because we considered it a forced exercise to substitute every instance of these words for today's terminology. By providing this brief background, we are convinced that whatever "sensitive" language Montessori uses, the reader will understand it must be placed in the context of her time.

Questions? Write to Joke Verheul
at publications at montessori-ami.org



“Some Thoughts on The Importance of Presenting the Universe to Six to Twelve Year-Old Children”

Maria Montessori

A Treasure article from the Maria Montessori Archives

FIRST ADVANCED COURSE

Kodaikanal

Opening Lecture, 1 November 1943

This advanced course, as the words indicate, ought to be the continuation of the previous one. It is not, however, a direct continuation, because fundamentally two things change: the personality of the children, and the purpose of education, which for this age group is to give culture. This change in the personality, as I have very often said, is a very distinct change. In other words, it is not a continuation of that which has gone before. Rather it is a new period of life which from the psychological point of view is especially interesting because this period is one of acquisition of intense culture. Just look around and consider schools as they exist today, where certain kinds of culture are made obligatory, and you will find that the culture considered necessary for the masses is given. Institutions have guessed that this is a period when the human mind is the most intelligent and receptive, and therefore the items of culture can best be given in this period. What others have guessed at we have scientifically developed, and we call it The Age of Intelligence. We are so convinced of this fact, that we say that the period from ages 6 to 12 years is especially made by nature in order to help the child acquire culture, just as in the previous period from 3 to 6 the mind of the child is so made to absorb the

environment.

Now we are confronted with the consciousness which developed during the first six years. The children's consciousness and intelligence focus on the environment, because during this age we see a restless urge on the part of the child to know the reason of things. He is eager and it is this eagerness that indicates that this period is particularly suited for the best acquisition of knowledge. Psychologists have recognized this fact and have given it a name, which is strange and different: extraverted intelligence, extra meaning outward and verted meaning directed. This is a tendency that is directed beyond the immediate environment towards the world. But there is more evidence. Not only does the child show external interest to learn everything that surrounds him, this is also the period of life during which the seed of every culture must be sown, because the soil of intelligence is now fertile and best suited to bring the seed to germination. You can liken the mind of the child to a field, fertile and prepared to receive this great seed of culture. But, if by some misfortune, this seed is not sown at this time, it becomes difficult and artificial to impart knowledge at a later age. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this timely sowing for maximum result because this is the time when knowledge is received in the fertile ground of the intelligence with enthusiasm and with ease, and has the best chance of early germi-

nation.

The interest of the child becomes easy to arouse at this stage because it is vibrant, whereas later it becomes stagnated and dull, and the offering of culture becomes artificial.

The main task, therefore, of this period is the sowing of the seeds—the cultivation of the intelligence. You will ask, ‘How much shall we sow?’ and I answer, ‘As much as possible.’ I have only to consider the development of culture in civilization as it is today to see the many examples that must be given to the children. In front of me there is an immense field from which to choose. But herein also lies the problem. The field of culture today is so immense, it is so tremendously vast, that it is impossible to give to the children the whole of it.

Now the need arises to apply the special method whereby the child is introduced to these different items that form the culture of our civilization. The problem, then, is not how to draw up the syllabus but how best to include all of those items—how to sow the greatest number of seeds into this fertile ground of the awakened intelligence—and how to introduce them, so that the child may be able to grow into the individual who will be best suited to the times in which he lives, and the demands which the existing society makes upon his individuality. Our problem becomes one fundamentally of psychology. How shall we give culture so that the child not only penetrates its fields, but also that he will accept it with the greatest enthusiasm? This is [not] the only psychological problem as it surrounds the mind of the child, but it is the main one to be taken into consideration. The majority of those who have studied this period of the child’s life—psychologists, pedagogues, and educationalists—have recognized that there are other issues surrounding this question, which are not, however, as important as the one I have mentioned.

I have said in one of my previous courses that the child [aged 6 to 12] is an extraverted being. He has the desire to explore, and this tendency is not limited to the outer world alone, but also to

the world of thought and morality. We no longer find a child who absorbs language from the environment. He no longer receives with ease or without reasoning, but wants the reasons behind all that he encounters; the why and purpose of things and their meanings are what he seeks at this age. He wishes to understand and discover for himself, and through this construction, he builds up his moral individuality. Thus, the teaching of morals becomes an impossibility, as the teachers of today have discovered. The children somehow always dodge the teachers and discover their own truths about morality, of the difference between good and evil, while their capacity for judgement differs from that of their teachers. For instead of acquiring the teacher’s principles, the child assumes the role of moral judge. Nothing is more impossible than to teach morality to children of this age. As soon as we make an approach, we are challenged with retorts such as no adult would dare make.

Thus, you have before you a glimpse of this older child—a person no longer attached to his lovely mother, but an individual with a will—a rebel. He no longer thinks of her as the personification of his ideal but will always try to run from her because he is now directed towards the outer field of exploration—he is extraverted—and no longer merely a recipient of information. An explorer, the child now directs his attention to the exploration of the abstract world—the world of abstract ideas. This fact is not only acknowledged by psychologists, but also a trait recognized by the lay community. Mothers will notice to their dismay such changes in their previously obedient children, who now have become “naughty” and give little respect to mothers and seniors. The child is said to have entered the age of “roughness”. This being, who before was the lovable little child with baby curls, kissed and fondled by everybody, now resents any such advances. The adult’s remark, ‘How lovely you are!’ is met by a prompt desire to scratch. No longer is he the lover of the beautiful, dainty clothes that fitted him out like a little prince, and no longer

does he want his curls. I remember a girl who went to the house of one of her friends, asking her to cut off her long curly hair of which she was very fond and used to admire for hours.

This is the expression of the change in the nature of the child, who is no longer introverted (not interested in himself), but instead his energies are directed to the outer world—diverted to things apart from himself. We realize how very logical nature is in placing at this period of life this great craving or intellectual hunger in the mind of the child, and at the same time endowing him with an equal craving for the distinction between good and bad, just when his intelligence is awakened for all. The child needs this recognition [from the adult] in order to develop his own inner light.

Another interesting factor to be observed at this period of life is the tendency of the child to associate himself with other people, but not in a superficial association. It is an association that means much more than the mere being together with others. The ties of organization, of a collective kept together, consist of hierarchies under a chosen leader who must be obeyed. Now this natural tendency, this urge of grouping together, is a very important factor, as it is through this faculty that humanity frames its organization.

It becomes evident, then, that if to this singular acuteness of intelligence, possibilities of culture are given which widen his cultural outlook, if ideals are given which embrace the world, it is upon these that any organization will be based. Through this organization the child will greatly develop with the amount of knowledge and light acquired in the moral field of activity. This acquisition will be made use of at a later age for cultural formation.

Therefore, I repeat, that the most important idea is this intelligence and the desire to explore, and that all the others become secondary to the development of intelligence. To feed the intelligence, the main difficulty is not merely to transmit culture from one mind to another, it is the

repeated offering of food on a large scale.

It would certainly be an impossible task if we approached the problem of giving these cultural possibilities without any idea of how to manage it, as we cannot follow a closed road. We are already prepared by our understanding of his past development. We have learnt from the child a psychology that is of fundamental importance. One realization is that he must acquire culture through his own individual activity, and must have the freedom to take what he needs. Because it is not a question of teaching, it is a question of answering the needs of the child's mind.

The smaller child cannot not move, and no matter what he does, he is always moving because he has the need to build up his movement; likewise, the older child is continuously asking the reason for this and that, and why is this and why is that, because he requires this mental activity to understand for himself the causes of everything. Our duty is to open before him a wide field of culture which enables him to acquire and answer these thousands of "whys". We see how easy the path becomes. The question is not one of what to teach; we have before us a thirsty mind. We must merely put in front of him the items of culture because we know that the tendency of this mind is that of a studious person. The only thing we must do is to present to the child the items from which he may choose.

There is yet another thing we know about the child. We know that he acquires knowledge through repeated experience. We know this about the small child and that picture does not change. On the contrary, we know that the older child will wish to make repeated experiences for himself. So we begin with the sure guide, the psychology of the child. We have sufficient guidance to be persuaded on this fact. We are in front of a person with a tremendous desire to learn as much as possible, so it will be sufficient to offer items of culture and leave him the freedom to choose. We find ourselves on a very clear path. We have the added advantage

of the child having familiarity with geography, geometry, algebra, natural science, etc., subjects introduced generally in our elementary schools. So, it is very simple to present to an experienced person items of culture. This is not a problem for us. We shall be met by a person, having acquired already through his own past efforts, who is not loathe to learn. On the contrary, he wishes to go more deeply into the matter. The path is clear before us. And yet, our task is no easy one. Those who have tried are aware of the difficulty of preparing the necessary amount of intelligent food for this appetite of hungry minds.

Ordinarily, the child is required to know that which the syllabus prescribes and nothing more, nor is he supposed to attend school one hour more than he must. Within our schools, the approach is very different. In the ordinary schools the teacher is adequately shielded behind the curriculum and against the demands of the child. With us, the task of giving sufficient cultural interest falls heavily on the teacher, who often must look up a subject for which she is unprepared, based on the curiosity of the child. The absence of a syllabus signifies that the teacher's task has no limits. She needs to constantly remind herself to be awake, alert, and unafraid, when confronted by the interest of the child. It is the teacher who needs to be helped in the first instance, who will in turn supply this help to the child. This help to the teacher forms the characteristic feature of our plan of education for this period.

Therefore, I say my dear friends, if it is necessary to give to the children so many things let us be logical and give them the Universe. For if we skip from one subject to the other in order to see which ones interest him, it would be a tremendous task. But if we remain within the limits of the syllabus, there remains nothing else to offer. Therefore, we begin by giving the whole vision of the universe; the ideas and parts of the universe form one whole unity, and how wonderful is this idea! This supports enormously the mind of the child—this mind that searches desperate-

ly, going to one person for the why of this, and to another for the why of that—insisting always, asking always. This mind then, instead of wandering around, becomes fixed around this one central interest, the universe, which is imposing, and gives the answers to all his queries.

Even the child's mind, and its desire to know more and more, becomes the centre of interest. Certainly, it is necessary to give a centre of interest, but not as it is practised today. How can the mind of the child be interested in one topic for the entire year? How can one impose interest, as we are commonly expected to do? You could impose fatigue and duty—but interest is a personal matter, indifferent to persuasion. So, if you hear of a method alleged to be based upon the producing of interest, you can be sure of its absurdity.

Beginning with the universe provides more than interest when it is pursued with marvel and admiration. The sentiments aroused about the study of the universe are loftier and greater than any isolated interest and thus interest instead becomes concentrated. Consequently, knowledge is not only attained, it is simultaneously organized and systematized; knowledge becomes unified and complete rather than in fragments of disconnected pieces of information.

From this central curiosity around the unity of the universe, interest diverges to other related topics. For example, if you find yourself interested in the stars, the sun, or astronomy, it becomes necessary to study related factors. If we are interested in the Earth, we study geography; if in plants, we research the field of botany. These stars, this sun, these stones, and the life which inhabits the Earth form the whole; they are in close relation one with the other. This interrelation requires us to study the whole if we are to understand about any single aspect. In practice, no matter what you encounter—be it the stem or the single cell—you cannot explain it unless you understand the universe. And what better answer could one give to the mind seeking the “why” of the “whys” or the “cause” of the “causes”

than the whole of the “whys” connected? One almost realizes that the present universe is insufficient because greater curiosity and satisfaction are both sought and insatiable. Everything provides interest to the child. ‘How did it start?’ ... ‘How will it end?’ ... ‘Where does this come from?’ ... ‘How does it move?’ ... ‘This is something that I want to know.’ ... These questions show the intelligence of the mind of the child, with the desire to know more and more always at the centre. In this way, the mind begins to become conscious of its surroundings. ‘How are things interrelated?’ ... ‘Why are things interrelated?’ ... ‘Because the laws of the universe make it possible.’ Then the response, ‘How interesting!’

Sooner or later the child will ask spontaneously, ‘And I, who am I?’ And more than that, ‘What is the task and what is the role of human beings? Are we merely inhabitants upon this Earth, or are we something else?’ And, ‘Why are we so closely united? Why does one group fight against the other?’ So follow the ideas of good and evil, and the energies of the child in this period become significant, not only the intellectual energies but also the moral energies. As they do, the child will exclaim, ‘I know everything. I know more and more!’ He does not say, ‘How much must I learn?’ He sees always with greater and greater vision himself in relation to the whole. Perhaps were he to create poetry, he would say, ‘What a great gift I was given, to know and to understand all.’ This intelligence, instead of becoming draining, becomes better and better nourished, soars higher and higher, and attains a greater and greater vision. The result is the development of the intelligence.

The greatest support to the intelligence is that we must begin from the whole and not from the specific. Years ago, for the first time, we explained the plan of “Cosmic Education” in London. It is not given in pieces; it is not a logical sequence of passing from the known to the unknown. Instead, the plan is based upon the cosmic—the Universe. This is the only plan we

can follow without limits. Certainly, we cannot use this approach with an uninformed person, or with a person who cannot read or write, or with one who does not know of the various sciences. We would find it difficult to get such a person interested in these things. But this is not difficult because our children have known these details from the age of four. We are ready to receive the children with the plan of Cosmic Education, which centres the universe.

Nevertheless, you must not think of the plan as new. This has been the natural approach wherever there has been education in the real sense of the word. What was the plan of prehistoric education? If we consider ancient Egypt, we find the plan of Cosmic Education. They began by giving the story of creation followed by the history of mankind and then all the resulting ideas. ‘God created the world,’ the solemn teaching from the first days in old-fashioned schools, is the first information given to the children. Then children are made to understand the times in which they live through the history of the past and present. Spontaneously the teacher offers the answers to the questions which always is bugging the minds of the children. ‘What happened before? ... God sent an emperor and from him came another, and then this one, and so on ...’

And what did these people learn from this education? Merely their own place in creation and society. The children of older times were just like those of today asking, ‘Where was I before I was born? And why and how?’ and we answered, ‘Because God wanted you to be born.’ What is this but the conception of Cosmic Education? Do you think these notions were given to the old people or to the philosophers? No, they were given to the children, even when they used to write with a stylus upon stones. Even then, they did not address the lofty minds, they directed their information to the children.

This idea that the beginning is the whole is not revolutionary. It has passed through the experience of the ages. Everything is contained in the beginning. We follow this principle, and we take it up within a scientific plan.

