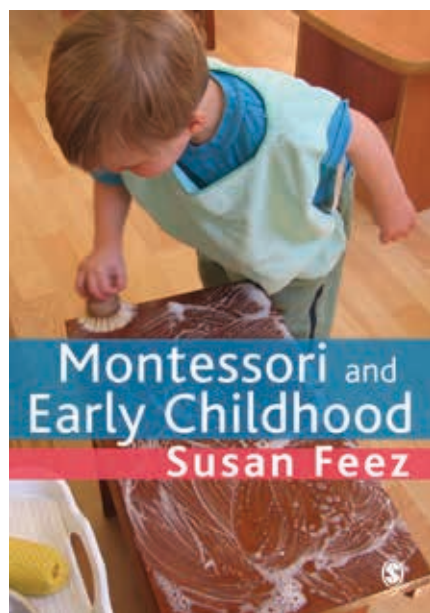




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BOOK REVIEW: MONTESSORI AND EARLY CHILDHOOD by Susan Feez

As reviewed by Kay Margetts, Melbourne Graduate School of Education



Montessori education has been frequently criticised, particularly for the strong reliance on structured skill-acquisition activities involving prescribed materials and teaching routines. However, *Montessori and Early Childhood: A Guide for Students* provides an overview of the approach to education devised by Maria Montessori that is both thought provoking and practical, and has currency for early childhood practitioners.

As I read this book my preconceptions of Montessori education were challenged. I was constantly reminded of how remarkably knowledgeable and insightful Maria Montessori was about the development of young children and the range of materials

and equipment she advocated for supporting their learning and engagement. I kept reading terminology and ideas about development and learning that resonated strongly with Piaget's Theory of Cognitive development and the work of Vygotsky and I wondered how strong the influence of her work has been on their work and that of others. So it was with great interest that in Chapter 9, where these links are explicated, I learned among other things that Montessori and Piaget were in contact throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and Vygotsky later had the benefit of the work of both these pioneers. The author however notes that while the works of Montessori and Piaget were each informed by their observations of children's activity, Montessori used her observations to design pedagogy, while Piaget used his observations to develop a theory of knowledge originating in childhood.

Given the popularity of Vygotsky's work and the *zone of proximal development*, I was fascinated to learn that he acknowledged that Montessori had actually identified this phenomenon before him, as noted in the citation on p. 167 of this book:



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For each subject of instruction, there is a period when its influence is most fruitful because the child is most receptive to it. It has been called the *sensitive period* by Montessori and other educators' (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 189; emphasis in original).

In recent times this notion of sensitive periods has been a key focus for neuroscientists (OECD and CERI, 2007).

Montessori and Vygotsky also believed that children's potential development is revealed in two ways: as they imitate adults and in so doing extend themselves beyond what they can do independently, and through play that is orientated to their future activities or achievements.

Again the author (p. 167), through citing Vygotsky (1978, pp. 117–118), illustrates how he encompassed the pedagogy of Montessori as an example of future-orientated play:

Montessori has shown that kindergarten is the appropriate setting for teaching reading and writing, and this means that the best method is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations. For this it is necessary that letters become elements in children's life in the same way, for instance, that speech is ...

This is rather surprising given that non-verbal, rather than verbal interactions are a feature of Montessori teaching techniques. However, Montessori (1949/ 1982, pp. 95–96) wrote that language gives humans 'the power to transform themselves, their communities and their environment ... [and] ...an instrument of "collective thought" ...to communicate, to share ideas' She believed that language development is integrated with fine and gross motor development such that increases in independent movement widen the field of activity and thereby increase the need for language. Her conviction that language helps children organise and hold perceptions in the mind 'as a resource for thinking and imagining', underpins Montessori education and is embedded in the foundational exercises of practical life and the senses, as well as mathematics and the social and physical science areas of the curriculum. Through the foundational exercises, the ability of children to follow a given sequence, manipulate objects precisely, self-correct, concentrate, and to remember, is nurtured and becomes the basis for learning to write and read.

This very easy to read book begins in Chapter 1 with a brief introduction to the work and life of Montessori (and her son) and early childhood education, and her belief in children's innate agency and drive for independence. Montessori believed that when children work independently and without interruption, they begin to concentrate, develop self-control over their movements and thoughts and do not need to be controlled by others. She also noted that as children concentrate and engage in meaningful activities, they become increasingly calm, focused and happy. Chapter 2 commences with a description of a morning in the Children's House – preschool for three-to-six year-olds – and consists of some delightful vignettes of children's activities and teacher pedagogy. This chapter then unpacks key features of Montessori education including the critical role of careful observation and recording of children's spontaneous

activity for informing transformative pedagogy. It also addresses key elements of the conceptual framework used by Montessori educators, including stages of development and multi-age groupings, sensitive periods, how children learn, and the normal state of development. Importantly, this chapter addresses the debate around children's activity as developmental work or play and defines the activity that Montessori educators call children's work. The definition appears to sit comfortably with the notion of child-initiated, play-based intentional learning and teaching advocated in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and other contemporary early childhood curricula.

The importance of carefully prepared environments that allow children as much freedom as possible and encourage constructive activity is carefully described in Chapter 3, for each of the three multi-age settings (birth to three, three to six, six to nine years). Furniture, use of space, aesthetics, light, and learning materials and their presentation, along with examples of educators' interactions are generously described and provide stimulation for the reader to evaluate their own learning environments and pedagogy and to implement some of the ideas in this chapter. Towards the end of the chapter, the author explains the importance of the development of, and interconnections between, concentration, independence and self-control and physical activity. Although the notion of freedom for children in Montessori classrooms is a key aim in supporting children's learning, this does not mean that children can do as they please. Some useful strategies for intervening in disruptive or aggressive behaviours are provided and the notion that these behaviours are adaptations or responses to physical or social 'obstacles' is espoused.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the two foundation areas of the Montessori curriculum: exercises of practical life and exercises of the senses. Exercises of practical life refer to culturally valued social and physical daily tasks, and provide children with opportunities and relevant ways of focusing their minds to regulate their actions and attention and contribute to communal order and harmony. These exercises involve everyday activities such as dressing, eating, self-care, care of the environment, interacting with others and courtesy. The importance of imitation and repetition is unpacked and the three stages of exercises of practical life are explained. These stages reflect children's

increasing independence. The first stage is the educator's presentation of an activity, including demonstrating how to do it, the child's choosing of the activity and independently imitating the educator, and finally the child's spontaneous use of the knowledge or skill in another context. Many examples of activities for supporting children learning practical life skills are provided, accompanied in many instances with useful, almost step-by-step, pedagogical instructions for what to do and say. While some may find these routines restrictive, they do provide useful examples for intentional teaching. I found that the outcomes and practices in this chapter, as in other chapters, reflect the five EYLF learning outcomes.

In addressing exercises of the senses, Chapter 5 describes some of the specially designed sensorial materials developed by Montessori to refine children's sensory perception and



help them move from concrete reality to abstraction and imagination. This occurs as children are given the language to label particular concepts – colour, shape, size, texture, sound, science, and so on. These materials are frequently considered to be the forerunners of puzzles and other problem-solving games typically found in early childhood services. Understanding the materials described in this chapter, such as the pink tower, would be enhanced by simple sketches. However, the examples provided should be useful to early childhood educators in providing ideas for enhancing their learning environments.

Distinctive design features of the language curriculum and the materials that support the development of spoken language, written language, reading and writing, and some of their discrete components such as enrichment vocabulary, grammar and reading fluency, and reading analysis are explained in Chapter 6. Montessori language learning materials are carefully designed to support particular purposes and require children to move and manipulate them. In contrast to many contemporary language learning resources, the Montessori materials are very simple and try to avoid unnecessary distracting colour and decoration. Importantly, this chapter addresses language learning in children from birth to the early years of primary school and the role of physical activity is carefully explained.

Montessori loved mathematics and her materials encourage children and educators to share this enthusiasm. As with language learning, mathematical concepts are developed as children use movement and their senses to explore the learning materials. The self-correcting materials enable children to experience a range of concepts within the one set of materials and to move from concrete activity to abstraction. As well as shape, size and pattern, children are introduced to whole numbers and fractions, geometry and algebra. Chapter 7 provides an overview of mathematics learning and activities for supporting the different concepts.

Learning about the world in which we live is a key component of early childhood curriculum. The notion that all things in the world are interdependent and interconnected (including the classroom community that is built as children and educators interact) is a strong feature of contemporary Montessori education and is a means for educating children for peace and sustainability. As with other components of the curriculum, language is critical for building culturally valued knowledge about the natural and social sciences: geography, history, science and the visual arts. Information about these aspects of the curriculum and a repertoire of activities for building understanding is outlined in Chapter 8.

Each chapter is supported by carefully selected *Case studies* that are, in essence, vignettes of children's activities and educators' pedagogy. In some instances these are followed by *Reflection points* that provide a rationale for what is described in the *Case study*. *Activities*, *Question points* and *Things to think about* are also provided throughout to encourage practitioners and early childhood education students to undertake guided observation and reflect on issues explored in the book and in relation to their own knowledge, experiences and practice.

While certain aspects of pedagogy may not sit comfortably with all educators, I would be surprised if anyone reading this book does not take away ideas to apply in their own setting and to extend their professional repertoire and expertise, and thus enrich children's learning and development.

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This article first appeared in the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* in June 2011. The author has kindly provided permission to publish.

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