WORKING TOGETHER TO HONOUR THE CHILD

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An extract of this – paper was presented at the public presentations in Sydney and Melbourne "The Symphony of Montessori: Working Together to Honour the Child".

Ideas are in the air, awaiting discovery and recognition by great minds who then give those ideas the power to be transformed into action. The discoveries made by Dr Montessori about children, the ideas she gathered as she turned the searchlight of her genius towards the child were powerful ideas whose time had come. These ideas, which grew into a philosophy, have reverberated down the century.

Throughout her life and since her death, there have been other people blessed with the necessary insights who have made similar discoveries to Dr Montessori, sometimes without any awareness that she had already thought and written about them. This is the way it is with humans and the universality of ideas. Montessori was generous with her genius and was fascinated by the ideas of others, who influenced her own thinking as she, in turn, influenced the thinking of others. The important point here is that her ideas had power to do good and that she shared them with the world, not seeking fame for herself but a better world for children.

Rachel Remen in her wonderful book, **Kitchen Table Wisdom** (1997), speaks of her anger and feeling of betrayal when a colleague used Rachel's ideas and did not acknowledge their source in a best selling book. As a psychotherapist, Rachel was used to the academic world where ideas are jealously guarded and ownership is important. However, Rachel has humility and is open enough to learn from her patients and was able – painfully – to acknowledge that the world of ideas is everybody's domain. She learned this when her client said, "You know, you can get a lot of good done in this world if you don't care who gets the credit." Struck by the profound truth in this little bit of philosophy, Rachel asked her client what made her think of this. "Oh," she said, "it was on the bumper sticker of the car that just pulled out of my parking spot."

My talk tonight will explore some of Montessori's ideas which have been echoed and validated by educators, philosophers, environmentalists, psychologists, curriculum consultants, childbirth educators and neurologists. When I first began work on this topic, the scope was far more limited. My fellow members of the AMI Alumni Association and I had a far more modest project in mind. We thought that it would be a good idea to identify some practices in Montessori classrooms and talk about how they are used in general education. Then I began to explore – and my journey took me far beyond that narrow pathway. I will touch on some of the highlights of my exciting discoveries but there are many more for you explore independently.

Before I plunge into this talk, I will take a few moments to identify Dr Maria Montessori for those of you who are meeting her ideas for the first time tonight. Maria was born on the 31st August in 1870, the daughter of Alessandro and Renilde Montessori in eastern Italy. She was an only child and very soon proved that she was going to do things *her* way. At first she decided to study engineering but later changed to medicine. Both professions were closed to women, but against great odds, she achieved her goal, graduating at the age of 26 from the University of Rome at the top of her class.

She was given work with adults in a mental asylum and one day, discovered almost by accident, the children's room. The children were considered retarded and were kept in the room with little activity and no expectation that they could learn. It was at this point in her life that she decided to learn all she could about education so that she could help these children. She went to the great educational philosophers of her day, studied and observed the children. Basing her ideas on the work of Seguin, she manufactured materials for the children so that they could learn through their

senses and their self chosen activity. She encouraged the children to be free to explore and teach themselves through the materials. She requested that the adults were not to teach but to guide. These were revolutionary principles in their day and I believe, are still radical today.

She developed her philosophy throughout her long and productive life, shaping and changing it in response to her observations of the child. There are numerous books which are a rich source of information about Dr Montessori's life and work which I would recommend to those of you who are interested in learning more.

MONTESSORI AND OTHER GREAT THINKERS

Throughout this century Dr Montessori's work excited the interest of other great minds. The truth of her discoveries about children was recognised by others with the eyes to see. **Bertrand Russell**, one of the greatest western philosophers who, like Dr Montessori was a polymath or an expert in many fields, and again, like Montessori, was a tireless worker for justice for the oppressed and peace for the world, chose a Montessori school for his child. He saw that the way a child could learn self discipline best was not through external means but by self chosen activity which has its own inherent discipline. He said in 1926 (from **Maria Montessori: a Centenary Anthology** pub-lished by the AMI in 1970, p. 37):

> *"I had always understood that Madam Montessori dispensed with discipline and I wondered how she managed a room full of children…On sending my little boy of three to spend his mornings in a Montessori school, I found that he quickly became a more disciplined human being…The fundamental idea is simple: that the right discipline consists not in external compulsion, but in habits of mind, which lead spontaneously to desirable rather than undesirable activities. What is astonishing is the great success in finding technical methods of embodying this idea in education. For this, Madam Montessori deserves the highest praise."*

Jean Piaget was the President of the Montessori Society of Switzerland and noted the similarities between his theory of the stages of development in childhood and Montessori's Planes of Development. **Sigmund Freud** recognised the importance of Montessori's work. He wrote in a letter in 1917:

> *"Like anyone who deals with the study of the psyche of the child I am in deep sympathy with your efforts, which show at the same time a love for – as well as an understanding of – Man."*
> (**Centenary Anthology**, p 28)

Freud's daughter **Anna**, became one of the first psychotherapists who worked predominantly with children. The nursery schools which she established in London during the Second World War, followed the Montessori philosophy. She wrote in 1966,

> *"That pleasure in achievement, linked only secondarily with object relations, is present in very young children as a latent capacity, is demonstrated in a practical manner by the successes of the Montessori method."*

Another great thinker, **Alexander Graham Bell**, had a Montessori class in his home during the winter of 1913. He said of the children in the class:

> *"Their development has been so remarkable and the whole experiment so inspiring that people all over the country have become convinced of the values of your teachings and the advantages to American education that will follow a general adoption of the Montessori method."*

(**Centenary Anthology**, p 23)

Montessori's importance was acknowledged by religious leaders, governments around the world and academic institutions. In 1946 she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the Educational Institution in Edinburgh. Its President said:

> *"Teaching is a conservative profession, but once in a generation there arises an outstanding figure which comes with a breath of new life inspiring people to new endeavours and new activities. These are the great figures of educational history. Among them no-one in our generation stands higher than Madam Montessori. her name has become a household word, not only in Scotland, not only in Europe, but in every part of the world."*
> (**Centenary Anthology**, p 50)

A remarkable Australian woman, **Martha Simpson** an inspector of schools in NSW and Teachers College lecturer, had generated enough enthusiasm for the Montessori method after attending a training course in Rome, that the education system in NSW was primed to become Montessorian in 1914. However, in the midst of a world war, the voices for the child and for world peace, were quickly drowned by the voices for war.

Montessori was seen by the world as a great force for peace. She was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1950, Torres Bodet, the General Director of UNESCO said,

> *"In our midst we have someone who has become the symbol for education and world peace: Maria Montessori."*

The revered Indian leader **Mahatma Gandhi** wrote in his book **Towards a New Education** (1953):

> *"Even as you, out of love for children, are endeavouring to teach children through your numerous institutions, the best that can be brought out in them, even so, I hope that it will be possible not only for the children of the wealthy and the well-to-do, but for the children of paupers to receive training of this nature. You have very truly remarked that if we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children and if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have to struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace, until at last all the corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which, consciously or unconsciously, the whole world is hungering."*
> (**Centenary Anthology**, p 39)

Dr Montessori excited great interest wherever she spoke and her ideas and educational practices were enthusiastically adopted by many people on every continent of the world (except Antarctica!). The space of this talk only allows me to touch on a very few. I recommend to anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the dramatic impact of her all encompassing philosophy, to read **Maria Montessori: a centenary anthology**, published by the Association Montessori International in Amsterdam in 1970.

MONTESSORI GAVE THE CHILD A VOICE

Why is it easier for governments to cut back on their financial support for babies and pre-school children than on support for the armed forces or road works or large building projects? One reason is that children do not vote, they do not have a loud voice amongst policy makers and power brokers. There are some adults who see the injustice of this quite clearly and act on it. Dr Montessori acted on it by speaking on behalf of children – all children. In raising this topic, I am not

setting myself up as a judge of the way adults or governments respond to children's needs. I believe that all adults do their best by their child. I am raising this issue because it runs as a bright thread through the fabric of Montessori's work and is validated by other people concerned with children. I am hoping that it may encourage you all here tonight to leave aside your adult body for a few minutes and see the world through the eyes of a child.

Dr Montessori spoke on behalf of children. She spoke loudly about much that was wrong with the way children were treated by adults and society. She saw the baby as a young human in the process of growth – vulnerable and powerless. She saw adults with the power of life and death over these young people, who wielded this power unquestioningly and with a strong belief in their God-given right to do so. She saw that the major impacts of these adults were during the time when the baby was most open and trusting and that the memory of these early years would remain in the subconscious mind but exist as the most powerful shaping force in the child's life. The indelible experiences which actually shape the baby's mind happen before he or she has any defenses to withstand these influences.

Montessori wrote in 1938:

> *"Parents must openly and willingly confront the most burning social issue: the struggle for the recognition of the rights of the child."*

There are a few people today who have continued Montessori's role as advocate for children. One such person is the cartoonist and social commentator Michael Leunig. When he published a cartoon in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1995, which I will describe in a moment, he raised an outcry which reverberated amongst families all over Sydney. What is he doing here? He is giving a voice to a baby. By doing this he confronted the comfortable beliefs of parents that child care was not only their right as a modern parent but that it was actually good for their child.

This very cartoon inspired Sally Loame to write a book called, **Who Cares – Guilt, Hope and the Child Care Debate** (1997). She describes her busy morning organising her two pre-school children for day care before she goes to work:

> *"Then something catches my eye. A Leunig cartoon. He needs more than the usual split second to digest, but this morning I take it. God, he's drawn a baby, its little head sticking out of a pupae-like swaddling, 'abandoned' by its mother in a child-care centre. 'Thoughts of a Baby Lying in a Child Care Centre,' he's called it. The wretched little mite lying alone and immobile damns his mother for her ignorance, her cruelty and her selfishness for leaving him and going to work. But the Leunig baby has no malice against his mother, just love and bewilderment."* (p 2)

Parents were furious with Michael Leunig for the question he posed. They felt that he had no right to pose it. Their rights as parents had been questioned and their reaction throughout the print and electronic media was full of anger and the bitterness of betrayal. They did not want to truly consider child care from their child's point of view. In an interview a week after the cartoon was published, Leunig said:

> *"The mother-baby relationship is a very particular one. It lies at the heart of our culture and I think we're losing this vital relationship. We've become ignorant about the psychological and emotional state of the infant, in the same way we were about Aborigines when we used to take their children away.*

> *It's become an expectation that when you have a child you put it in a crèche and go back to work. Noone is questioning that expectation. I'm just trying to open up the question, to be the voice of the infant."*
> (Loame, 1997, p 7)

It is often a painful process for adults to shift their perspective and consider our influence on a child. To do so, we need an empathic imagination and the courage to explore our own prejudices. As Montessori said in her book, **The Formation of Man** (1938):

> *"The greatest difficulty in the way of an attempt to give freedom to the child and to bring its powers to light does not lie in finding a form of education which realises these aims. It lies rather in overcoming the prejudices which the adult has formed (about the child). That is why I said we must recognise, investigate and fight against "the prejudices concerning the child" only, without touching other prejudices which the adult may have formed regarding his own life…*
>
> *If the prejudices concerning the child are directly and exclusively aimed at, a reform of the adult will accompany it step by step because an obstacle in the adult will have been removed. This reform of the adult is of enormous importance for society as a whole. It represents the re-awakening of a part of human consciousness which has been covering itself progressively with layer upon layer of impediments…There is in (the adult)…a blind spot, similar to that on the retina of the eye. The child, that unknown being, sometimes considered almost as a matrimonial accident, who opens a road of sacrifices and duties, does not in himself arouse either awe or admiration."*

Montessori, Leunig, Sally Loane and many other people promoting the rights of the child are speaking with one voice when they invite adults to have the courage to consider the world from the child's point of view. When adults can do this, they see how they themselves may have been an obstacle in their child's best interest. When an adult comes to this understanding, he or she then has the tools to begin a personal transformation which will both help the adult and the child to grow to the fullest potential

THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

Dr Montessori was one of the first voices speaking about the responsibilities of parents to their children. She spoke often of the need for the adult to create a warmly supportive environment and then to step back, allowing the child as much opportunity to develop as possible. In her book, **The Child in the Family** (1989), Montessori says,

> *"The adult ought never to mould the child after himself, but should leave him alone and work always from the deepest comprehension of the child himself."*

And again she notes:

> *"The small child … is defined by educators as (soft wax), which can be shaped in the appropriate way. Now the concept inherent in the definition of (soft wax) is correct: the error lies in the fact that the educator believes* he *must shape the child. On the contrary, the child must shape himself.…"*

Montessori did not mean by this that the tiny child should be left to his or her own devices and abandoned by the adult. Her message is one of deep love and utter respect. She acknowledges the passionate love which exists between child and parents but also asks that this love not be used to dominate the child. She asks that the adult have a selfless maturity, a spaciousness of mind which will mean that the adult will always be there for the child in a loving, consistent and joyful way and that the adult will also be guided by respect for the growing child and an awareness of

how easily the small child's attempts at independence may be crushed by unthinking acts of domination.

She says in **The Child in the Family:**

> *"As educators, we can choose the proper path, using our sensitivity to understand what action is necessary to help in the construction of the child. We must inhibit ourselves in order not to become destructive. The one who creates is the child: we do not. It is no easy matter to make this clear, for in the popular mind it is the adult who creates the new life. What must happen, therefore, is a kind of purification, whereby we liberate ourselves of the unseemly illusion of our omnipotence."* (p 20)

Stephen Covey in his best selling book, **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People** (1989), speaks of his bewilderment when, despite both parents' best efforts at praising and positive reinforcement for their son, the boy seemed to become more and more fearful, more timid and clumsy. Stephen Covey observed his son closely and looked deeply and honestly into his own heart. He finally realised that he was – with the best of intentions – attempting to mould his son into a child he, Covey, could be proud of. With great humility, Covey accepted that it was not his right or responsibility to shape his son. This work belonged to his son alone. Covey accepted in his heart that he was already proud of his son and that he need do nothing to earn his approval except live. He did not need to be an "A" student or a top athlete or a famous piano player. Whatever his son did with his life was his own choice, and Covey would honour that choice while staying in close touch and sharing the highs and lows.

> *"Through deep thought and the exercise of faith and prayer, we began to see our son in terms of his own uniqueness. We saw within him layers and layers of potential that would be realised at his own pace and speed. We decided to relax and get out of the way and let his own personality emerge. We saw our natural role as being to affirm, enjoy and value him. We also conscientiously worked on our motives and cultivated internal sources of security so that our own feelings of worth were not dependent on our children's 'acceptable' behaviour".* (p 20*)*

Aline Wolf quotes both Carl Jung and JG Bennett in her wonderful book, **Nurturing the Spirit in non-sectarian classrooms** (1996).

> *"The well known psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, has advised, "If there is anything we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is something that could be better changed in ourselves." JG Bennett echoes this advice: "Whether we have to deal with children as parents or as teachers, our task begins with ourselves; and there is very much more to be derived by children from what those in contact with them do to put their own house in order than what they attempt to do to put the child's house in order."* (p 35)

Here is Montessori (1936) again:

> *"The child's parents are not his makers but his guardians."*

Another tireless worker on behalf of children in Australia is Professor Maurice Balson. In both his books, **Becoming Better Parents** and **Understanding Classroom Behaviour**, he sends the same message to adults and children. To help a child to reach his or her full potential as a human being, adults need to accept the child as he or she is. Balson believes, like Adler and Dreikus, that encouragement, not praise or competition, is the adults' most powerful tool with which to assist the child. He quotes Soltz (1967):

> *"She (the teacher) must also accept the child as he (the pupil) is now – not as she expects him to be later. 'As you are right now, you are fine. Now let us learn and grow together."*

Let us pause here for a moment to consider the difference between praise and encouragement. The starting point of praise is that, in the eyes of the adult, the child needs to change in some way – to get better at a skill, or to share instead of being selfish, or to form a letter or number better, or to stop bullying, etc. In the adult's view the child is lacking in some respect and this needs to be remedied. So the adult does this by praising the actions which are desirable and criticising (overtly or by ignoring) those that do not measure up. This locks the child into trying to please the adult, trying to measure up to the adult's standard, to hunger for the words of approval, "well done," "best in the class," "so much faster than your brother." It makes the adult feel good.

Encouragement, on the other hand, begins with acceptance, "As you are now, you are fine." It accepts that the child has an enormous drive towards perfection, to do it better, to be the best I can, to reach for the stars. The adult is there to share this journey, not to dictate it. If you watch a child mastering a skill, emptying the dishwasher, cleaning his teeth, getting the sum right after checking it on the answer chart, you will know the immense satisfaction that child is feeling, you will almost see the self esteem growing by the way his or her shoulders straighten, the head is held proudly, a quiet smile appears. This child will not be the servant of other people's opinions.

Dr Montessori (1988) says:

> *"There is one thing (the teacher) must never do and that is to interfere by praising a child's work, or punish him if it is wrong, or even by correcting his mistakes. This may sound absurd and many people find it a stumbling block.… Most teachers think it is their main business to be always criticizing.… The child's training has, they think, to be guided by two reins: prizes and punishments, …but if a child has to be rewarded or punished, it means he lacks the capacity to guide himself, so this has to be supplied by the teacher. But supposing he sets himself to work: then the addition of prizes and punishments is superfluous; they only offend the freedom of his spirit. Hence, in schools like ours which are dedicated to the defence of spontaneity and which aim at setting the children free, prizes and punishments obviously have no place. Moreover, the child who freely finds his work shows that to him they are completely unimportant."* (p 223)

Montessori goes on to speak about the dispiriting effect on the child of having his or her work marked with a cross to indicate it is wrong. Pointing out a child's mistakes has "a lowering effect on his energies and interests." (1988 p 224) It does not teach the child anything except that he or she is a failure. This discourages a child even more and makes it even more difficult for him or her to learn.

> *"For if a child is to stop making mistakes, he must become more skillful, and how can he do this if, being already below standard, he is also discouraged?"* (1988, p 224*)*

Rachel Remen (1996) sees praise and criticism from a physician's point of view.

> *"The life force in us is diminished by judgement far more frequently than by disease. Our own self judgement or the judgement of other people can stifle our life force.… Unfortunately, judgement is commonplace. It is as rare to find someone who loves us as we are as it is to find someone who loves themselves whole.*
>
> *Judgement does not only take the form of criticism. Approval is also a form of judgment. When we approve of people, we sit in judgement of them as surely as when*

> *we criticise them. Positive judgement hurts less acutely than criticism, but it is judgement all the same and we are harmed by it in far more subtle ways. To seek approval is to have no resting place, no sanctuary. Like all judgement, approval encourages a constant striving, it makes us uncertain of who we are and of our true value…Approval can't be trusted. It can be withdrawn at any time no matter what our track record has been. It is as nourishing of real growth as cotton candy. Yet many of us spend out whole lives pursuing it."* (p 35)

Jennifer Monaghan, a teacher with over 15 years in education in the Catholic school system as a teacher, student welfare counsellor and principal, echoed Montessori's words in 1995. She spoke at the National Montessori Conference in 1996:

> *"Encouragement means to put heart into the person. By instilling courage into others, we help them see their strengths and the development of belief in themselves.*
>
> *Though experts extol the value of using praise to raise the children's self esteem, praise frequently has the opposite effect. When praise is used, usually it is pointing out what we think someone already does well."* (p 16)

Montessori's guidelines to teachers in the **Absorbent Mind** (1988) agree with Ms Monaghan's suggestions on how to encourage children:

> *"Give the child responsibility*
> *Look for their strengths*
> *Have realistic expectations*
> *Avoid comparison with others*
> *Value risk taking*
> *Model having the courage to be imperfect*
> *Emphasise the action, not the actor or the result*
> *Avoid criticism."* (p 16)

The wonderful thing about being with the children is that through their optimism and their ability to come to each day fresh and loving, is a great opportunity for the adult who shares their life to grow personally and to become more aware of strengths and weaknesses. Steve Biddulph speaks of this in his inspiring book, **The Making of Love in Today's Society**.

I will conclude this section with another quote from Stephen Covey. This is from his book **First Things First** (1997):

> *"Life's tests refine you. Genuine friendships sustain you. Being unaffected and genuine, having integrity, and facing problems squarely help as you try to reach out, make a difference, touch a life, be an example, do the right thing. You become motivated as you struggle to become a better person.*
>
> *The struggles are ongoing. After raising nine kids, I think I'm just beginning to get some perspective. Many times I blew it, lost my temper, misunderstood, judged before understanding, didn't listen, and acted unwisely. But I also tried to learn from my mistakes. I apologised, grew up, shifted my value, recognised growth stages, didn't overreact, rolled with the punches, learned to laugh at myself, had fewer rules, enjoyed life more, and realised that raising kids is hard work – physically and emotionally. It's draining as well as fulfilling. You fall into bed at night totally exhausted, and like Scarlett O'Hara murmur, "Tomorrow is another day." Oh to be half as smart as your child thinks you are and half as dumb as your teenager sees you!"* (p 5)

WHAT IS EDUCATION?

Dr Montessori believed that the great purpose of education was to support life. Education should assist every human being to live better lives and to be more sensitively attuned to children so that the future generations would bring greater peace and human harmony to the world. Normally education is viewed in a more narrow way. It is often seen as a means of correcting faults in children or society generally. For example, the literacy and numeracy standards are believed to be dropping, so a new program is initiated in schools. Education is asked to react to problems. However, Montessori saw the potential for education to be far broader, more proactive in its positive influence by supporting the best in life rather than trying to correct its faults.

Montessori says (1988):

> *"This is education, understood as a help to life; an education from birth, which feeds a peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim, attracting them to a single centre."*

Education, therefore, is not a curriculum or timetable. Rachel Remen (1997) defines education in a very similar way to Montessori. She says that educate comes from the root word educare, "…the root word means to lead forth the innate wholeness in a person."

She goes on to speak about the theory of karma. She says:

> *"(It) suggests that life itself is in its essential nature both educational and healing, that the innate wholeness underlying the personality of each of us is being evolved, clarified and strengthened through the challenges and experiences of our lifetime."* (Remen, 1997, p 325)

Montessori saw education as a force for the liberation of the personality. She said (1946)

> *"Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities."*

Montessori education is therefore not tied to a static curriculum or a passing on of information. Margaret Stephenson, a well known Montes-sorian, quotes Dr Montessori in **Dr Montessori – A Contemporary Educator?** (1996)

"During 1948, in a lecture in Poona, India, Dr Montessori said,

> *'Today education … is still largely the passing on of information. It is static and stagnant. It fails its purpose if it remains on the same old level, if it does not move with the needs of the time. Mere information imparted is nothing. It is the cultivation of the values that are hidden in the human personality that is of importance and urgently needed today.'"*

Erich Fromm in his beautiful book, **The Art of Loving (1957, p 117),** validates this view. He says that the teaching of knowledge is useless:

> *"While we teach knowledge, we are losing that teaching which is the most important one for human development: The teaching which can only be given by the simple presence of the mature, loving person."*

The globlisation of information and the pace of change, makes it vital that education is used in its broadest sense. The information in use today will be out of date in 20 years. As Mr Mario

Montessori said in **Education for Human Development**, "It doesn't matter what we teach children so long as we teach them how to think."

Teaching children to think and question is suggested by the proponents of the study of philosophy for primary and secondary students and well known radical thinkers such as Edward de Bono (1990). Teachers who share philosophy and divergent thinking with children help them to see things from another perspective and to liberate their minds from their normal patterns of thought. They are helping children to develop habits of mind which are flexible and open to new ideas.

Dr Montessori (1989, p4), said that the best experience for a child in school was to have the spark of his or her imagination ignited, the seeds sown which would enthuse the child to want to find out for him or herself. The best curriculum for a child exists,

> *"not in a syllabus to be imposed on him, or with exactitude of detail, but in the broadcasting of the maximum number of seeds of interest. These will be held lightly in the mind, but will be capable of later germination, as the will becomes more directive, and thus he may later become an individual suited to these expansive times."*

The seeds sown lead to germination of ideas and true understanding. The child begins to understand the reason underlying the knowledge instead of learning the rules by rote.

As Jane Healey points out in **Endangered Minds, Why Our Children Don't Think** (1990), children are losing the ability to reason out a problem, to apply their knowledge in new ways, to sustain interest over a period of time longer than the program space between advertisements on television. They need opportunities to think, to reason, to debate, to have conversations, to discuss ideas, to collaborate, to independently persist with a problem until it is solved. They do not need facts and rote learning. Jane Healey speaks with regret of the loss of the oral narrative tradition where the myths and fables of the culture were passed on to children. While listening to these stories and to the stories of their own families, the child will be developing imagination and the language and cognitive skills required for intellectual thought.

Jerome Bruner developed the narrative curriculum in which children's interest is sparked by "the building in the suspense of how things came to be." ("Schools of Thought: Pathways to Educational Reform", **NAMTA Journal**, 1991 Special Edition, Vol 16, No. 2, p6.)

Children do not need the answers, they need help in framing the questions and support in following up their sparks of interest.

Montessori education uses story telling for both pre-school and primary children. A four year old in a Montessori school will be told true stories: for example, the teacher's own life stories, the story of a lake, the story of the life cycle of a snail. In the primary school, the child is told the Great Stories: the origins of the universe, the story of how people began to use writing, the story of famous people in history, etc. These stories are not given to the child as the one true interpretation. They are given as what *might* have happened to spark interest and encourage further research. The children are encouraged to make up their own versions of the story using all the research tools and people at their disposal.

Rachel Remen, in her work as a therapist with people who are very ill, came to the realisation that mystery in life is more important than answers. As a medical doctor, she had worked for 30 years with the belief that patients came to her for answers, cures and that she had failed them if she could not supply the answers. I think that her words (1997, p 293) apply equally well to teachers, parents and people in the healing profession:

> *"Mystery seems to have the power to comfort, to offer hope and to lend meaning in times of loss and pain. In surprising ways it is the mysteriousness that strengthens us at such times. I used to try to offer people certainty in times that were not at all certain and could not be made certain. I now just offer my companionship and share my sense of mystery of the possible, of wonder. After twenty years of working with people with cancer, I find it possible to neither doubt nor accept the unprovable but simply to remain open and wait.*
>
> *I accept that I may never know where truth lies in such matters. The most important questions don't seem to have ready answers. But the questions themselves have a healing power when they are shared. An answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something, to stop wondering. Life has no such stopping places, life is a process whose every event is connected to the moment that just went by. An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road."*

When education is seen in Montessori's context of a broad preparation for life which begins at birth and may end at death, it can be understood that it goes far beyond the boundaries of the school room. Teachers share only part of the child's education and can be of the greatest support when they are sharing the essence of themselves, their experiences of life, their open-hearted values and of the least help when they are teaching memorised facts. When education is seen as liberating the personality, freeing the spirit of the child and uncovering the life force, it helps prepare the child for whatever he or she will encounter in life.

MONTESSORI AND THE NEW BORN

In **The Secret of Childhood** and **The Child in the Family**, Montessori speaks about the acute needs of the new born baby. She says that the baby and the mother need a period of quiet to adjust to the tremendous thing which has happened to them. The child should be welcomed by shaded lights, soft sounds and gentle touching because the baby is acutely sensitive to light, sound touch. As in the animal kingdom, the new born baby and mother should be protected by the family, left in peace to discover each other.

These beliefs have been echoed this century by many sensitive gynaecologists, midwives and childbirth educators. Le Boyer became famous in the 1960's by his proposal of a birth without violence. Dr Spock encouraged parents to be responsive to the baby's needs. Sheila Kitzinger advocated a gentle birth where the mother was in control of the birth process and active in the labour. Rather than the baby "being delivered" by the doctor, the mother was to give birth.

Recently, Dr Sarah Buckley wrote in **The Age** newspaper (29/11/96), recommending that women become more aware of the process of birth on themselves and their babies instead of allowing the "experts" to rule them:

> *"As a doctor and a mother, I ask myself why women are tolerating this situation. Why are educated, articulate women, who are prepared to battle for their rights in their personal and professional lives, so accepting of the high intervention rates that are characteristic of this group in particular? I ask why we are not at least advocating for our babies, at a time when science is discovering what mothers have known for years, that a new born baby is a highly sentient being, exquisitely sensitive to its emotional and physical environment…."*

Montessori's advice for the care of the mother and the baby still reverberates amongst some people but needs to be far more widely accepted and supported by the whole of society.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Recent research into the development of the brain has validated many of Montessori's views. Montessori divided the child's growth into planes of development lasting 6 years. She maintained that the first 3 years of a child's life (the first subplane of the First Plane of Development) witnesses the most phenomenal growth in the brain. A conference called, "Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development", was held in 1997 in the United States. In the Executive Summary, it states, "It is during the first three years of life that the vast majority of synapses is produced. The number of synapses increases with astonishing rapidity until about age three and then holds steady throughout the first decade of life."

Dr Montessori believed that the baby's brain had potentialities for growth in different areas, e.g., language, movement, manipulation, and acquisition of culture. She believed it was the child's interaction with the environment which caused these potentialities to become actual, experienced sensitive periods of growth during which time the brain was extremely adaptable to certain skills. If not utilised during this period, these skills would never develop to their fullest. This particular quality she called the "Absorbent Mind", which meant that the sensory exper-iences of the baby actually shaped (she used the word "incarnated") the brain.

All of these assertions have been validated by recent brain research.

1) **Time Magazine** (February 1997, p 50) reported on the latest brain research. Carla Shatz, a neurobiologist at the University of California, reports the fact that at birth the baby's brain has 100 billion neurons, "roughly as many nerve cells as there are stars in the Milky Way....

> *But while the brain contains virtually all the nerve cells it will ever have, the pattern of wiring between them has yet to stabilize. Up to this point … what the brain has done is lay out circuits that are its best guess about what is required for vision, for language, for whatever …. And now it is up to neural activity, no longer spontaneous but driven by a flood of sensory experiences, to take this rough blueprint and progressively refine it."*

2) Findings published both in the proceedings of the Conference, "Rethinking the Brain" and in Jane Healy's book, **Endangered Minds** (1990), state that current research reveals that the child's brain has special times when it is most receptive to new skills or aspects of the environment. It is variously called prime time, critical periods, windows of learning and sensitive periods.

From "Fertile Minds" in **Time Magazine** (1997, p 55), for example, it is explained that baby's have a repertoire of all the sounds in the human language. But by the age of 6 months, they are refining their perceptions to include only those from their own culture:

> *"The University of Washington's Patricia Kuhl and her colleagues have conditioned dozens of new born to turn their heads when they detect the ee sound emitted by American parents vs. the eu favoured by doting Swedes. Very young babies … invariably perceive slight variations in pronunciation as totally different sounds. But by the age of six months, American babies no longer react when they hear variants of 'ee'.…'It's as though their brains have formed little magnets.' says Kuhl, 'and all the sounds in the vicinity are swept in.'"*

Another sensitive period focuses on the language skill of phonemic awareness. Healy (1990, p 287) speaks about the importance of the skill of hearing the individual sounds in words (phonemic awareness) in the later ability to read:

> *"…yet children do not necessarily pick up these skills without certain types of listening experiences. Children who have missed out during the sensitive period for auditory discrimination, especially need concentrated training in these skills. Although lack of*

early experience may still result in gaps, a good training program can probably make up at least some of the lost ground."

3) There is much recent evidence to support Montessori's view that the baby and young child's brain is formed by interaction with the environment and is indelibly marked by experiences. Research has found that the electrical activity of the brain, when it is in contact with an experience, changes the physical structure of the brain. If a child is deprived of a stimulating environment, the child's brain develops less than those children who have been played with, touched and talked to. Jane Healy (1990, p 48) says:

"We now have clear evidence that the environment can play a role in shaping brain structure and, in turn, learning behaviour. It is the area of the brain which is stimulated which grows."

Unpleasant or frightening experiences impact on the child's brain in the same way and leave an indelible mark. The 1997 article from **Time** reports:

"Children who are physically abused early in life … develop brains that are exquisitely tuned to danger. At the slightest threat, their hearts race, their stress hormones surge and their brains anxiously track the nonverbal clues that might signal the next attack. Because the brain develops in sequence, with more primitive structures stabilizing their connections first, early abuse is particularly damaging…. Experience is the chief architect of the brain. And because these early experiences of stress form a kind of template around which later brain development is organised, the changes they create are all the more pervasive."

It is sobering to note here that often parents believe that a family breakdown will affect an older child more than a younger baby. However, the evidence now seems to suggest that the effect of family trauma on a baby is far more pervasive and is indelible.

STRUCTURE OF SCHOOLS

The structure of schools today reflects Montessori's theory of the planes of development. The primary school encompasses the years of the second plane (6-12) and secondary school covers the third plane (12-18). There is an understanding on the part of educators that there is a difference in intellectual, social and emotional needs between the children of the second and third planes even if they are unaware of Montessori's theories.

Montessori believed it was extremely important to mix the ages of the children in their school groups. She advocated 3, 4 and 5 year olds together; 6, 7, and 8 years olds together; and, 9, 10 and 11 year olds together. Educators today are discovering the benefits of **multi-aged** classrooms, also called "composites". In Amer-ica the concept is called "looping" and in Great Britain, "family clusters." The teachers recognise the benefits of having children for at least two years.

Although not all schools gather children in multi-aged groups, there is a recognition that a child's learning cannot be judged by his or her age. Montessori believed that the child proc-eeded according to his or her own pace and that this should be respected. The curriculum should be shaped for the child's interest and stage of development, not to his or her chronological age. The Curriculum Standards Frameworks is an initiative of the Victorian government. It is a broad description of a curriculum in primary and secondary schools. Children are not placed in 12 grade levels but in broader bands of development. A child is in a particular level for at least 2 years. This recognises that the curriculum should be more expansive and horizontal rather than vertical, allowing for individual exploration.

Montessori schools follow the structure of a **3-hour work cycle**. Montessori observed the children's pattern of activity and noted that they needed a full 3 hours to move from short, easy tasks to the longer, more concentrated work which she called their "great work period". If this freedom is offered the child, he or she will have the opportunity of coming to know his or her own work cycle.

The most recent literacy initiatives of the education department in Victoria call for a restructuring of the timetable so that children can have a **block of 2 hours** to concentrate on literacy skills. The program is called, "Keys to Life". There is a greater emphasis on individ-ual work by the child with more time for 1-1 work with the teacher. In the Catholic educat-ion system, a similar program is called, "Literacy Advance". This program also recom-mends the benefits of a two-hour block each morning for the development of literacy. An enthusiastic teacher in NSW, Ann Morrice, was encouraged by her Principal to establish a new method of teaching children to write and read. She used the 2-hour block as the foundation for her program, which shows early signs of success with 5 year olds. These programs recognise that the child learns best when allowed to move at his or her own pace and to have the opportunity to repeat tasks.

Some Principals would like to offer a longer work period but find this impossible within the timetable constraints where the '8 Key Learning Areas' have to be given time.

THE CURRENT CURRICULUM DEBATE

There is wide acceptance of Montessori's view that the early years of a child's life are the most important for laying the foundations, but only a few voices are raised on behalf of the importance of the pre-school years. Govern-ments show their interest in the curriculum only when formal schooling begins. The brain research cited earlier, however, shows that if governments are truly concerned with the prosperity of the future, they would turn their attention to day care centres and kindergartens when children have the highest potential for learning.

The Montessori curriculum for the 3-6 and 6-12 year old child does not separate subject areas either by timetable or by limiting the child's choice of work. This means that the child integrates the curriculum naturally. When a seed of interest is sown by a story or by watching an older child work, the child is free to follow that interest. For example, if the child's interest has been sparked by the Story of the Coming of Life on the Planet, he or she may move into researching astronomy, physics, mathematics, chemistry, and geology.

The Curriculum Standards Frameworks which was mentioned earlier recommends that teachers integrate the curriculum as much as possible. The writers recommend that children learn better when the subjects relate to and build on each other. They suggest that teachers select a theme which is general, so that many 'Key Learning Areas' can be woven into the subject matter.

A famous American educator, Jerome Bruner, recommended what he called a spiral curriculum and gave teachers an example of one such curriculum when he developed, "Man a Course of Study" (MACOS). A spiral curriculum is integrated so that each step of learning rests on the one which went before.

Montessori called the classroom experiences of a child aged from 6–12 in Montessori schools, "cosmic education with a fusion curriculum". It has no artificial barriers between subjects. David Kahn (1991, p 10) calls the Montessori curriculum "incomplete" and likened it to Bruner's "Man a Course of Study", which has been called "the unfinished curriculum." Kahn says "The Montessori framework is incomplete by design, and therefore the curriculum is deliberately left to the child and teacher to complete its formation through activity, discovery, experience, structure and thoughtfulness."

The child who is fortunate enough to fully experience the 'cosmic education' as envisioned by Montessori, emerges at age 12 with a deep understanding of the delicate balance of all things living and non-living on the planet. This child has a sophisticated understanding of the inter-relationships of all things. Current curriculum writers have recognised the importance of developing this understanding in primary and secondary students and have written curriculum documents covering them in the 'Key Learning Areas' of Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE) and Technology.

People who are concerned with the environment and ecology today advocate that deep thought should be given to any projects which have an impact on the physical environment, Seddon (1997). They believe that it is not possible to introduce, for example, a new farming method, a bacteria which kills rabbits or a new species to an area – such as sparrows into Australia – without altering the delicate balance of ecology. This sensitivity is exactly what children are receiving when they are told the 'Great Stories' in Montessori primary schools, and it is what the curriculum writers of the CSF for SOSE and Technology are aiming at in the late 1990's.

Organisations supporting such occasions as the annual Arbour Week, recognise primary school students' particular sensitivity towards the environment and their responsibility to it. Their printed material and practical help to schools is an important contribution to an understanding of world ecology.

It is clear that there is much rethinking going on in curriculum development. Every few years state and Catholic school teachers must adopt a new method and content of teaching. This is tiring and dispiriting for teachers, sometimes making them cynical or wanting to leave the profession. The curriculum writers in Victoria would do well to study the Montessori program as it contains all the important areas of study in the 'Key Learning Areas'.

This tendency to reinvent the wheel also occurs in America. As Howard Gardner (**NAMTA Journal** 1991), author of the theory of multiple intelligences, said in an interview:

> *"I think there is general agreement that mass education is in trouble. The attempts to try to improve education across the board are entirely praiseworthy. However, I am personally disappointed by the fact that these new reforms have paid so little attention to interesting experiments which have worked already … around the margins, to progressive education ideas and to ideas which are associated with particular schools of thought such as piagetian education or Montessori education. Why go back to the drawing boards and mandate instruments from on high when you can already learn a great deal from projects which have succeeded over a period of ten to fifty years?"*

THE MONTESSORI LANGUAGE PROGRAM

The Montessori language program, when followed carefully, is the only one in existence today which takes a 3 year old child from playing with words and having fun with sounds, through to the breaking up of these words into units of sound and to identifying these units with a letter of the alphabet. The child is then free to write! He or she is not limited by the physical skills of writing with a pencil but is set free to form thoughts into physical symbols by the use of an ingenious wooden alphabet which the child is free to manipulate. Reading, which occurs later at about the age of four or five, is based on this firm foundation of awareness of the sounds of our language and its relation to a symbol.

The Montessori language program follows the principles of:

• basing writing and reading on a firm oral language foundation;

- moving from speaking to writing using sandpaper letters and a movable alphabet which is manipulated by the child and incorporates movement;
- moving to a whole word approach so that the child has the 2 major word attack skills of phonics and sight words – again incorporating movement to assist learning;
- introducing the study of the structure of the language, i.e., grammar to enhance writing skills; and
- moving to the twin goals of total reading and total writing.

The current research into how children become literate fully supports the Montessori approach to language. The research is implemented by various programs such as the West Australian First Steps program, the Keys to Life in Victoria, Reading Recovery which is Australia-wide and Ann Morrice's interesting experiment in NSW referred to above. All are firmly founded on the importance of phonemic awareness, the use of phonics, the importance of oral discussion, the use of meaningful print, the importance of good literature and the development of the child's personal word bank.

These are all Montessori principles and have been in use for over 80 years in Montessori classrooms. A clear description of the Montessori approach to language can be found in Pat Hilson's excellent thesis which was written for her Master of Education degree from the Canberra CAE in 1987.

MONTESSORI EDUCATION – A MULTI SENSORY APPROACH

It is now well established that children have different modes of learning. Some children are more visual, some are aural and some are more kinaesthetic. Howard Gardner (1983) ident-ified linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Whether these different modes of intelligence exist or not, it is important that a child is able to explore the world using many different parts of his or her brain. The Montessori method of education activates all areas of the brain and encourages a child to learn by many different modes.

Theodor Hellbrugge, a German paediatrician, established a highly successful program called, "Action Sunshine" in Munich in the late 70's. His theory was that handicapped children could be taught alongside normally able children using the materials of Montessori education. He chose this method because it called on the full range of learning styles. As recorded in Montessori (1997, p169) Hellbrugge said in 1989:

> *"The therapeutic potential of Montessori's theory lies primarily in its physiological approach to the senses. Learning by seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling as well as through movement (kinaesthetic learning), is strongly encouraged in the Montessori approach by the material. The child assimilates auditory, visual, gustatory, tactile and olfactory impressions.… Working with the sensory material helps the child to understand what he sees, hears and touches. In sensori-motor learning, the child combines different impressions, and develops concepts. Only when these subprocesses are sufficiently developed is abstract thought possible."*

Mr Hellbrugge found remarkable success in these methods. The children's progress was monitored over several years as they progressed through primary and secondary school after 4 years at the pre-school level. They have been able to pass entrance examinations into conventional schools, and some have completed secondary school.

Mr Hellbrugge again (p 175):

> *"In the program of developmental rehabilitation, as it was founded 15 years ago in the Munich Paediatric Centre with the aim of utilizing the unique opportunities of early childhood development to rehabilitate children with congenital or early disorders or*

> *damage, Montessori education … has a decisive role to play in the integration of those children … into the family, into ordinary nursery school, and into ordinary school. This new approach is meanwhile starting to be accepted and practised not only in the Federal republic of Germany but also internationally."*

The Montessori materials which support the educational philosophy are successful with children of all abilities because they stimulate the full range of learning styles.

THIRD PLANE OF DEVELOPMENT

Montessori saw that young people aged between 12 and 18 needed a very different environment to that provided by a primary school. She said in **Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory** (1939, p 151)

> *"During the difficult period of adolescence it is desirable to have the child live outside his habitual surroundings, outside the family, in the country, in a peaceful place…Life in the open air, in the sun, a diet rich in vitamins furnished by the nearby fields are the auxiliaries so precious to the body of the adolescent; while the calm environment, the silence, the marvels of nature satisfy the mind and are conducive to its functions of reflection and meditation."*

Dr Montessori (p 153) envisioned the young people learning to live in a mini-society, preparing for the life in the greater society by practicing its functions in a more secure environment away from their parents and family.

> *"A modern farm requiring a number of scientific and manual labours presents the chance to produce, then to exchange, and also to enter into direct contact with society through the store or sales stand. By providing a hotel annex, "The Rural Children's Hotel", the school affords itself the opportunity of initiating the children into all that such an enterprise entails.*
>
> *Such a house, receiving both boys and girls, should be directed by a married couple who, in addition to the material functions, exercise a moral and protective influence on the youths. It would be a family house."*

This need for a different lifestyle, away from family and the city, has been acknowledged by other educators. Several private schools in Australia offer the opportunity for students in Year 9 to live away from home in the country. One such school is Geelong Grammar. The Principal, Sir James Darling, saw it as a time for students to develop confidence, self-reliance and independence:

> *"The theory of Timbertop was this: that adolescent boys could better develop by themselves, out of the usual school machine. Placed in a different and less clement environment, they should undertake responsibility for themselves and be given the challenges of something like a man's life under conditions which they had to conquer. But the first principle was essentially one of self reliance and the challenge to live up to this responsibility."*
> (Geelong Grammar Prospectus)

CONCLUSION

I have been able to touch on only some of the areas of the Montessori philosophy which have been validated by other thinkers. In the space of this paper it has not been possible to explore this theme fully. Dr Montessori's brilliant work demystifying the teaching of mathematics, her work on the spiritual nature of the child and the importance of silence, conflict resolution and peace in

schools, the development of the conscience as part of moral development, are all deserving of full attention, and I would recommend their exploration to anyone who is interested in human development.

I would like to conclude with an image which I believe encapsulates the essence of Dr Montessori's hope for children. I am indebted to Gordon Preece of Ridley College for this image. He spoke of nurturing and assisting children with an open hand. This open hand supports but does not crush, it guides but does not force. It supports the child lightly, giving strength where needed but always with an implied belief that the child has the inner strength, the skills and the independence to do it alone.

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