

MONTESSORI AND FROEBEL—A COMPARISON

ELLEN YALE STEVENS

Principal of the Brooklyn Heights Seminary

A popular magazine has by a series of very interesting articles introduced the name of Madame Montessori to the American public and created such a widespread interest in her methods of education for young children that there is danger that our proverbial enthusiasm for new ideas may carry this system on a wave of popularity only to swamp it in the end, unless a careful pedagogic study is made and the real basis of truth that it contains made clear.

We have had so many educational fads, or methods so called, widely exploited, loudly hailed, and then left to oblivion, that the question arises: Is Madame Montessori's method of scientific pedagogy to suffer the same fate? I wish that the American edition of her book when it is published, instead of "Method," might be named "Principles of Scientific Pedagogy," to avoid the suggestions of the ill-fated name "method."

One sees things here in Rome, where I write these lines, in a long perspective and is taught to look for the fundamental in the evanescent. This great modern city is eager to give its children the best in education as in other things and is erecting new schools everywhere. But it is also very conservative, and so in some of the municipal schools the Montessori method is used in one room and the kindergarten method is another. In other schools such as that in St. Angelo in Pescheria the Montessori method only is used in the two lowest grades, while in still others one finds the kindergarten or *Giardino d'Infanzia* only.

The Association of the Beni Stabili, which has erected in the newer parts of the city where land is cheaper model tenements under the co-operative plan, has in the center of each block of buildings a *Casadei Bambini* or House of Childhood, free to those children of their tenants who are too young to enter the first class

of the municipal schools where the Montessori materials and method are used exclusively. Here in Rome, therefore, I can compare the two systems in schools where the type of child is the same, but at home I must see the Montessori method tried with children of a different race and environment. Italian children are at the same time more precocious and less nervous than our own and also more susceptible to impression. In all the schools I have visited I find the Italian children—even the youngest—rhythmic, studious, and naturally graceful. I have yet to find an instance of the monotone singing so prevalent with us.

The kindergarten as seen in Rome is without exception, so far as I have observed, of the strict Froebelian type. The classes are large, sometimes as many as fifty children of five years of age under one teacher; the occupations entirely dictated and the games directed. Yet nowhere have I seen the kindergarten circle; instead the children sit in pairs on a bench in front of a long, narrow, slanting desk. It is the *banco* as thus used that is satirized so severely by Madame Montessori, who has introduced in its place, in the schools under her direction, low, broad, firm tables, where two or at most three children can sit comfortably in little, broad chairs.

But in order properly to compare these two methods, one needs to consider the preparation of their founders, which led in each case to their development.

Maria Montessori has a twofold advantage over Froebel in that she is living at a time when she can make use of the results of the experimental psychology and child-study of the last half-century, and in that her own training and experience have been of the broadest. As a doctor of medicine she early became interested in deficient children, and studied most earnestly the methods of Itard and Séguin with idiots. As a lecturer in the University of Rome on anthropology and hygiene, she extended her researches into the biological foundations of education. When she was placed in charge of one of the hospitals for deficient children in Rome she had six years of observation and experiment, until the results of the education as devised by her brought them on a par, as regards examinations for the municipal schools, with normal children of

the same age. This wonderful success turned her attention to the problem of education for the healthy, sane child.

The establishment of the Beni Stabili schools at this time, as they were placed under her charge, gave her the opportunity for experiment and observation which she desired; and for two years she worked with a devotion and enthusiasm few teachers would have shown, without vacation, and from early in the morning until late at night. The results of these years of experience, training, observation, and experiments by a woman whose genius is of the intuitive, inventive order come to us in the fascinating record in her book and in the wonderful series of didactic material invented by her to take the place of the Froebelian gifts, occupations, and games. She is right, I think, in calling her method scientific, for she has based it on scientific principles true to psychology and developed from accurate and painstaking observation and experiment.

Madame Montessori is at this moment engrossed with the problem of the older child. Having revolutionized the education of the child from three to six, she realizes that it must not stop there. A child developed by spontaneous activity in the free atmosphere of a Montessori school, with his senses trained, his muscles co-ordinated, his creative ability stimulated, with a power of self-direction and self-government far beyond that of the usual child of his own age, would be stifled in the ordinary municipal school as found in Rome.

The educational world awaits with keen interest the result of this year of study and research, while it deplores the withdrawal for a time of Maria Montessori from the course of lectures she has given for several years and from the direction of the schools established by her. But a great genius points the way; others must follow in it and make perfect the path. In America we are, I think, ready to take her principles and her educative material into our schools much more readily than they are in Rome, for we are already working in harmony with many of her ideas. Our best teachers have the necessary psychological and pedagogical training, as few in Italy have. I should like to see Madame Montessori the center of a great educational movement, the inspiring force, the creative genius, surrounded by teachers fitted by culture and

experience to carry out her methods and in charge of schools properly equipped.

But to return to a comparison of the two systems. As Maria Montessori's preparation was so much broader than that of Froebel, as her genius—creative and intuitive like his—had a severer, more scientific training; so, it seems to me, is the point of view of each essentially different.

Froebel saw the universe in which he wished to interest the child in its unity and yet infinite variety. By means of the gifts, occupations, and games which his genius devised, the child is *led* into the different worlds which make up his environment—the world of sense, that of the family, the social organism in all its occupations, the world of Nature, and finally of the moral and spiritual life. While Froebel sees first the universe, then the child, Montessori's point of view is essentially and wholly that of the child. Froebel said: "Let us live with our children, play with them, direct them into this manifold life of the universe." Madame Montessori says: "Let the child live, free to develop all his powers; let him create his own world." Froebel's teachers are *in front* of their children, leading them, directing them; Montessori's are *behind* theirs, watching them, quietly removing all obstacles to their development, silently placing within their reach all helps to their progress, but leaving the initiative entirely to the children. Conciseness, simplicity, objectivity are their watchwords. The Froebelian training of the senses is too much that of the eye, by it perception is developed, through analysis, not synthesis; too much use is made of the instinct of imitation, not enough that of creation. Froebel's system stimulates too soon the reasoning powers of the child and does not strengthen the nervous system and muscular memory.

Perhaps a comparison of the materials employed in each system will explain this difference. The first exercises in the Montessori system are those of practical life. The child is taught to love cleanliness and order. In one school I visited the children all came up at once to shake hands with me, first showing their hands to me back and front to prove they were clean. In another school I saw a child come back to her table after a game, see a little dust

on it, go gently to the closet for a duster, then—without a word from the teacher—clean, not only her own table, but all the others. Children of three learn to button, hook, lace, tie bow knots, so that they are soon dressing and undressing themselves and others. The material for sense-training develops discrimination and exact use of language. Differences in shades of color, weight, and sound of objects are made without a mistake by very young children. For example, a child shakes, with her hand held to her ear, ten cylindrical cardboard boxes—like dice boxes—in which are pebbles or shot graded so as to make a series of five pairs; then deftly places them in order so that there is a perfect gradation from loud to softest sound. Another will take thin blocks of wood two inches square made of wisteria, walnut, and pine, balance each for a moment in his little hand, then place it correctly in a pile of others of like weight when it is impossible for an observer to distinguish any difference. Discrimination in color and tint is developed by means of silks wound on reels, eight colors and eight shades, with very slight gradation, which again trains him for practical life. The material makes the children self-correcting to a marvelous degree. It seems wonderful that the children, after their muscles have been trained and their muscular memory established, by a series of exercises, can write any word they wish on their slates or on the blackboard without a copy, and recognize and quickly correct all mistakes. The gradation from the work of a child of three to that of one of six or seven is perfect, so that our so-called kindergarten and first primary years merge into one. The Montessori teachers realize that a child does not *play* but *works*, and that if his force is guarded and not exhausted in an attempt to follow the thoughts of others, but is allowed free scope, there will be no nervous strain or fatigue. The individual differences of children are seen in this method in their choice of materials and in the time taken by them to master their use. Native bents are observed, natural talents developed. Yet there is much opportunity for group work—children help each other, work things out together. Some children will be seated at one table busily writing, three or four others will be on a square of felt on the floor, using the large, paper-script letters to form words and sentences. Others will be

grouped around the series of sticks, from one to ten, which is so valuable for the development of the sense of number. Another group will take their slates, writing sentences for others to read or little problems for others to solve. All is spontaneous activity, yet all are working harmoniously together.

The material invented by Madame Montessori is more practical than that of Froebel, is a means to an end, is exact and accurate, and is scientific because true to psychological and biological laws.

The dangers of this method, as in that of the kindergarten, lie in the teachers employed. Just because in this system the teacher apparently does so little, is her activity really all the greater. I have seen much poor teaching here as well as much fine work, such as that of Madame Galli-Succenti, who has introduced the material and the method into one of the municipal schools, and whose long training and experience make her particularly valuable as a practical exponent of these principles. On the other hand, a teacher with slight pedagogic or psychologic training will get a superficial idea of the principles, and as a result her school will be poorly disciplined and the work in it aimless.

I hope that some great university in America will create a school for the study and practice of the Montessori methods, which are destined, I feel sure, if properly understood and applied, to revolutionize primary education.

ROME, ITALY

December, 1911