

MONTESSORI SCHOOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

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Abstract:

Montessori's conception of the development of the human person is not to be based on the design of method of education rather on given the children the chance to live well through the maximization of the freedom and choice through play and fun, especially at the early childhood. This is what informed the Montessori school which is built on the self-initiated approach to learning. With this conviction, she proposes the learning environment distinctively different from other forms of early childhood educational models. The problem currently is that many schools or learning facilities for early childhood education that claimed to be practicing Montessori model of early childhood education are practically away from the requirements specified by such educational theory or ideology. This conception of early childhood development through self-directed learning informed that knowledge can be developed in a very gradual and stable pace through the exercise of freedom to make use of the instructional or learning materials provided as prescribed by Montessori School environment. This is, in extension, directs Montessori's projection of what the educational contents of the human person should be and what it should be dependent on as contents of its curriculum for a good foundational education of any child, relation to the knowledge development and contents in Nigerian educational system, as basis of availability and provision of well-funded Montessori schools. Employing evaluative mode of analysis, therefore, the paper concluded that the provisional imports of Montessori's philosophy of education which is self-initiated approach to learning at the early childhood education, when adequately assessed and provided for, will help to solve developmental problems associated with Nigerian basic education, in reference to the child's mental and physical capacities in establishing true or real knowledge contents for personal and societal development.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Education, Human Development, Philosophy of Montessori School Self-Initiated Approach,

Introduction

The general recognition and acceptance of the fact that the development of the human person in relation to the contents of his or her lived experience necessarily begins at the early stage of human development poised many thinkers and philosophers to develop various versions and theories of early childhood education. Most of these thinkers and philosophies across the ancient, medieval and early modern eras of philosophizing in education were men (Standing 12). As a courageous woman, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) defied the stereotypical restrictions that provided the ground for only male ideologies to thrive when she came up with her own theory of education in a world dominated by patriarchal consciousness. She conceptualized a sense of education that is child-centered model of learning, and bearing in mind the education of handicapped children, she longed for world peace through the understanding of early child development by the provision of the self-initiated learning environment. She believed that such a peace resides in the hearts of children, because of her work, she was nominated for the Nobel peace prize in the years 1949, 1950 and 1951.

With a consciousness to understand the child development better, appropriate and proper, Montessori grasped the opportunity of working with normal children and, bringing some of the educational materials. She had developed at the Orthophrenic School, where she established her first *Casa dei Bambini* or 'Children's House', and which was opened on the 6th January 1907. A small opening ceremony was organized, but few had any expectations for the project. She put many different activities and other materials into the children's environment but kept only those that engaged them. What Montessori came to realize was that children who were placed in an environment where activities were designed to support their natural development had the power to educate themselves she was later to refer to this as auto-education (Standing 120). By the autumn of 1908 there were five *Casa dei Bambini* operating, four in Rome and one in Milan. Children in a *Casa dei Bambini* made extraordinary progress, and soon 5-year-olds were writing and reading. News of Montessori's new approach spread rapidly, and visitors arrived to see for themselves how she was achieving such results. Then, within a year the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland began transforming its kindergartens into *Casae dei Bambini*, and the spread of the new educational approach began.

In the Montessori philosophy, the spirit of the child is as critically important as the mind of the child. This became her novel legacy of the whole world, and her scheme of education was established on the philosophy that in order to educate the child's mind to be self-independent and self-creative through play and freedom. It is essential to know those who are to be educated are to be free to express the contents of their mind through the educational materials available to them. If education is to profoundly touch the heart and mind of a child, he/she must be involved in continuous learning: not because he or she is interested in earning the highest grade: but simply because he/she is simply curious and interested in learning. It is in this light that this paper is aimed at analyzing the values of this philosophy of education, the self-initiated approach to learning as developed by Maria Montessori, and then, the contemporary adoption and acceptance of Montessori School among other models of early childhood educations in many educational facilities. Furthermore, it will evaluate the value of Montessori's elementary education in the light of Nigerian educational landscape, and then, make informed evaluative conclusion.

Maria Montessori and Her Philosophy of Education

Montessori's Self-Initiated Approach is a method of education named after Maria Montessori. She was the first woman in Italy to obtain the degree of Doctor of Medicine. As a doctor, Maria Montessori looked at education from a scientific level. She believed that education should prepare a person for all aspects of life. She designed materials and techniques that would promote a natural growth of learning in students (Uzomah & Isanbor 278). They are common to all Montessori classrooms. Working with these materials and techniques forms a pattern that children carry over naturally to reading, writing, and mathematics. Each skill is developed to interlock with another (Standing 50). For the American Montessori Society, the Montessori Method of education is a child-centered educational approach based on scientific observations of children from birth to adulthood. It is time tested method, and widely used by thousands of the schools over 100 years of success in diverse culture throughout the world.

Montessori's profound interest in education was motivated by her interest in the natural development of children, she defined education as the active help given to the normal expansion of the life of the child. On the basis, she advocated that only exercises which make for natural development should be encouraged, because it fosters auto education. She recommended that education should be absolutely free for children (Uzomah & Isanbor 278). She saw freedom as the single most important factor in allowing children to develop as spontaneous and creative individuals. She saw the role of education as

providing environments in which children could be set free to follow their natural impulses to become the wonderfully dynamic natural learners they were designed to be. For her this is to say that education must align with natural inclination of children towards learning. Children are naturally inclined to know and this is responsible for the curiosity that they explicitly exhibit.

For Montessori's philosophy of education, classroom materials stimulate the child's reasoning and imagination, prompting him to move beyond the concrete, sensory world to the realm of the abstract. Once the child has mastered a particular task; he or she is guided of a new area of learning. It is the task of the teacher to create an environment that is most favourable to the enhancement of concentration and to provide the child with the means with which to educate him or her (Uzomah & Isanbor 278). This simply requires that teacher get to know the child and assist him at his own rate of progress. For this reason, children usually designed materials in the classroom enable a child to take advantage of sensitive period's for the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Maria Montessori's Self-Initiated Learning for Early Childhood Education

Maria Montessori challenged traditional teaching learning environment. She challenged the traditional teacher-student dynamic. She believed the child is not an empty bowl which need to be filled by teacher (Uzomah & Isanbor 279). She also believed that there are individual differences and teacher should not use 'one size fits all' approach. The traditional approach is rather homogeneous and lacking in individualistic nuance, so the Montessori Method aims to bring a little more agency to a child's learning in hopes of facilitating greater understanding. There is a strict emphasis on learning through interaction with environment, in this philosophy (Montessori, *Learners of Education* 101). It encourages what its terms 'free activity' within an established 'prepared environment'. What this activity may be, and even what kind of an environment is required, is up to the individual teacher – and in part, should be inspired by the individual needs of the student. The philosophy does provide some guidance as to what these environments should look like, and recommends that teachers hit a few key notes:

Montessori Approach to Education: A Montessori program is based on non-competitive and cooperative activities that help a child develop a strong self-image, high levels of academic and social competence, and the confidence to face challenges (Standing 52). Encouraged to make decision at an early age, Montessori-educated children are problem-solvers who can make appropriate choices, manage their time, and work well with others. They exchange ideas and discuss work freely. These positive communication skills build the foundation for negotiating new settings. Research has shown that the best predictor of future success is a \positive sense of self-esteem. Montessori programs, based on self-directed, non-competitive activities, help children develop the confidence to face change with optimism.

Maria Montessori was a physician, research scientist, and educator during the late 1800s-early 1900s who made observations about how children learn. The Montessori Philosophy of Education is based on Montessori's observation that children have a natural desire to learn and that stages of development exist for which there should be corresponding educational environments and trained adults who prepare these environments (Standing 56). Children learn independently in a prepared environment with teachers who guide and serve as the links between the student and the educational environment of academic materials and lessons. By providing freedom of choice, this enriched learning environment cultivates individuals who learn to make independent decisions and to solve problems creatively. Students learn to develop healthy social relationships, to develop skills in concentration, and to master academic and life skills.

Over the years, the Montessori philosophy has evolved to challenge the whole child's personality and intellect in a variety of multicultural and international settings. Montessori used her scientific observations of children to design functional learning environments created to support and enhance a child's innate desire to learn about the world around him. Based on a strong integration of adult to child observation and practical hands-on activities, classroom materials offer learning experiences in a clear, concrete manner. Students use motor and intellectual discovery when working with these materials, with an emphasis on the sequential and orderly acquisition of both motor and cognitive skills.

A well-prepared Montessori learning environment is given careful attention, allowing and encouraging the child accessibility to all materials she/he needs in performing and experiencing the step-by-step process of individual work (Standing 60). The classroom is thus arranged in a series of easily accessible shelves designed to accommodate specific work areas. This framework of organization gives accessibility to the necessary learning materials and frees the student to concentrate on the work, allowing an increase in independence and responsibility. This, in turn, decreases the need of direction from the teacher. As a result, children develop internal, rather than external, referencing.

The Montessori classroom contains materials to support learning in the core subjects of language arts (reading and writing), mathematics, and geometry, while also providing materials in the areas of history, geography, and natural sciences (e.g. biology, astronomy, and chemistry). Each classroom contains materials that teach specific concepts for the particular age range. The materials are designed in a logical sequence of skill acquisition and concept building while reinforcing the development of abstract thinking. The learning materials initially isolate knowledge to one concept at a time in a concrete manipulative style (Montessori, *Education and Peace* 110). The child progresses toward an abstract, more divergent, level of evaluation and analysis, while also moving toward self-set, teacher-supported goals.

Prepared Environment: A Montessori classroom is strikingly different from a traditional classroom: there are no rows of desks. Colorful materials are neatly organized into clustered areas—like a science area with materials to conduct experiments, reference texts, binders labeled with student's names charting their individual progress through the curriculum and housing their science reports, and a terrarium (Standing 68). Desks are interspersed with open space where children work together on rugs, or cluster around a teacher sitting on the floor answering questions. Students are typically so actively engaged in their work that visitors are undisturbed and an atmosphere of quiet concentration prevails. The Montessori classroom facilitates independent learning and exploration. The environment is designed to strike the imagination, to lead the student to abstraction, and to provide a system of information storage and retrieval (Amos 220).

The prepared environment facilitates the child's exploration of the essential principles of all disciplines through sequenced order and aesthetic appeal. Technology elements are integrated into classroom life. Children learn to use calculators, computers, and multimedia devices as part of their everyday experience. Throughout the curriculum, as appropriate, internet resources supplement research collected first-hand from resources found in the classroom and the community. Hence, Montessori classrooms tend to fascinate both children and their parents. Typically, they are warm, bright, inviting, and filled with plants, animals, art, music, and books. There are curriculum centers with intriguing learning materials, such as three-dimensional mathematical models, colorful maps, botany charts, and collections of natural specimens. Each material stimulates curiosity and the five senses.

Multi-Age Learning Communities: Montessori education places children in multi-age groupings. Children aged six to nine and nine to twelve, and thirteen and fourteen are placed in lower and upper elementary and junior high classes respectively. This multi-age grouping gives many advantages to learning, including the following:

- Children can progress through the curriculum at their own pace, guided by an individualized learning plan.
- The classroom serves accelerated students as well as remedial or English Language Learner students well because it is enriched with materials for an age-range, up to the level of challenging the interests of the most advanced students. It is acceptable and expected that students will excel in one area but may struggle with basic concepts in another. The three year curriculum gives each student space to grow at various levels while meeting end-criteria before moving forward.
- Younger students are constantly stimulated by the interesting work of older students.
- Older students serve as tutors and role-models, providing leadership experiences. Older students grow from helping younger students and reinforce their own knowledge by teaching others (Fisher 220). They also learn to empathize with the needs of children who are younger than themselves, building important social and character skills.
- In a mixed-age class, teachers work with the same students for three years, forming an integral and close mentoring relationship.
- The class retains a high degree of continuity since the majority of students in each class returns the following year. This makes it easier to orient new children and individualize the ongoing curriculum for each student (Kilpatrick 114). The multi-age classroom is a groundbreaking concept for developing community and supporting students of varying levels of academic and social development (Standing 72). By creating a bond between parents, teachers, and children, Montessori sought to create a closely-knit community where individuals could learn to be empowered; where children could learn to become contributing, sharing members of their school-family; where students could learn to care for younger children, learn from older people, and trust one another; and where children could find ways to be acceptably assertive rather than aggressive.

Individualized Learning: Montessori philosophy posits that for education to touch a child's heart and mind, the child must be learning because he/she is curious and interested. Montessori strives to make learning its own reward with each success fueling the desire to discover even more. To appeal to each child in this way, the curriculum is individualized according to the following principles:

- Individual learning styles, timetables, and capacities are respected. The child must develop herself; the adult acts as a resource and a catalyst for development.
- Students are given the opportunity to choose what to investigate and learn.
- The student is responsible for mastering basic skills and basic core knowledge. The student will follow a written study plan for each week, which is arrived at jointly by the teacher and the student.
- The student will be supported in planning an individual schedule for completing work.

Materials and activities are designed to support different learning styles and multiple intelligences, such as linguistic, spatial, musical, kinesthetic, and interpersonal. Some

children kinesthetic learners learn best by using their hands, taking measure of materials physically and thereby mapping them mentally (Riesman 83). Others linguistic learners are especially attentive to verbal cues and have innate ability to verbalize knowledge and to learn by listening attentively. Other children may benefit greatly from interacting with others, sharing, teaching, and collaborating to master the material; these are children with strong interpersonal learning skills. Montessori philosophy supports these differences and recognizes that children may also transition from one learning skill set to another as they develop during these formative years.

Active Learning: Montessori materials are designed to stimulate the senses and engage students in active learning. Students are encouraged to pursue areas of particular interest to them, becoming “experts” (meaning the student is able to integrate this learning into his or her daily work and practice) and using all available resources, including internet and community sources to engage their curiosity (Standing 78). Here, the classrooms are prepared with Montessori-sourced materials, which are hands-on and encourage “experiential” learning, as opposed to the more traditional model of lecture and drill exercises, which are comparably passive. Repetition is accomplished by having a variety of materials with which to practice the same concept. It is this repetition – through active and multiple modes of learning – which leads to mastery of the concept.

Students learn by trial and error and by discovery. They learn to ask the right question, spontaneously engage in their own research, analyze what they have found, and draw their own conclusions. The extended work period, typically three hours, offers both the time and resources for investigation and experimentation, using the internet, classroom library, and related indoor and outdoor materials, as well as opportunities to pursue research outside the classroom, in a community garden, the local library or museum, or by contacting outside experts. Throughout this process of discovery, students are not afraid to take risks and to learn constructively from their mistakes. Active learning is the heart of Montessori education. Rather than present children with the “right information” and supply the “right answers” up front in the form of lessons and lectures.

Montessori Curriculum: Materials Credentialed Montessori teachers present core subjects using Montessori materials. Montessori materials have been shown to be an effective way of meeting California state standards and Common Core. In addition, materials are supplemented with books, experiences, technology and other instructional materials to support the child's individual learning style. Supplemental materials to be added to the Montessori classroom are regularly reviewed staff. Dialogue continuously occurs between teachers and administration based on observation and assessment of individual student progress (Standing 83). The integrated curriculum includes materials and activities for the development of understanding and skills in mathematics, geometry, natural sciences, physical sciences, technology, language arts (including phonics, spelling, grammar, sentence analysis, creative and expository writing), literature, geography, history, civics, economics, anthropology, sociology, practical life, movement, physical education, music, visual arts, and crafts.

Homework –The Montessori Way: The Montessori student often volunteers to continue research, do community service, and work on classroom related projects. Consequently, the Montessori student naturally develops good study skills, discipline, and responsibility. Continuing school-related projects at home also provides parents the opportunity to be involved in and stay current with their children's education. Daily homework, however, is not a part of a Montessori program. Nonetheless, if the student chooses, the teacher provides guidance for outside projects and activities based on the student's individual interests and needs.

Characteristics of Montessori Elementary Program

The following are the various characteristics of Montessori elementary program which are as follows:

- There is a multi-age group in each class, ideally a three year age span, with 6-9 year old grouped together, and 9-12 year old in another grouping.
- Wherever possible, children stay with one teacher for three years
- The assumption is that children are self-motivated to learn
- It is an individualized program. The child progresses at his own rate
- There is the use of self-correcting concrete materials which are devised to be used in a sequence matched to the child's sensitive periods beginning at an early stage. Materials are limited so that children learn to share and help one another.
- The children have freedom of movement and may work anywhere in the room, at tables or mats on the floor. They are also free to talk, help others, work in groups or with a partner in an atmosphere of respect and responsibility
- There is an emphasis on the moral and spiritual development of the child as a contributing member of the world society
- The use of technology is encouraged and integrated into curriculum
- In the Montessori's educational environment, learning is made fun.

Relevance of Maria Montessori's Elementary Program in Nigerian Educational development

Montessori education in Nigeria is gradually being recognized as the best form of teaching in early childhood education. Educators and teachers are beginning to see the effect of such learning in the lives of the students. The traditional method of teaching is gradually fading away and is getting replaced by Montessori education, at least in most private schools in Lagos, however the government schools still use a traditional method of learning to educate students in the classroom. Nigeria hasn't always been ideal, for students and teachers alike. Due to widespread corruption and outdated teaching methods, children have been struggling more than ever, in the early 2000s, there has been an explosion of institutions that follow the Montessori system. Nigeria is an ideal case study because of the width of the Montessori application, instead of just elementary schools, the Montessori system has been instilled in daycare programs and kindergartens.

Nigerians have successfully applied two facets of Montessori training into their educational institutions. The first step involves establishing viable teacher training programs that allow the teachers to grasp both educational and pedagogical aspects of their profession. The next step is the application of safe environments and so-called 'subject' networks, the concepts of a safe environment relates to children feeling comfortable because they learn what they want, without pressure, children are mentored from the moment they enter the Montessori system in Nigeria, and their performance is studied closely. When their interests are recorded, each child receives a customized approach.

As a potential 'cure' for inefficient conventional education, the Montessori system has saved the lives of millions of children throughout the region. However, it's important to note the perils involved with this approach, a lack of sufficient training. Corruption and inefficiency stand in the way of proper Montessori application, many teachers are unaware of even the basic notions of Montessori. A lot of this has to do with a lack of monitoring and state-funded programs. Also too many children in one classroom in the Nigerian educational system, the Montessori system can only succeed if children can express

themselves freely. In Nigeria educational system of crowded classrooms, this isn't possible, solving these problems will take time.

It aids in social growth and cooperation in some Montessori schools in Nigeria. Young children are grouped in different ages and are motivated to work together and help each other, by doing this, it encourages students to learn to respect each other. Also younger ones can learn positive behaviour from the older ones. Learning together in the same classroom can help develop the skill of collective problem solving and build a sense of community. For many indications, it aids at the development of holistic learning experience of the child at an early stage, and such education is based on the idea that children can be taught in a more natural and engaging way. The holistic approach seeks to empower children to use their academic learning as a foothold to their emotional and social development. The Montessori curriculum covers eight key areas that focus on the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child. Key curriculum areas include, practical life, sensorial, mathematics, language, science, geography, art and culture. The Montessori education is directly aligned with what children will learn in elementary school and beyond which will be more suited in Nigeria education system

Children are eager to learn with children learning in the classroom using the Montessori curriculum. They are willing to figure out task easily. Young children do not lose information if they have an understanding of it. The reason why students struggle to pass certain subjects is that they lack an understanding of the course, however with Montessori system of education in Nigeria students understand however the how and why with materials recommended for the model of education. This is because they can make sense of materials given to them because they practice over and over again until it finally makes sense to them. Therefore, this indicates that Montessori education in Nigeria is better than the traditional school methods, as according to trending nature of Nigerian educational landscape; the Montessori method can save Nigeria's education through the development of the spirit of self-reliance, teamwork and capacity building in the early stage of the children, who are the shapers of the society they belong to, especially when given the opportunities and avenues to showcase their creative and innovative abilities. However, it is worthy to note that, in Nigeria, the very few institutions running the Montessori school system for early childhood development are typically more expensive and less common than regular schools and very few of them practice what they preach. This has limited the reach of self-directed learning to students in classrooms.

Conclusion

The paper recognized that the human person as a child of learning does not and cannot develop beyond what the society can provide for him or her, as a subject of lived experience. Thereby, Montessori model of education at the early stage of one's development remains a prime example of how conventional educational can be bettered to nurture great young minds for the sustainable and reliable development that is seated on the pavilion of self-creativity and self-innovation. This is what genuine and conscientious freedom and trust can provide in the lives of the individual as learners and as developers of the society which they belong. As Montessori became more prevalent, we've seen a rise in overall self-confidence in children as well as improved creative thinking, Therefore, owing to the educational issues in Nigeria, teachers should be properly trained in the early childhood education and parents should be encouraged to look into the unorthodox approach to learning which has been widely adopted in many educational facilities in forms of nursery schools, in order to replace them with Montessori Schools and make sure that the recommended Montessori Self-Initiated Approach to Learning is consciously and justly applied and sustained in order to achieve its objectives and philosophy of development.

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