

The Influences From Montessori to the Early Years Children

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ABSTRACT

This article will review the theory of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and her key ideas regarding the holistic development of children in the early years (0-5 years). It will identify some of Montessori's key ideas – holistic development, learning through play, the prepared environment, observation and the importance of parents –but also consider the perspectives of other early years theorists that may hold differing views. It will discuss how Montessori's contributions have influenced current early years practice by identifying how her ideas have shaped the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, a legal document that must be followed by all early year's settings in England. I will conclude by evaluating how these ideas and perspectives will have an effect on my own pedagogy in the future.

Keywords: *Montessori, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Montessori was an Italian born theorist whose interest in children's development began in her career as a clinical paediatrician in which she focused on mental health. One of Montessori's main influences was Jean Marc Itard (1775-1838) whose scientific and detailed observation of children and emphasis on viewing each child individually in order to prepare activities to aid their development helped shape Montessori's theories. Montessori's idea that development was based on both nature and nurture and that sensory motor development was a necessity in the early years were influenced by Adhered Seguin (1812-1880) who developed education tools for children with special needs that were believed to be uneducable [7]. These influences helped create the holistic based Montessori pedagogy that is still popular in education today.

provide an education for life alongside more specific skills, such as writing and reading. She considered children to be powerful, autonomous individuals who are capable of developing independently, at their own pace [1].

2. MONTESSORI'S MAIN THEORIES

2.1 Holistic development

Holistic development is concerned with educating the whole child, focusing on the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and communication of a child. These areas are all interconnected and cannot be developed in isolation – for example, a child cannot learn to write before developing the physical muscles needed in his hands. Montessori was an advocate of holistic development, claiming that she aimed to

2.2 Montessori's key ideas with EYFS

Apart from the holistic development, Montessori's other important contributions also include self-correcting and sequential materials, a prepared environment, teaching-based on observation, a trust in children's innate ability to learn, and autonomy is of great importance to encourage. Early Years Montessori's key ideas: providing tools that children can use, a prepared environment and allowing children the time to learn at their own pace all aid the holistic development of a child.

The EYFS statutory framework makes it a requirement for early years settings to ensure that children are progressing as they should be in all areas of development. The framework identifies seven areas of learning and development, all of which are considered important and inter connected, but three 'prime areas' which are the foundation on which the other aspects are based. These prime areas are communication, physical development and personal, social and emotional development. Play is one of the most effective ways in which to develop all of these areas.

3. CHILDREN'S PLAY

Play is described by many theorists, such as Piaget, Frobel, Isaacs and McMillan, as being central to a child's development [6]. Montessori believed that children learn through "active play"; the engagement in activities that involve the use of all of the child's senses and hands. She suggested that children learn best through play in a prepared environment, where tools and equipment for play are available and accessible to the child which encourages freedom of movement and choice and allows the child to learn to take responsibility for their environment [1]. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) supports the views of Montessori, believing that children learn through imitation and activity and suggests that teachers should provide children with purposeful activities such as looking after the home and helping with the preparation of food [9]. However, Montessori's ideas have been criticised for not allowing children to participate in enough imaginative play [1]. This 'symbolic play' between the age of 2 and 6 is highlighted by Jean Piaget (1962) as being an important stage of development, and therefore, a lack of this type of play during this stage could have an effect on development [6]. Being imaginative is also highlighted as an area of development in the Early Years Outcomes document (Great Britain, 2013) which gives practitioners guidance on stages of child development in the early years [4]. This suggests that it is viewed as an important area of learning that should be encouraged by early years settings. That said, Montessori's key ideas are still visible in the statutory framework for the EYFS which states that "play is essential for children's development" as this builds their confidence in their ability to explore, problem solve and recognise how they relate to others [3]. Play is central to the current early years curriculum, in which key elements of Montessori's theories are still used, for example the prepared environment.

4. A PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

Montessori put great emphasis on the need for children to have a 'prepared environment' in which they can develop through the use of child sized tools that are accessible within an organised tidy classroom [6]. She also considered that the environment should be attractive and interesting in order to provoke children to explore and enquire about the environment around them [1]. This idea is supported by Piaget (1976) who identified that during the sensorimotor stage (0-18 months) children need a safe, interesting environment where they can explore and gain experience with different sights and textures, as well as multi-level furnishings that provide opportunities for the children to develop gross motor skills such as climbing, pulling themselves up and walking [6]. Montessori's influence regarding a prepared environment can be seen in the EYFS statutory framework where it suggests that one of the main

guiding principles for all early year's settings should be for them to have an "enabling environment" in which children's experiences will cater to their individual needs [3]. In order for a teacher to know what to provide for a suitable environment, Montessori suggested that they must use their day to day observations of children within their care.

A prepared environment is essential in the kindergarten nowadays. Besides, the environment is divided into the indoor environment and outdoor environment, which makes an enabling and supportive environment. It is also important that teachers reflect on their own values, and how their values impact on the decisions they make about the arrangement of space, the equipment, and materials made available to children [10]. As a result, we usually take the environment as the third teacher. With this in mind, consideration of the environment becomes a critical undertaking within the planning of early childhood education.

4.1 Indoor environment

Children spend a lot of time in the kindergarten classroom, so it is crucial to create the indoor environment. A well-designed and well-organized learning environment that is inviting to children, full of interesting materials, and set up to accommodate a range of activities and play, supports children growth in all areas of development, such as language, art, cognition and so forth. Any developmentally appropriate program -- whether it's a half-day program located in an elementary school setting, a full day program in a child care setting, or a small place located in a church basement -- can follow some basic guidelines to arrange a learning space for young children that will encourage their exploration, creativity, and active learning. So the physical setting in which children play and learn is crucial in facilitating their experiences.

Interest areas should be set up for children in the classroom, which should also be clearly defined by equipment, such as low shelving units or dividers. In addition, teachers should make children to feel comfortable, safe, and free to explore, discover and learn when they enter into their learning environment. In order to create an inviting space for children, there are several factors to consider, such as coziness, softness, and natural building materials and natural light sources. What's more, we should also take storage needs and appropriate equipment into consideration. If possible, special needs even become an even greater concern.

4.2 Outdoor environment

The outdoor environment should be close to the nature, which is easy for children to explore and play. A range of educational theorists, such as Aristotle and Frobel, believed in the value of the nature. Nowadays,

forest school is prevalent in the European countries, while it becomes popular in China as well.

Forest School is an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands on learning experiences in a woodland environment. Previous research highlights that outdoor play may be particularly valuable for children as it can integrate cognitive, emotional and social behaviors. In the forest school, children can play imaginative games using whatever resources and ideas come to mind, building shelters or other large structures from branches with the help of other children and adults, counting objects or look for mathematical patterns and so forth. So children can develop fully, freely and creatively through the forest school.

If the kindergarten does not have the opportunity to make the forest school, we should consider to create a more natural outdoor environment. Sometimes, we can raise some potted plants in the classroom as well to create a natural feeling. For example, we can decorate grass, trees, flowers, and ponds inside the kindergarten. In addition, we can let children feed some animals, like rabbits and fish, in order to make children be kind, considerate as well as patient.

As a result, rich, purposeful, and well-organized indoor and outdoor environment benefits children's cultural identity, concepts of the world, social success, and holistic learning, which is supportive to all-round development of children, and lay a solid foundation for their future development.

5. OBSERVATION

Montessori believed that observation was important to determine what children were interested in and what they needed to enable them to learn. She suggested that by watching children carefully and then acting upon those observations, a practitioner can find out what children need that they are not currently receiving from their environment [6]. Drummond suggests that careful observations can improve early years provision by identifying strengths and weaknesses in what is being provided and identifying 'significant moments in a child's learning' in order to build on their development [8]. These theories are clearly represented in current practice as observations are used in both a formative and summative manner to assess a child's needs and their development and progress.

The EYFS states that this involves "practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations." [3] The Development Matters (Early Education, 2012) nonstatutory guide suggest a process for practitioners to follow in order to get the most out of observations – observation (watching

listening and taking notes) which is followed by assessment (analysing what has been observed and decide what this tells them about the child) and then planning (what should be done to aid the development of the child? The environment, activities and experiences should all be considered) [2].

This cycle should continue on a regular basis to assess the child's needs. Observations can be very useful in identifying the needs of the child and show the stage of development a child is at. This cycle has been influenced by the work of Vygotsky, who believed that practitioners should observe children carefully and then plan a curriculum according to the children's development needs [6].

It could be argued that practitioners spend too much time doing paperwork for these observations, however, in reality, most observations are formative and only a small amount of notetaking is required. Observations that are made by practitioners should be shared with parents in order to inform them of their child's progress and also to allow them to help aid their child's development at home.

6. PARENT'S PARTICIPATION

It has been considered for a long time that parent's participation has a positive impact on a child's learning and development: during the early twentieth century, Margret McMillan provided lectures for parents as part of her nurseries [7]. Since then "The role of parents has evolved significantly and increasing knowledge about the valuable role parents play in their child's lives has led to an emphasis, by the government, on involving them as much as possible in order to enhance outcomes for children's development." [5] Nutbrown (2011) argued that parents can help their children develop more when they have some understanding of how a child's learning develops. This is supported by Urie Bronfenbrenner's social model (1979) which considers external factors within a child's environment that may affect their development [7]. At the centre of this model is the child and the layers around the child represent the people or environments that can influence the child with the most central having the most influence [2]. This model shows parents as the most influential people in the child's world which suggests that it is important for settings to involve the parents in the child's development and that they see the parent as being the child's first educator in life.

This importance is also discussed by Bowlby (1969) who suggests that attachment to a main figure (such as a parent) is best created within the early years and can model relationships for the rest of the child's life [9]. The EYFS statutory framework (2017) seeks to provide a working partnership between practitioners and parents and provides a statutory requirement for each child to have a Key Person and for that

practitioner to discuss all assessments and any issues or problems with parents [3]. This suggests that it is important for each child to have a key person within early years settings so that the practitioner can form a relationship with the child and the parents in which they can communicate openly about the child's development and needs so that the parents can participate in the child's learning. However, it could be argued that having each child having one key person may cause emotional distress to the child if this key person is not available due to illness or if they stop working at the setting, in which case the child would have to be re-assigned a new key worker. This may be distressing for the child at the time, but it may also be argued that it is another learning experience for the child as they will learn that throughout life, they will have to adapt to being supported by different people.

However, children do not have a key person in the kindergarten in China because of the large population and staff limitation. In my point of view, the existence of the key person is really essential for both children and parents. With the help of a key person, the children can be well observed, guided and recorded, and at the mean time, parents can get the all-round feedback about their children from time to time in order to lead and guide their children altogether with practitioners. So it is necessary to set up 'key person' system in Chinese kindergartens, which is beneficial to children's development.

7. CONCLUSION

Montessori's theory on child development has been influential to current early years practice and will have an influence on my own pedagogy. I have learned that as a practitioner I need to view children from a holistic perspective and provide an environment with the activities and materials that are required for children to progress at their own pace and as individuals. I know that children are autonomous individuals that are capable of working independently to achieve their goals and my role will be to support these children in doing that. In order to provide this and get the best out of each child, I understand the importance of observations and how these can provide an insight into how a child is developing and what they need from me to support them to progress further. I will keep in mind Bronfenbrenner's social model when consulting and communicating with parents,

remembering that the parents are the child's first educator and have a strong influence on the child's learning and development. I believe that these influences will remain in my own pedagogy and affect my views as a practitioner in the future.

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