

## ● Letters to the Editor

Contributor: Dianne M. Feeley

### MONTESSORI: A REPLY

712 East Fifth Street  
New York, New York 10009  
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The Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

James Hymes, in his article on "Montessori" (*Educational Leadership* 23: 127-31; November 1965), speaks out strongly against this "method." Nowhere does he have so much as one good word for it. It was popular in Europe, he says, only because Europe was so bankrupt of educational ideas, and the Montessori revival in America is but a combination of good publicity and anxious middle class parents. I recognize that American education [is] eclectic in nature. It will undoubtedly not adopt Montessori. But I do earnestly hope that we will be open enough to learn from it. Even if Dr. Hymes' analysis was absolutely correct, and that I dispute, is there not one thing that we could learn from it?

Historically, Montessori reached America when Americans were already involved in the Progressive Movement. At that time the kindergarten population was almost exclusively the middle class child, whereas Montessori's work was almost exclusively with children who had learning problems—institutionalized mentally retarded children, or children of the Roman slums. The kind of child who was attending kindergarten in America already had learned how to process information, regardless of how unordered the information came. His main problem was that he had never played with many children, and thus his need was a social one. This, plus the observational nature of the kindergarten—a place where psychologists studied children's relationships with each other—made Montessori irrelevant, for the most part.

Interestingly enough, those in this country involved in the problems of special education found Montessori's materials, insights and techniques valuable. Dr. Hymes speaks of an American report, published in 1914, which claimed that American education was really further advanced than Montessori. That slim volume, by Kilpatrick, now out of print, should be read by every educator, in the light of what we now know about learning difficulties and potentials of young

children. People such as Piaget, McV. Hunt, Benjamin Bloom, Deutsch, and Bruner are much closer to Montessori than they are to Kilpatrick.

What has drawn me to Montessori is that the kind of child I work with—the child deformed by society—exhibits by the age of two signs of intellectual deprivation. He tends not to ask questions, he tends not to be curious, he tends not to use verbal means to express himself, his environment tends not to provide him with the sensory experiences he needs. To reach this kind of child, a knowledge of sequence is vital. The teacher needs the ability to analyze the child's learning problem, and to break down the skill into small, sequential steps that will lead the child to successful learning. Montessori was a programmer, as one can so clearly see by looking at her materials. She built a logical curriculum from those materials. The rationale is there.

There is nothing implicit within Montessori that suggests the nine negative perspectives—either/or thinking I find outdated—Dr. Hymes presents are an adequate description of the Montessori method. Indeed, reading Montessori's own daily school schedule would refute most of the charges. In America, it is true, Montessori schools are generally started by the finances and energy of middle class parents. The school day is usually three hours long. Thus many middle class oriented Montessori schools do not emphasize reading stories or field trips, because these things are done by the parents.

Montessori's concepts of a heterogeneous class, where older children often teach younger ones, of children being able to learn many abstract concepts if only there are concrete means by which they can be grasped, of creating exciting games based on concepts, of individualizing instruction, of having a sequential pattern available to children who need it, of an environment where children can learn from animals and things and other children as well as adults, of children free enough to need neither punishment nor reward, are positive contributions, contributions I hope will not be lost under whatever faults—real and imagined—in Montessori. But from a system that has been around for fifty years, with that much insight, we surely can learn something.

Sincerely,  
Dianne M. Feeley

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

James Macdonald raises penetrating questions regarding the reliability and applicability of much current educational research. See the "Research in Review" column, page 601.

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