

Montessori and the Special Child

by Jon Osterkorn

Little did Dr. Montessori realize as she passed through the gates of the Manicomio di Roma that the children she would find in this antiquated mental asylum would be the source of a revolution in special education. The conditions there were both physically cruel and psychologically dehumanizing with emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded children and adults housed together with criminals and the physically sick. The inmates themselves asked Dr. Montessori to help the children who were ignored by both the scientific world and society in general.

Taking the work of Itard and Seguin as her guide, she began research on effective modifications and additions to their approach in regard to the education of the young mentally retarded child. Through intensive work directly with the children she formulated a new approach, based on experimental psychology, which rendered knowledge comprehensible to the disabled child's mind through work in a prepared learning environment of sensorial materials. The scientific application of the principles of developmental education advanced by Dr. Montessori opened a new avenue for intellectual growth and emotional balance for the disabled children under her care. Her research revealed that the child, even the most seriously disabled, has special potentialities which enable him through interaction with the environment to achieve independence and competence. She detailed the structure of the child's absorbent mind and how psychological deviation could be overcome through constructive activity in a prepared learning environment.

Over the next seventy years this unique help to life advocated by Dr. Montessori grew and expanded in importance for children with a wide range of differing disabilities throughout the world. Successful application of the Montessori approach has been demonstrated with blind children in Padua, Italy (Leonardi, 1957), with brain injured children in Washington, D.C. (Argy, 1965), with mentally retarded children in Milan, Italy (Attias, 1977), with physically disabled children in Munich, Germany (Ockel, 1977), with learning disabled children in Toronto, Canada (Trass, 1982), with cerebral palsy children in Hellerup, Denmark (Hoff, 1966), and with emotionally disturbed children in Dublin, Ireland (Jordan, 1977).

In all of these efforts, one of the central features of the Montessori approach has been the integration of disabled and non-disabled children working together in the same learning environment. While the concept of mainstreaming is relatively new in the field of contemporary special education, the Montessori approach has always placed important emphasis on the benefits gained through involving children of different abilities in the same integrated learning experience. Confirmation of this aspect of Montessori work was given at the XVIIIth International AMI Montessori Congress in 1977 with participants from every corner of the world sharing reports of their efforts to help the special child. In order to prepare teachers for this important

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work with disabled children, specialized training courses have been established by the Association Montessori Internationale in Dublin, Ireland; Munich, Germany; and Mexico City, Mexico.

In the United States the first impact of Dr. Montessori's work with disabled children came in the field of education for the deaf child. Two of Dr. Montessori's first American students, Mrs. Reno Margulies and Mrs. Anna Hurd established classes for hearing impaired children after returning from their training in Rome in 1912. Mrs. Margulies opened the Margulies School for the Deaf in New York City and Mrs. Hurd initiated a Montessori program at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf in Providence, Rhode Island.

Dr. Montessori was especially interested in this work when she toured the United States in 1913. She visited the Volta Bureau, the national clearinghouse for information of the education of deaf children, in Washington, D.C. and met with Alexander Graham Bell who was a leading advocate for the education and training of hearing impaired children and adults. A highpoint of this visit was a meeting with Helen Keller and her teacher Mrs. Anne Sullivan Macy in Philadelphia. The next year Dr. Montessori wrote, "Helen Keller is a marvelous example of the phenomenon common to all human beings, the possibility of the liberation of the imprisoned spirit of man by the education of the senses." (1914)

The following article by Anna Hurd offers a glimpse of this early work with Montessori and hearing impaired children in 1915. Seventeen years after Dr. Montessori walked through the gates of the Manicomio di Roma disabled children in the United States were learning by means of her discoveries. Today, this historical report attests to the universal benefit of the Montessori approach and the special promise it offers the disabled child. □

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