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## **Evolution of Child Centric Education and Contribution of Madam Maria Montessori the Great Educator of 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Present Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*For a few decades prior to the mid of 17<sup>th</sup> century the educational system was very much teacher centric where teacher was the prime factor or in the centre of the education system. Maria Montessori was the first 19<sup>th</sup> century woman physician to become involved with education as a doctor treating underprivileged children. She devoted her energies and further studies to the field of child centric education. Her work has made a significant contribution to improving the standards of education and her methods and materials have been adopted in public and private schools around the world. Montessori wanted to give full freedom to the child. She did not like any interference in his normal activities. Originally her teaching method is famous for self learning mode associated with unique sense training that develops a self reliance and perseverance.*

***Key words: Evolution, Child centric education, freedom, sense training, self-learning.***

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**Introduction:** In the traditional system of education either the teacher or the subject matter dominated. Suppressing completely the child's liberty and natural life-urges, the teacher with the rod compelled him to obey his instructions and commands without any question or murmur. The teacher was the active speaker; the pupil was the passive listener. The red eyed master was the ruler; the timid and obedient child was the ruled. They were bound by artificial bonds, and never by wholesome human relationship. The teacher was always awe-inspiring; the pupil was always living in terror. An artificial order was maintained by extremely enforced rules and regulations and discipline was conspicuous by its absence in such a lifeless atmosphere. Sometimes the heart of the helpless child ached for freedom from this artificial bondage. Under the pressure of such an unpsychological, unrealistic, tyrannical teacher-centric education, the child's genial currents of the soul were checked and repressed, his life-force was wasted, and his infinite possibilities were nipped in the bud. (Chakraborty 272) Nobody paid attention to individual differences for the early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. All were cast in the same groove.

**The Evolution of Child Centric Education:** The idea of focusing the curriculum on the learner (in either facet) and their interests is not a new notion. Signs of this approach has roots as far back as Ancient Greece (469–399 B.C.) with the work of Socrates and in Ancient China (551–479 B.C.) through the infamous philosopher Confucius. (Henson, 2003) Both of these men stressed the focus on the individual; each student should want to continue learning until self-realization, or excellence, is reached. Nearly 500 years later in year 1 B.C., a Roman educator by the name Quintilian introduced what is known as the ‘Doctrine of Interest’. This document is still referenced to today in schools that utilize a learner centred approach. Quintilian stated, “Students ought to study what they want to study, meaning the curriculum should be built on student interest.” (Ellis, 2004)

In ancient Rome for the first time we notice the importance of the child in the educational thoughts of **Quintilian**. He opined that child should be educated according to his abilities. The subject matter should be attractive to the child. He protested against the physical punishment of the child. Then **Erasmus**, the great humanist of the 15<sup>th</sup> century emphasised on the individuality of the child. He said education should be related to the practical life of the child and the teacher should know the child. The great practical educationist **Comenius** (1592-1670) laid emphasis on man and his environment in his educational plan. Education should be related to the daily life of the child, he said. He for the first time made child- centric education scientific. He prepared child centric curriculum. In the early of 18<sup>th</sup> century **Rousseau** the most outstanding historical figure first revolted against this lifeless artificial system of education that tortured the helpless child. He first declared that the child should allow remaining a child before he would develop into a man. According to him, the child is endowed with instinctive and emotional impulses, inclinations and desires will and temperament, which constitute his nature.

### **Opinion of 19<sup>th</sup> century educators about child centric education:**

**Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827):** Pestalozzi had full faith in human nature. He sensed a grain of humanity in each individual. He believed that every person has a tendency to become virtuous.

**Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852):** Froebel has his own unique way to interpret the child’s nature. He says that childhood is not a period of preparation for youth. It has its own separate importance. He regards ‘playfulness’ as a special trait of a child. It is wrong to presume that a child begins to do whatever he is asked to do. The child has his own unique personality. Every child tries to protect the uniqueness of its own nature. Froebel does not give any place to the desire of the teacher in the education of the child. He considers self-activity of the child as his great teacher.

**John Dewey (1859-1952):** Dewey believed that education must be directed towards understanding students’ capabilities and interests so that they could best succeed in their communities. Dewey also believed that this type of education was best administered in a social setting which would help students reach their potential (Henson, 2003). Dewey stated

that the experiences that arose from learner-centred curriculum were based on the individual.

**Bertrand Russell (1872-1971):** Russell recognizes the importance of the first six or seven years of a child. The impressions acquired by the child during this formative period are the permanent nature. In order to acquire the good knowledge Russell thinks that some intellectual virtues are necessary for a child to develop his/ her intellectual capacity. Those are- curiosity, open mindedness, faith in the acquisition of knowledge, perseverance, concentration of attention, patience and exactness.

**Vygotsky (1896-1934):** Vygotsky studied interactions between children and noticed that when students worked together in groups to solve problems they were able to solve the problems more efficiently than they would if they were working alone. In these groups, students would discuss the problems and were able to help and talk each other through the problems and by doing so were more apt to solve the problem in a way that everyone understood.

**Jean Piaget (1896-1980):** Piaget was concerned with dealing with the learner as an individual. Rather than giving students written problems, he would give them problems that encouraged them to work with and manipulate concrete objects. Through this work he noticed that each student had different assumptions and conclusions and worked with the objects in different ways.

**Contribution of Maria Montessori in Perspective of Child Centric Education:** While there were small ‘pop-ups’ of learner-centred education in the very earlier decades there wasn’t a major push for this theory until the establishment of the Progressive Education Movement in the early 1900’s. It was during the integration of the Progressive education model, that an overall definition was formed about the learner centred theory; the ultimate goal of this model is that the school should allow all individuals, both students and teachers alike, the freedom and opportunity to study what they wish. **Dr. Maria Montessori’s** work has considerably influenced modern educational theory and practice, especially in case of children at nursery school stage. Her gospel of love, respect and sympathy for the child has been accepted all over the world. She was born in 1870 in Italy when the country was undergoing political upheavals. She came in the contact with some dull and handicapped children while working in a hospital. She thought that such children could improve their condition after receiving necessary education. Her work has considerably influenced modern educational theories and practices especially in the case of nursery school stage. Montessori system of child centric education has become so popular that the word ‘Montessori’ has become synonymous with ‘child’. Thus today ‘Montessori’ is related to ‘child’.

### **Solutions for Our Current Educational Problem and Montessori Education:**

- a) **Independence for child:** While the current education system makes us heavily dependent on our teachers, the children of the class and books, the Montessori system

is based on the theory that the children are able to do things for themselves there is an increase in their self belief and even self confidence and esteem that they may carry on throughout their life.

- b) **No comparison between children:** The basic theory of Montessori is against comparison between children. It rather promotes co-existence and co-learning. The students are self-inspired and study to co-exist, not compete.
- c) **Observation based education:** The basic idea behind Montessori format is learning via observing – especially children at a pre-school stage. It is also the way adults can learn about what the child needs.
- d) **Multi age grouping learning:** Based on age groups, children are mixed into ages and abilities in three to six year spans: 0-3, 3-6, 6-12, 12-15, and 15-18. As the International Montessori Index puts it, there is constant interaction, problem solving, child to child teaching, and socialization. Children are challenged according to their ability and never bored.
- e) **“Teach by teaching, not by correcting” method:** In case of Montessori Method the teacher does not criticize or humiliate students. He/she respects the student as he/she is. There are no papers turned back with red marks and corrections.
- f) **No grades –No punishments:** Children are bound to make mistakes. we can either scold them and instil fear in them, or teach by example. For example, if a child drops something, instead of scolding, we can set an example, *“Oh you dropped the food, why don't we get a cloth and wipe it up.”* It is an opportunity to ask the child to do some valid practical work with us. We will find children do like to clean up as they see it as something adults do – thus they learn quickly.
- g) **Formation of character by moral education:** In Montessori Method, education of character is considered as important as academic education, children learn to take care of themselves, their environment, each other – cooking, cleaning, building, gardening, moving gracefully, speaking politely, being considerate and helpful, doing social work in the community, etc. This forms the basis of a person's nature and characteristics, and something that our current education system misses completely.
- h) **Freedom for child:** Montessori stands for full freedom which is essential for the spontaneous development for the child. She insists that there should be no interference in the way of the child's growth and development.
- i) **No fairy tales:** Montessori feels that fairy stories tend to confuse the children. Moreover such tales hinder them in the process of adjusting themselves to the real world. She therefore eliminates fairy tales from the curriculum prescribed for the young children.
- j) **Auto education or self-learning:** Montessori Method encourages auto education or self education based on the psychological aspects of the child's development. It enables the child to learn according to his own interest and at his own speed. Didactic Apparatus is used in order to facilitate self education.



Montessori assigns greater importance to sensory training than learning or thinking. So she uses a device called **Didactic Apparatus** to sharpen the pupil's sense and accelerate learning. The process of learning through the didactic apparatus involves the three psychological steps of association, recognition and recall which are the basic principles of self-education.

Sl. No.	Purpose of sense training	Apparatus (material used)
1	Perception of size	Series of wooden cylinders varying in heights, blocks varying in sizes, rods varying in lengths.
2	Perception of form	Geometrical insets in metal, wood, or the shapes of the insets drawn on paper, cards.
3	Perception of colour	Series of coloured woods, papers, tablets etc.
4	Discrimination in weight	Tablets of wood, similar in size but different in weight.
5	Discrimination in touch	Highly polished surface and sand paper surface is used
6	Discrimination in sound	Cylindrical sound boxes containing different substances
7	Discrimination in temperature	Water of different temperature.
8	Tactful activity	Train him to discriminate differences in weight and temperature keeping his eyes closed.

**The Role of Montessori teacher:** In *A Way of learning* (1973) Anne Burke Neubert listed the following elements in the special role of the Montessori teacher:

Montessori teachers **are the dynamic link** between children and the Prepared Environment. They **systematically observe** their students and interpret their needs. They

**are constantly experimenting**, modifying the environment to meet their perceptions of each child's needs and interests, and objectively noting the result. They **prepare an environment** meant to facilitate children's independence and ability to freely select work that they find appealing, selecting activities that will appeal to their interests and keeping the environment in perfect condition, adding to it and removing materials as needed. They **carefully evaluate** the effectiveness of their work and the design of the environment every day. They **observe and evaluate** each child's individual progress. They **respect and protect** their students' independence. They must know when to step in and set limits or lend a helping hand, and when it is in a child's best interests for them to step back and not interfere. They **are supportive**, offering warmth, security, stability, and non-judgmental acceptance to each child. They **facilitate communication** among the children and help the children to learn how to communicate their thoughts to adults. They **interpret** the children's progress and their work in the classroom to parents, the school staff, and the community. They **present clear, interesting and relevant lessons** to the children. They attempt to engage the child's interest and focus on the lessons and activities in the environment. They **model desirable behaviour** for the children, following the ground-rules of the class, exhibiting a sense of calm, consistency, grace and courtesy and demonstrating respect for every child. They **are peace educators**, consistently working to teach courteous behaviours and conflict. They **are diagnosticians** who can interpret patterns of growth, development, and behaviour in order to better understand the children and make necessary referrals and suggestions to parents. (NAMC)

The 'Children's House' the name of the school given by Montessori provides a practical life where everyday life is carried on in which all house work is entrusted to the little ones, who execute with devotion and accuracy their domestic duties, becoming singularly calm and dignified. The time when the child is mentally prepared to learn a thing is the psychological moment, Montessori said. The teacher should wait for this psychological moment and it should also work for developing this moment in order that the children may learn things joyfully.

In present day Montessori system and its impact can easily be seen in the field of pre-primary education in the European countries, U.S.A., India, China, Japan, African countries, Latin American countries and all through the world. This system has encouraged lovers of education to discover new methods of teaching young children. As a result education becomes child-centred gradually. The most significant feature of the system is the individualisation of instruction. So Dr. Montessori has revolutionised the concept of child education. Her impact on educational thoughts and practices is universal.

***“A child is like a butterfly in the wind, some can fly higher than others,  
But each one flies the best it can. Why compare one against the other?  
Each one is different. Each one is special. Each one is beautiful”***

***----- Maria Montessori***

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