Policy Statement

American Montessori Society Information Items, part of the publications program of the American Montessori Society and published by the Cleveland Montessori Association, is intended as a service to AMS members bringing to their attention both original contributions and reprints of previously published materials on topics relevant to their needs and interests. Its sponsors intend that this publication shall play a responsible role in the integration of the Montessori educational philosophy and methodology within American culture.

The attitudes and opinions expressed in AMS Information Items do not necessarily represent the official position of the American Montessori Society, nor does publication of any individual work thereby imply agreement or support by its author of the aims and practices of the Montessori movement.

As a service publication for members, only their active and free expression of bona fide interests and needs arising from their own experience can make this publication useful within the movement. Comments and suggestions for specific types of information items desired will be appreciated by the editor.

Thus, AMS Information Items is being designed as 1) a service publication for all AMS members, but some issues may be more relevant than others for the specific interests or needs of individual members. 2) We intend that it will be an instrument to facilitate the integration of the Montessori method into American culture; we also hope we can contribute to the achievement of American values within the Montessori movement. 3) Its content will not be limited to strictly "Montessori-oriented" materials or to any monolithic interpretation of the Montessori movement and its policies within an American setting. 4) Use will be made, accordingly, of non-Montessori publications which are either consistent with her insights or which extend them in terms of current theories and data which are relevant for the American Montessori classroom and American culture.

Forthcoming AMS Information Items will reprint one of the few references in which Dr. Montessori gave her specific evaluation of the characteristics of American children; another will deal with her views on the inadequacy of short courses for the training of Montessori directresses and the necessary elements of a proper curriculum for a permanent training center.

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(Editor's note: It is singularly appropriate that the first number of AMS Information Items should be an appraisal of the rebirth of the Montessori movement in America, as reflected in a critical review of the different viewpoints of E. M. Standing and Nancy McCormick Rambusch. The author of the review, Dr. John J. McDermott, Department of Philosophy, Queens College, New York, has been for many years since he "stumbled on to one of her books" a serious student of the thought of Dr. Montessori. For additional comments by him, see his "Introduction" to the New American Library edition of E. M. Standing, Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962). The source of the review, Cross Currents, "A quarterly review to explore the implications of Christianity for our times," has played a significant role within the intellectual life of America since it began publication in 1950. For those interested, it is published by Cross Currents Quarterly, 103 Van Houten Fields, West Nyack, New York at a yearly subscription rate of $3.50. We wish to thank them for permission to reprint the following article.)

"The Montessori Renascence"

by Dr. John J. McDermott

Cross Currents

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Although only several years of age in America, the Montessori renaissance has already passed that point at which its sheer existence was cause for approval. With hundreds of teachers now in a training program under the auspices of the American Montessori Association and Montessori schools beginning to proliferate, a new kind of analysis is in order. As part of what should be a constant attempt to overhaul our philosophy of education, we must sift the merely novel in the Montessori approach from those aspects that will prove to be residual. In such an investigation, two problems come to the fore: the first pertaining to the nature of Montessori's doctrine and the second relating to its relevance for the American scene. Orthodox Montessorians, like Mortimer Standing, contend that only the first is a problem because they hold that "children are the same the world over." This is a somewhat innocent and misleading conviction, for even if it were true, the gist of the matter is that parents are quite different the world over, or more to the point, the political framework in which educational processes are evaluated differs considerably from culture to culture.

Both books in question presuppose the cultural concern for the child
so characteristic of our epoch. But this concern is comparatively new. The rapid pace of the modern world tends to obscure the recent origins of some of our most obvious preoccupations. We should not, therefore, overlook the fact that our knowledge of such an ever-persistent and highly central phenomenon as the child is for the most part but seventy-five years old. Maria Montessori shares with Freud and Dewey a significant role in this latter development and perhaps when the full realization of her insights comes to pass, she may well see fulfilled her desire to make this the century of the child.

Beginning her work with slum children in Italy at the turn of the century, Maria Montessori happened upon what she subsequently called the "normalized child," that inner life of the child which will not reveal itself to purely adult categories. Cardinal to her view of children was the insistence that they are not small adults, and therefore present a life-situation calling for analysis on its own terms. Following this conviction, she conducted what would now be called a sustained phenomenological analysis of the experience of childhood and in so doing unearthed a host of seminal insights relative to the proper education of children.

As both Mr. Standing and Mrs. Rambusch note, the central pedagogical problem for Montessori has to do with the relationship between freedom and order in a "prepared environment." But it is important to realize that Montessori's version of this problem is worked out within the framework of a very definite philosophical anthropology. She shares that philosophical revolution engendered at the end of the nineteenth century by William James, Henri Bergson and behavioristic psychology. Her sympathies are clearly on the side of an empirically oriented philosophy of man. Although often lacking adequate language to present the more shattering of her insights, she clearly cuts herself off from the desiccated framework, scholastic and otherwise, that dominated theories of human behavior prior to the nineteenth century transformation in psychology and biology. In her work on The Absorbent Mind, for example, she sides with a complex developmentalism in that "today, the vision of evolution has broadened; it has become spread over a bi-dimensional field, wherein are included many functional relationships, near and distant, which link up the activities of different forms of life." It is within this developmental setting, with its assertion of different "types of mentality in the successive stages of growth," that Montessori locates the problem of freedom and order. She contends, and her empirical evidence is impressive in this regard, that there are "sensitive periods" which occur in the ongoing life of the child and which call for specific realization -- some through educational means. It is fitting, then, that the most convincing dimension of Montessori's approach has to do with the remarkable success of her "prepared environments" as a stimulus to the exercise of powers heretofore unrecognized, let alone brought to fruition by conventional education. It is clear that Montessori saw her overall developmental framework as the locus for insights as to the role of order and the place of the "guiding mechanisms" so necessary to "growth and psychic development." Speaking of these ordering characteristics in The Absorbent Mind, she contends that "the promise they hold can only be fulfilled through the experience of free activity conducted on the environment." In short, experiment is the constant point of departure for Montessori in her attempt to provide an ever better educational situation for the child. It is by no means apparent that Montessorians, orthodox and otherwise, are equally as faithful
to this experimental temper. Of the two books under review, the first, by Mortimer Standing, is a simplified and somewhat disorganized version of his longer and more carefully presented Mátéia Montessori -- Her Life and Work (Academy Guild, 1957). C. piously illustrated, it acts as a handbook for the basic principles and concerns of the Montessori approach. We should, I think, be ambivalent about Standing's book on Montessori. He has ably brought the atmosphere of the Montessori tradition to the fore and, through a wealth of anecdotes and observations gathered in his thirty years as her assistant, has successfully given us an insight into the extraordinary humanity of her person and her work. Further, Standing writes about real children and avoids that antiseptic atmosphere that pervades so much of the ostensibly more sophisticated contemporary literature about early childhood education. Against this, however, is his total lack of a critical dimension. And he seems to be in no way aware of other relevant developments in contemporary educational theory, especially of those that tend to correct or go beyond Montessori's position. It is perhaps this last deficiency that causes him to use very old-fashioned and thereby misleading language in his presentation of even her most dynamic and modern insights. The book by Nancy Rambusch, the founder of Whitby Montessori school in Connecticut, and now president of the American Montessori Association, is an effort to introduce Montessori to the American scene from an American point of view. The first half of this task she accomplishes admirably. Lucidly presented in the context of a series of contemporary educational problems and attitudes, Mrs. Rambusch establishes herself as an acute commentator on educational theory, particularly as ramified in early learning. The sections of her book devoted to the Montessori view of the "Child" and of the "Environment" provide the reader with what is unquestionably the best introduction to these facets of the Montessori approach now extant. The second part of her task, to explicate the relationship between Montessori's position and the American approach in terms of educational aims and needs is not as successful. This is, of course, no small problem, and it is true that the very presence of such a cultural problematic in her book already indicates that she has gone beyond the prevalent view that the Montessori approach can be largely indifferent to the geopolitical setting into which it is introduced. But aside from the idiomatic crispness of her language and the utilization of the best contemporary American literature in educational theory, the real problem is not faced. Indeed, it is of significance that her chapter on the "New School" is the only really disappointing one in the book, characterized as it is by a vagueness and a tendency to general-ity not found in the rest of her exposition and not typical of the Montessori approach. More specifically, there is little doubt that Montessori opens up an extremely seminal point of view with regard to the education of children, particularly youngsters from three to five. Even those who tend to be skeptical about claims for highly successful education methods with young children will be most likely persuaded by Mrs. Rambusch's fine exposition of Montessori. The question remains as to whether these insights, not to say methodological apparatus, can be integrated into the structure of American public education without disrupting those values central to that tradition and to that complex of relations known as American culture. Can the passion for experiment, socialization and overall communal participation be as meaningful in a Montessori-oriented school? And can the
Montessori approach remain viable when faced with the sociological problems characteristic of American urban education? Mrs. Rambusch, while directing herself to the weaknesses of American education, particularly those accented in a post-sputnik generation, does not adequately confront these vital concerns which would be broached in the name of public education. Further, she would agree, I hope, that the increased begetting of private Montessori schools does little to answer these problems.

It is of note that Montessori herself, beginning as she did with slum children, would see no insurmountable difficulty in having her approach attain a genuine penetration of the overall American educational framework. Perhaps Nancy Rambusch and the American Montessori Association, who seem to share this egalitarian orientation of Montessori, will return to these problems and take real issue with our situation in all of its aspects, positive and negative. Given this, Mrs. Rambusch can then better say, as she does in her Preface: "can Americans do less than look again at Montessori?"

John J. McDermott