Montessori and the Baha'i Faith

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Abstract
The life and work of Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), scientist and educator, are introduced as relevant for the study of those investigating education in the light of the Bahá’í teachings. It is illustrated that Montessori was attuned to the spirit of the Bahá’í Era and that both her thoughts and actions showed understanding of such Bahá’í principles as the oneness of humanity, the equality of the sexes, the oneness of science and religion and a spiritual orientation to life. Her discoveries with children and view that they are key to the development of human society and ultimately world peace are presented in relation to Bahá’í writings on these subjects.

Résumé
La vie et l’oeuvre du Dr Maria Montessori (1870–1952), femme de science et éducatrice, sont présentées ici comme étant pertinentes pour les chercheurs qui se penchent sur la question de l’éducation à la lumière des enseignements bahá’ís. L’auteure démontre que Montessori était en harmonie avec l’esprit de l’ère bahá’íe et que dans ses pensées et actions elle a fait preuve d’une bonne compréhension de principes bahá’ís tels que l’unité de humanité l’égalité des sexes, l’unité de la science et de la religion, et une orientation spirituelle de la vie. Ses découvertes avec les enfants et ses vues selon lesquelles les enfants sont la clé du développement de la société humaine et, en fin de compte, de la paix mondiale sont présentées par rapport aux écrits bahá’ís sur ces sujets.

Resumen
Se introduce la vida y trabajo de la Dra. María Montessori (1870-1952),

científica y educadora, como relevante para
el estudio de aquellos que investigan la educación a la luz de las enseñanzas
Bahá'ís. Se ilustra que Montessori
estaba afinada al espiritu de la Era Bahá'í y que tanto sus pensamientos
como sus acciones demostraban un
entendimiento de tales principios Bahá'ís como la unidad de la humanidad,
la igualdad de los sexos, la unidad de la
ciencia y la religión y una orientación espiritual de la vida. Se presentan
sus descubrimientos sobre los niños/niñas y
su opinión de que ellos son la clave al desarrollo de la sociedad humana y a
la larga a la paz mundial en relación a
las escrituras Bahá'ís sobre estos temas.

T he Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh marks a whole new cycle in human
history. It marks mankind's arrival at a new
plane of development. The spiritual teachings that have sustained mankind and
spurred its growth throughout
history have been renewed by Bahá'u'lláh, and a larger measure of the
spiritual reality explained because of man's
greater capacity to understand in this day. Like those spiritual leaders of the
past—the Founders of the world's great
religions who have led mankind to increasingly higher levels of social
organization and unity (the family, the tribe,
the nation)—Bahá'u'lláh's mission is to bring our awareness and
communal life to the ultimate level (in this world)
of planetary unity. His spiritual teachings concerning the oneness of God, the
oneness of religion, and the oneness
of mankind provide the foundation for this new organization, eliminating the
root causes for much of the world's
disunity. His very existence as the most recent of God's Messengers,
fulfilling the prophecies of the world's
religions provides the motive force—acceptance of his Revelation—for that
unification.
Bahá'u'lláh tells us clearly what our tasks are in this world: to
recognize his Revelation, and through it to
know and worship God; to develop ourselves spiritually, growing through the
tests and difficulties of our daily lives
to reflect more and more of the divine attributes or spiritual qualities; and
finally, to carry forward an ever-
advancing civilization. The civilization we aim towards today is a worldwide
civilization. Every aspect of
mankind's life will undoubtedly be affected: work, economics, medicine and
health care, government, the arts, and,
of course, education. Bahá'u'lláh has given us numerous principles to
guide us in our development in each of these
areas. It is tremendously exciting to contemplate this world civilization and
to work towards it through our chosen

occupations. We must keep in mind, however, that we do not know just what this future order will look like.

Bahá'u'lláh did not tell us exactly and neither did 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi. The new organization will evolve from many sources, its elements discovered by both Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, both past and future, and from people of many races and ethnic backgrounds whose ascendancy the world has not yet experienced.

In many passages, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that every atom of the universe was touched by the power of his Revelation, and indeed when we look at a graph of the growth of invention and technology in the centuries prior to this Revelation and the decades since, we see a tremendous increase dating from the time of Bahá'u'lláh.

The technological means for planetary unity have been established. In the social sciences as well, there have been discoveries that revolutionized our understanding of human life. Many are those who have helped and are helping to build a new world though still unaware of the Source of the Revelation and its aim. An important and exciting task then falls upon those who can investigate with the highest standards of scholarship, the theory, research, and applications of each branch of knowledge important for a world civilization and then evaluate, refine, and direct that knowledge on the basis of the standards established in the Bahá'í writings.

With this perspective in mind, I would like to consider the life and work of a truly great woman, Dr. Maria Montessori. Although her life's work was in the field of education, her definition of education was a broad one, and this is, in part, what makes it important for our consideration. Born in 1870 and active until her death in 1952, she lived at the same time as Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. I have no indication that she had knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith, but she was one of those souls who seems to have been attuned to the spirit of the time in which she was living. These words of hers written in the 1930s reflect this:

> An era that lasted for thousands of years, one as old as human history, beginning in fact in a legendary age and before that in epochs of which we have only a few traces buried in the bowels of the earth, has now come to an end. An immense chapter of history taking millennia to unfold has now closed. We are undergoing a crisis, torn between an old world that is coming to an end and a new world that has already begun and already given proof of all the constructive elements it has to offer. The crisis we are

experiencing is not the sort of upheaval that marks the passage from one historical period to another. It can be compared only to one of those biological or geological epochs in which new, higher, more perfect forms of life appeared, as totally new conditions of existence on earth came about. (Education 24)

Montessori was born in the province of Ancona, Italy, the very year that Italy first became united. She spent her childhood and early adulthood in Rome. Yet throughout her life she exemplified Bahá'u'lláh's injunction: "Let man not glory in this that [h]e loveth his country, let him rather glory in this that he loveth his kind" (Tablets 127-28). Once when asked her nationality she replied, "I live in Heaven, my country is a star which turns around the sun and is called the Earth" (Maria 50). Her understanding of this principle was profound. In part, it seems to have been an intuitive realization, but it was also as we shall see confirmed and strengthened by her research. She spoke out about it time and again even when much of the world was preparing for or participating in the two world wars that threatened to stop her work. In 1936, she addressed the European Congress for Peace in Brussels with these words:

We are all a single organism, one nation. By becoming a single nation we have finally realized the unconscious spiritual and religious aspiration of the human soul, and this we can proclaim to every corner of the earth. "Humanity as an organism" has been born; the superconstruction that has absorbed man's efforts from the beginning of his history has now been completed....In a word, contemporary man has citizenship in the great nation of humanity.

It is absurd to believe that such a man, endowed with powers superior to those of nature, should be a Dutchman or a Frenchman or an Englishman or an Italian. He is the new citizen of the new world—a citizen of the universe. (Education 28)

Like the vast majority of Italians, Montessori was a Catholic. What pervades her writings, however, is not her Catholicism (although she sometimes draws on the lives of saints or quotes scripture to illustrate a point), but her deep sense of spirituality and her ability to transcend a particular religion for the deeper truth. It was this quality that made her work attractive to people of so many religious backgrounds. Spirituality was at the very heart of her work with children. She states: "Our goal is not so much the imparting of

knowledge as the unveiling and developing of spiritual energy" (Maria 47). One of the things that makes her unique is her unfailing commitment to religious truth and the place of the spiritual component in education and all of life. She spoke with certitude on this subject even when it was not fashionable to do so. This contributed to her being somewhat ostracized by the scientific and educational establishment and her being labeled as "mystical" and unscientific. Ironically, there was disagreement over her even within the religious establishment. There is an account in a recent biography of Montessori being lambasted by an American priest because her work flew in the face of the doctrine of "original sin." Yet posthumously she was honored by Pope John XXIII.

Her life's work is a blending of the scientific and the spiritual. She never saw the two areas as being in conflict with each other. Sheila Radice, a writer for the Times Educational Supplement, followed Montessori's lectures and courses in London in the early 1920s and had many conversations with Montessori which resulted in Radice's publishing a book called The New Children. She writes of Montessori:

> In those days she told me she saw the "two camps" very plainly—the professors of the humanities sneering at science; and the scientists laughing at the philosophers, and she thought to herself that some day the teacher would come who could unite these two opposed interpretations of life in one. (3)

Radice goes on to explain how she felt Montessori herself did so much toward this end.

In the area of politics as well, Montessori's life reflected a constant effort to remain aloof to serve a higher interest even when there was much pressure to align herself with a particular group. This is an aspect of her life that can be particularly appreciated by Bahá'ís, as the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh stress noninvolvement in politics as an assistance to serving the higher goal of unity. In Montessori's life, this pressure was especially evident in the days prior to World War II when she was attempting to expand her work in Italy. On the one hand, she resisted attempts by Mussolini to use her schools to indoctrinate youth. Kramer, her biographer, on the other hand, is somewhat critical of her for not leaving Italy sooner or taking an active stand against the rising Fascism. It was not until her schools were forced to close that she gave up her work in Italy and went to Spain, making Barcelona her headquarters. In Germany and Austria, the Nazis burned her effigy as well as her books in public squares in both

Vienna and Berlin. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, her life was in danger in Spain, as a Catholic who had written on the teaching of religion. She was evacuated on short notice with the help of the British government. She left on a battleship and resettled in Holland where she again proceeded with her work. In 1939 as World War II was declared, she was invited to India by the Theosophical Society and remained there until 1946. In 1940 when Italy entered the war, she was confined to the Society's compound, and her son Mario was interred in a camp for civilians.

Although externally her life was affected by political forces, within she remained detached as this statement indicates:

> Not in the service of any political or social creed should the teacher work, but in the service of the complete human being, able to exercise in freedom a self-disciplined will and judgement, unperverted by prejudice and undistorted by fear. (Maria 53)

Many of her close associates observed that she seemed to feel that her life was guided by a force beyond herself to accomplish some definite purpose. Even as young as ten-years-old, while desperately ill, she comforted her mother saying "Do not worry, mother I cannot die. I have too much to do in my life" (6).

Anna Maccheroni, a colleague quotes her as saying, "To collect one's forces, even when they seem to be scattered, and when one's aim is only dimly perceived—this is a great action and will sooner or later bring forth fruits" (Standing, Maria Montessori 30). And Standing, an early biographer, recalls her saying that the art of life consisted in learning how "to be obedient to events" (31). She quite evidently applied these principles many times over in her own life. On this topic, Maccheroni elsewhere writes:

> She seems to face life in such a different way from most people. She sees, I might say, the unknown side of life. Often she repeats, "We are not born simply to enjoy ourselves."...She is by no means a fatalist, but she does feel that there are results from what we are and what we do that are not chosen by us as we choose so many things on the surface of our lives. "We human beings," she said, "we must have a mission too, of which we are not aware." (Maria 5)

By following this sense of inner direction, the young Montessori was led into a series of challenges based on another important Bahá'í principle, the equality of men and women. Bahá'u'lláh has said that humanity is like a

bird with the one wing male and the other female, and that if one wing is weak and undeveloped the bird will be unable to fly. Not only outspoken on the equality of men and women, Montessori lived this principle. She was a bright young student, and as she approached the age of choosing her course in adulthood, the only profession open to women in Italy was teaching. She flatly refused it. She especially loved mathematics and chose a career in engineering. This necessitated her attending a technical school then the exclusive domain of males. She was admitted and did well despite having to be sequestered in a separate room at break times. Open to what she felt to be guidance, Montessori changed her direction and chose a medical career. Initially told it was impossible, she persisted and became the first woman admitted to the University of Rome Medical School. There are many stories of the "petty persecutions" she endured with good humor, as well as the official regulations such as having to wait until all the men were seated before entering the lecture halls and having to work on her cadaver alone at night, before she won the respect of her professors and fellow students and graduated with high honors as Italy's first woman doctor in 1896.

She was a delegate to many international women's conferences and spoke out on behalf of women's right to education, equal pay, etc. Professionally, she was appointed assistant doctor at the psychiatric clinic in the University of Rome, as well as establishing a private practice. In 1898, she became Director of the Orthophrenic Institute in Rome, in 1900 became a lecturer at the Feminine Teachers Training College, and from 1904-06 she was also a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Rome.

It was during these early years in hospital work that Montessori began to discover her real life's work: the study of the child and education. It began seemingly quite accidentally. She discovered a locked room in the hospital for the insane in which only the most basic custodial care was being given to a group of mentally defective children. The room was bare except for hard benches. The woman in charge spoke disparagingly of the children saying they crawled on the floor searching for crumbs, which they would place in their mouths. Montessori saw in this act a crying out for stimulation. She began to work with these children and began to speak openly of her view that "defective children were not extra-social beings but were entitled to the benefit of education as much as—if not more than normal ones" (Standing, 29). Out of this came her directorship of

the Orthophrenic Institute into which
institute all the retarded children of Rome were transferred from the insane asylums. During this period she trained
teachers, visited other parts of Europe to study methods, and spent tremendous amounts of time with the children
themselves in observation and experimentation with the materials she would design at night. She herself has said,
“Those two years of practice are indeed my only true degree in pedagogy” (29).
We do not know the level of mental functioning of these children by today’s standards, but all were sufficiently
retarded to have been institutionalized, and after her work with them, all made progress. Some learned to read and
write well enough to compete successfully with normal children on state examinations. There was a great deal of
adulation for her work, but her own mind was going in another direction. She later reflected:
Whilst everyone was admiring my idiots I was searching for the reasons which could keep back the healthy
and happy children of the ordinary schools on so low a plane that they could be equalled on tests of intelligence
by my unfortunate pupils. (30)
Her course of action was to again enroll in the University of Rome as a student. She spent four years studying
philosophy and psychology while also a lecturer herself. She gave special study to the works of Itard and Seguin.
She translated and copied by hand the works of these two men “in order that I might have time to weigh the sense of
each word and read in truth the spirit of the authors” (32). All of this was a thorough and exacting preparation for
the work she longed to do with normal children.
The opportunity finally came in 1906. In one of the poorest districts of Rome, known as the San Lorenzo
quarter, new tenement housing for about a thousand people was constructed by a building and redevelopment
society. The difficulty arose when the three to six-year-old children, left unattended while the parents worked,
began defacing the building. With perhaps more concern for the building than the children, the authorities decided
to supply a room and gather the sixty children together with some sort of supervision. Montessori took on the task.
It was with this group of shy, dishevelled, disorderly, malnourished children that Montessori made an important
discovery that is at the heart of all her future work. It was soon replicated in other schools in Rome, other parts of
Italy, and then in other countries.
She did not begin with a preconceived notion of what would happen. Her approach

was to study the children, to learn from them, to observe their spontaneous activity, and to adjust what she did in response. Here, she was a scientist engaged in naturalistic observation. Her laboratory was the tenement classroom, and the materials were those she had made initially for her retarded pupils, plus small tables and chairs she had specially made. Without going into detail of the experimentation with this group of children, the end result which so astounded Montessori was that the children took on a new set of characteristics not usually attributed to children. They were spontaneously interested in the materials provided for them and would repeat the exercises with deep concentration and interest, completing their labor with obvious satisfaction and content. They were joyful in their work. They became very orderly. A spontaneous discipline developed—a self-discipline that was not imposed from outside but arose from within the child. They developed an internal motivation and became self-directed learners. They were readily obedient and respectful of reasonable authority, strongly attached to reality, and exhibited independence and initiative. The possessiveness so often associated with children became sublimated, and they began to display a profound sense of personal dignity. The process came to be known as normalization, and many more keys to the process were discovered over the years with various groups of children. The children were sometimes called “new children,” and visitors came to that classroom from all over the world. Froebel had had glimpses of the normalized child and so had Tolstoy in his school at Yasnaya-Polyana, but Montessori was the first to study normalization to find out what conditions facilitated and which hindered its occurrence.

The experience of seeing individual children and a whole class reach normalization is a profound experience for a teacher. One feels truly privileged and spiritually uplifted to be able to witness it. For Montessori seeing it the first time, it was almost unbelievable. Her own words describe the sense of wonder in this first experience:

> It took time for me to convince myself that all this was not an illusion. After each new experience proving such a truth I said to myself, “I won’t believe it yet; I’ll believe it next time.” Thus for a long time I remained incredulous, and at the same time deeply stirred and trepidant. How many times did I not reprove the children’s teacher when she told me what the children had done of themselves! “The only thing which impresses me is the truth,” I would reply severely. And I remember that the teacher would reply

without taking offence and often
moved to tears: “You are right! When I see such things I think it must be the
holy angels who are inspiring
these children.”
One day in great emotion I took my heart in my two hands as though to encourage
it to rise to the heights of
faith and I stood respectfully before the children, saying to myself: “Who
are you then? Have I perhaps met
with the children who were held in Christ’s arms and to whom all the divine
words were spoken to? I will
follow you to enter with you into the Kingdom of Heaven.”
And holding in my hands the torch of faith, I went on my way. (53)

For the next forty-six years Maria Montessori labored for the benefit of the
child and, through the child, for
all of humanity. Her studies of the child never stopped. She investigated the
many types of deviations from
normalcy exhibited in such behaviors as aggressiveness, timidity, disobedience,
various fears, disorderliness and
destructiveness, as well as excessive dependence, possessiveness, and excessive
fantasy. She described how the
deviated child could be guided into the process of normalization. Thus,
education became a healing process for the
spirit of the child. The words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá come to mind in this
regard:

Therefore must the mentor be a doctor as well: that is, he must in instructing
the child, remedy its faults;
must give him learning, and at the same time rear him to have a spiritual
nature. Let the teacher be a doctor to
the character of the child, thus will he heal the spiritual ailments of the
children of men. (Bahá’í Education 30)

This is the first and foremost aim of Montessori education.

Montessori discovered that children would explode into writing and then reading
quite as naturally as they learn
to speak. She observed and described the phenomena of sensitive periods in
children. The term sensitive periods
was first used by deVries, a biologist, in connection with animals. It refers
to a period of sensitivity towards which
the organism is directed with an irresistible impulse and a well-defined
activity. These periods are transitory and
serve to help the organism acquire certain functions or determined
characteristics. Montessori says of children:

Children pass through definite periods in which they reveal psychic aptitudes
and possibilities which afterwards
disappear. That is why at particular epochs of their life, they reveal an
intense and extraordinary interest in
certain objects and exercises, which one might look for in vain at a later age.

(Standing, 120)
Her work expanded to the study of later childhood and adolescence and in the other direction to infancy and even prenatal development and the preparation for parenthood. Montessori came to see more and more of the great possibilities for childhood if the needs and tendencies of children were understood and met. She did a tremendous amount of writing and an astounding amount of work in designing materials to serve the educational needs of the child.

While expanding from within as a body of knowledge about the child and a method for meeting the child's needs, Montessori education was also expanding from without, spreading across the world. Montessori herself traveled to various parts of Europe, lecturing to the public, establishing training courses for teachers and helping to establish schools. In 1913 she made the first of several trips to the United States. She spoke to an audience of 5,000 in Carnegie Hall, won gold medals for a model classroom at the 1915 San Francisco Exhibition, and spoke to many interested societies and individuals. She was the guest of Alexander Graham Bell, who became president of the first American Montessori Society, whose secretary was Margaret Wilson, daughter of President Wilson. Montessori lectured in cities in South America and, of course, conducted many courses in India during her stay there, returning again in 1948 at the age of 78 to give more courses, and in 1949 she gave her first course in Pakistan.

People visited her from various parts of Asia, Africa, and Australia as well as from Europe and the Americas. Schools were started in these various countries with children of all different economic levels and cultural backgrounds, and it became obvious that the phenomena Montessori observed and cultivated were universal.

It was characteristic of Montessori that while deeply concerned with the minutest detail in the design of a piece of didactic apparatus, she was also deeply concerned with the wider viewpoint: the implications of her work for the whole of humanity. She saw in her discoveries with young children from such diverse backgrounds a potent force for the uplifting of mankind, through proper education. She writes:

Education cannot be dismissed as an insignificant factor in people's lives, as a means of furnishing a few rudiments of culture to young people. It must be viewed first of all from the perspective of the development of human values in the individual, in particular his moral values, and second from the point of view of organizing

the individuals possessed of these enhanced values into a society consciously aware of its destiny. A new
morality must accompany this new form of civilization. Order and discipline must be aimed at the attainment
of human harmony and any act that hinders the establishment of a genuine community of all mankind must be
regarded as immoral and a threat to the life of society. (Education xiii)

These thoughts are in harmony with the Bahá'í Writings, which contain numerous references to the importance
of education both for the individual and society, and which emphasize the need for spiritual and moral education
along with material education. The following quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrate this point:

You must attach the greatest importance to the education of children, for this is the foundation of the Law of
God, and the bedrock of the edifice of His Faith. (Bahá'í Education 29)

Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the
question of education be accounted as of primary importance. (31)

Good behavior and high moral character must come first, for unless the character be trained, acquiring
knowledge will only prove injurious. (38)

Education must be considered as most important; for as diseases in the world of bodies are extremely
contagious, so, in the same way, qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious. Education has a
universal influence, and the differences caused by it very great. (28)

In order to develop the potential of each child, through education, for the benefit of society, Montessori asks us
to take a new perspective. She asks that we strip away the veils and prejudices we have about the nature of
childhood and education and to try to see these in a new light. Among those prejudices is the notion that the child is
an empty vessel that adults have complete authority and responsibility to fill. Also, it is assumed that the child is
capable of little self-control and concentration, and is incapable of taking care of his or her own needs. It is believed
that young children should not be allowed to do any form of work and should be sheltered from intellectual
challenge.

So widespread are these prejudices that they are almost universally accepted. The result is that many people
have never seen a "normalized" child (like those that emerged from the Montessori schools around the world)
displaying the characteristics of love of work, deep concentration, independence, attraction to challenge, as well as
manifesting an inner peace and joyfulness.

Key to overcoming the whole set of prejudices regarding the child is understanding that the child has an "inner guide" to his development. It is as real a guide as that which directs the physical development of the child, which begins with the first union of sperm and egg. The expectant mother can respect the process going on within her and protect it through proper diet and rest, abstention from harmful chemicals, but she does not control the development that takes place. Montessori refers to the child after birth, during its extended infancy (much longer than in animals) as a "spiritual embryo" in which the developmental process continues. She says:

...the formation of the intelligence of a human personality is certainly a miracle. How is it formed? By means of what process and in obedience to what laws?
If the whole universe is governed by fixed law, is it possible that the human mind be formed haphazardly, i.e., without law at all? Everything in course of development passes through a complex process of evolution.
(Formation 9)

Montessori was resistant to her work being called the Montessori Method, as it suggested a system of schools and institutions distracting us from a focus on the inner reality of the child. She emphasized that "This education is something that is given to us, not something that we can construct ourselves" (Reconstruction 1). Frequently, she urges us to view education as a "help to life." Student of Montessori and trainer of teachers, Margaret Stephenson explains:

If we are thinking of life, then, not of a school or class, we have to take a very much deeper, broader, and wider view than if we were to study merely a system of education....Montessori was working for life, not merely for the educational process of life; and only if we understand this, can we begin to understand what was her real contribution to mankind. If we are studying life, not a child in a class, we are faced with something different from a person who has to be taught, someone who has to work at certain things for certain periods of time, someone who has to reproduce what has been assimilated....This is not a child to be reported on, marked, graded, classified, labelled, but a living organism following a pattern of development. (Montessori, Secret xvi)

The role of education therefore must be to uncover these inner laws for the

development of the human
personality, respect them, and provide the environment, the attitude, and the materials that most effectively aid their
unfolding, while removing obstacles to the process. To the extent that Montessori did this were manifested most
wonderful results. One cannot help but think of the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

> Man is the Supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth
> inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word
> more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were
> safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can
> alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. (Gleanings 259)

The precious gems unearthed by Montessori—children reflecting spiritual qualities, integrated personalities and
imbued with a love of learning—suggested to her largely untapped resources for the development of the whole of
humanity. She viewed children as the "makers of men." Emphasizing that the human personality is essentially one
during the successive stages of its development, she urges the conception of "a principle of education that has regard
to all stages" (Formation 8). She adds, "In our most recent courses in fact, we call the child `man'" (9). With
regard to this concept, Montessori's grandson, Dr. Mario M. Montessori, Jr., a psychoanalyst, emphasizes her
contribution as
her identification of children as the link that guarantees the continuity of human evolution, which is a cultural
evolution. Because of their close emotional bond with those into whose care they are given, children turn, with
their special sensibilities and potentialities, to adults. From them they unconsciously absorb the fundamental
patterns on which they base their personal behavior during their childhood. Their minds absorb and digest
impressions of the social environment as they travel the road toward their own destiny in society. (Human
Development 39)

He further illustrates this potent force in the nature of childhood by relating the story of a young child
abandoned by members of her South American Indian tribe and raised by a French researcher who had been
studying the tribe. Born into a nomadic tribe living at the level of the Stone Age but raised in a totally different
environment, this child grew into a highly educated, modern, European woman

distinguishable only by her physical features. The development that took our ancestors two hundred centuries was accomplished in one lifetime because of the nature of childhood.

Montessori would have us look to the child for the key to development within human society—development, not only to the levels of civilization we know today but also to yet unrealized levels of perfection and unity. She speaks of the promise of childhood with these words:

> We need to know more of the Law that is behind all humanity, the source from which came all humanity, every personality, every race, every religion. That great Source has a Plan which is fulfilled not through the influence of the adult man on the child only, but also by the influence of the child upon the grown-up man. And the latter is not a love sentiment alone, though that is of very great influence; but it is a real influence of knowledge and wisdom, because if we have the problem to unite all humanity by taking into consideration the child, we touch something common to all humanity...when the child is born he has no special language, he has no special religion, he has not any national or racial prejudice. It is men who have acquired these things. What an opportunity is presented to humanity by this little child! (Reconstruction 6)

With this perspective, the task becomes to apply the principles that have demonstrated results with smaller groups of children on a wider scale. A potential means to the extension of these principles is the application of the Bahá'í principle of universal education. On one level the principle, of course, refers to education for everyone—male and female, of every race and group of people, of every economic level, everywhere in the world. The application of this principle in this way will surely make a difference in our world. In The Promulgation of Universal Peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests another meaning as well:

> ...education is essential and all standards of training and teaching throughout the world of mankind should be brought into conformity and agreement; a universal curriculum should be established and the basis of ethics be the same. (182)

Wider acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh and the application of Bahá'í laws and teachings will provide a universal standard of guidance. The work of Montessori suggests the means to a universal curriculum and method within a richly diverse world because it is based on the universal laws of development of man as manifested in the child rather than on some externally devised and culturally biased methods of

teaching. Montessori classes throughout the
world, with students and teachers from widely varying backgrounds, demonstrate that it is possible to have a unity
of purpose and approach by focusing on the needs common to all children, while still respecting valuable cultural
differences.

One of the greatest obstacles to a new world civilization that must be overcome is the constant threat and reality
of war. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke extensively about “waging peace” and in
this quotation clearly makes peace one of the
goals of education:

You must sow the seeds of peace in the plastic minds of children. Teach them the victories of peace. Surround
them with the lessons of peace. Envelop them with the atmosphere of peace, and inspire their hearts with the
glorious achievements of peace. Let their food be peace, their contemplation peace, their highest aspiration
peace and the impelling purpose of their lives peace. (Bahá’í Quotations 29)

Especially in her later years, Montessori devoted much thought and energy to the question of world peace
and the role of education in promoting peace. From the 1930s until her death in 1952, she addressed many peace
conferences, wrote extensively on the subject, and was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In a 1932
address to the Office of Education in Geneva, she said:

What is generally meant by the word peace is the cessation of war, but this negative concept is not an adequate
concept of genuine peace. (Education 4)

And also:

The fact that we mistakenly call the permanent triumph of the arms of war “peace” causes us to fail to recognize
the way to salvation, the path that could lead us to true peace. (6)

And to the European Congress of Peace in Brussels she said:

Preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education. We must convince the
world of the need for a universal, collective effort to build the foundation for peace. (27)

How can education promote peace? Not through the type of education that is widespread in the world.
Montessori explains that while the weapons of war have grown more sophisticated, education has remained at the
level of the bow and arrow. She emphasizes that education for peace does not mean merely preventing the child’s
fascination with war, eliminating toy weapons, or ending the study of history as a series of battles, where victory on
the battlefield is a supreme honor. She says it is not even enough to instill

love and respect for all living things,
although that is indeed important. War is a complex phenomenon she emphasizes. Humanity is overwhelmed by
events, and society has evolved in a purely external, materialistic way and remained ignorant and disorganized with
each individual thinking only of himself. In an address in Copenhagen, she said:

An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man,
the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in
which they live. (34)

She asks us to look at the characteristics produced by the type of education that has been most widespread in
our society. Children are not allowed to work alone, to set and pursue goals, or to follow their inner guide. Rather,
they are forced to conform to the group, in many cases their need for movement restricted by a desk and bench, with
the opportunity to speak and question severely limited. As such, they are not allowed to become masters of their
own forces. They become discouraged and repressed. Forced obedience restricts the opportunity for willing
obedience to develop. There is constantly the exposure of mistakes to public scrutiny and disapproval. The child is
punished for acts of charity in helping classmates and rewarded most for "besting" his classmates and coming out on
top. A school lifetime of such an experience is internalized and does not foster the development of those higher
virtues and characteristics that could foster peace. It is at this level that we must reform education to educate for
peace. The goal must first be the development of inner qualities before the transmission of skills and culture.

Montessori says:

Education today causes the individual to dry up and his spiritual values to wither away. He becomes a cipher, a
cog in the blind machine that his environment represents. Such preparation for life has been absurd in every
age; today it is a crime, a sin. An education that represses and rejects the promptings of the moral self, that
erects obstacles and barriers in the way of the development of intelligence, that condemns huge sectors of the
population to ignorance is a crime. Since all our riches come from man's labor, it is absurd not to regard man
himself as the most fundamental of our riches. We must seek out, we must cultivate, we must enhance the
value of man's energies, his intelligence, his creative spirit, his moral powers so that nothing is lost. Man's

moral energies in particular must be turned to account. For he is not only a producer. He is called upon to
assume and fulfill a mission in the universe. What man produces must be directed toward an end that we might
call civilization or in other words the creation of a superstructure as the handiwork of humanity! But man must
become aware of his own greatness; he must consciously make himself aware of the world outside him and of
human events. (xiv)

It is striking how the words of Montessori reflect appreciation of the most fundamental Bahá'í concepts: the
nobility of man and his purpose in life of carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. She had a deep sense of
the greatness of the time in which she was living and the magnitude of changes taking place in society. She had
insight into the most basic teachings of the Bahá'í Revelation: The oneness of humanity, the unity of science and
religion, the equality of men and women, and the spiritual aspect of humanity being its most important reality.
Not only Montessori's words, but her actions as well, illustrate the quality and spirit of life that the Bahá'í
Writings urge us to achieve. From an early age she had a sense of purpose for her life, and she actively sought
spiritual guidance and direction in order to fulfill that purpose. Obstacles in her path did not hinder her from
continuing with her work, and pressures to align herself politically were resisted with a clear sense of detachment.
Montessori lived her life in a spirit of service to all humanity and, even at the time of her death, offered a sacrifice
for that goal. These words are on a commemorative tablet of the Montessori family grave in Rome:

Maria Montessori
Famous scientist and pedagogue who dedicated her life to the spiritual renewal and to the progress of humanity
through the Child.
She rests in the Catholic cemetery of Noordwijk (Holland) far away from the country which she had so
profoundly loved, far from her loved ones buried here. This she decided, to give testimony to the universality
of her work, which made her a citizen of the world. (Maria 64)
The work of Montessori's productive life must be carefully considered by those who labor toward a worldwide
civilization. Her emphasis on the spiritual basis for education and her uncovering of the prejudices commonly held
about childhood and education orient us in a new direction. Her emphasis on studying the child through sensitive

and detached observation gives us the key to understanding more of the human reality. Her study of normalization,
or education as a healing process, and the factors that promote it, offers us a technique for fostering spiritual
education. Her discovery of the spiritual qualities that were manifested in children receiving such
an education, as well as the explosive academic learning that was its byproduct, offer us a vision of the potentialities
of childhood. And her elucidation of the relationship between childhood and adulthood makes us conscious of the
precious resources we have in children, properly educated, for transforming all society to a higher level of unity, a
higher level of morality, and to the possibility of world peace.

Always humble toward her own achievements, Montessori asks us not to honor her, but to look to the Child
who was the object of her work. And referring to her contribution as “small and incomplete” (Formation 22), she
calls on others to carry the work forward:

> The question is not to deliver man from some bonds, but to reconstruct; and reconstruction requires the
> elaboration of a “science of the human spirit.” It is a patient work, an endeavor based on research, to which
> thousands of people, dedicated to this aim, must contribute.
> Whoever works for this ideal must be actuated by a great ideal, much greater than those political ideals
> which have promoted social improvements, which concern only the material life of some groups of men
> oppressed by injustice or misery. This ideal is universal in its scope. It aims at the deliverance of the whole of
> humanity. Much patient work, I repeat, is needed along this road.... (19)

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