

# Editorial

Maria Montessori started a revolution in education. Revolutions generally meet with one of two fates. When successful, they lead to new standards in a society. When unsuccessful, the revolution was either based on wrong assumptions or was effectively gagged, kept from view, and suppressed. Montessori experienced a third, perhaps even more aggravating fate. Society's failure to fully understand the truth of her discoveries and their far reaching import is indeed aggravating. Yet today, her groundbreaking ideas, words, and convictions have lost none of their urgency. She pleaded for change and exhorted her contemporaries over and over again to adopt a different attitude towards the child, to be guided by his natural development and embrace "new education". Her science and discoveries were genuinely welcomed as the best invention ever, only to be discarded soon after, suffering the cyclical 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Over time her words have been understood, then misinterpreted and forgotten. Her ideas were rediscovered, belittled again, and then hailed once more.

Some of her frustration is heard in the exclamation 'If education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of man's future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind?'

Our times are able to grasp the importance of these words: the child is not only a constant source of inspiration on how to view human development, but also he is a source of rediscovery. Scholars and educational research recognize the significance of those first years of life in the evolution of

our lives and of society—the first food, the first steps, the first language, the first love we meet, our first environment—all have great consequences. More and more strata in society are coming to this understanding of the importance of the early years.

We do not just need people with the skills required for reading, writing and calculus, skills frequently "isolated" and required by employers. We need well-rounded people, who have been allowed to construct themselves into persons that can healthily contribute to society. Those first years of our lives are crucial in determining future outcomes in the fields of health, economy, peaceful relationships, creativity and profitability. The connection that exists undeniably between the early years and our collective wellbeing, the wellbeing of nations, has started to persuade even the most impervious. Montessori knew what conditions are needed to ensure that children's early years provide a solid foundation for the rest of their lives.

Let's hope that Montessori's ideas will find ever greater resonance. The omens are good: Unesco together with the Russian Federation recently hosted the first "World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education" which reaffirmed Early Childhood Care and Education as a right of all children and as the basis for development.

This issue of *Communications* focuses on the science of early childhood development. All articles, each in their own way, highlight some of the most important aspects that contribute to unhindered growth, the building of cognitive skills through motor activity, or the examination of unimpeded development.

In the first article, "Growth through

Activity and Movement—Movements with Intelligent Purpose”, Montessori argues clearly that movements considered solely from the point of view of a physiological fact do not really exist in life; all our movements have a purpose. The characteristics of the child, when he is left free to his own spontaneity, show that he is led by an inner force, an intelligent force, to perform various actions. Teachers and parents will be encouraged by this article.

A formidable contribution comes from Professor Adele Diamond, with “Executive Function and Tools of the Mind”. Prof. Diamond is a neuropsychologist, and her lecture was delivered as the keynote address following this year’s AMI’s Annual General Meeting in Amsterdam. Her presentation focused on early development of the cognitive control functions—collectively called Executive Functions—dependent on prefrontal cortex. She touched upon many aspects that are controlled from prefrontal cortex, such as planning and problem solving, self-control, creativity, inhibiting impulsive actions, etc. She also discussed at length “The Tools of the Mind” Programme, developed to scaffold the development of early literacy on the basis of the Vygotskian approach. Parents and others seeking affirmation and reassurance for their decision to place importance on the early years should read this article.

In “Nurturing the Respectful Community through Practical Life” AMI primary trainer Joen Bettmann demonstrates the importance of Practical Life exercises. She propounds that caring, careful, and independent work leads to higher self-esteem, more concern for others, better understanding for academic learning, and a self-nurturing, respectful classroom community. Teachers will find inspiration in this article.

Rita Schaefer Zener’s “Guiding the Process of Normalization” shares research

that she undertook to see how teachers deal with situations as normalization occurs. Montessori said that normalization is the ‘most important single result of our whole work.’ It occurs when love of work, concentration, self-discipline, and sociability all appear. There is another process at work as well. Deviations in development result from obstacles in the developmental process and occur frequently in all children. Dr Zener interviewed 165 Montessori teachers and tabulated how far and in what ways the interviewees followed Montessori’s recommendations on how best to approach and deal with normalization and deviations. Her statistics extrapolating theoretical questions with the current practice have been combined in a refreshing and illuminating article. Teachers as well as teachers-in-training will find this article useful.

Shannon Helfrich briefly and clearly explains how the young child who arrives at the conscious phase of the Absorbent Mind is primed to be an active participant in exploring the physical world. He has already created the foundations for functional human existence, and can move and thus explore his world. He can already speak. We see his skills grow, which help him reach ever greater independence. “The Conscious Worker, The Child from 3-6 years of age: The Montessori Children’s House” is a perfect companion and complementary article to its “colleagues” in this issue. Teachers, parents, and all Montessorians will enjoy this article.

All articles in this issue touch upon science of early childhood development, underscoring also one of the questions AMI asked itself a few years ago. We wondered ‘how can we reach scientists, researchers and universities throughout the world to establish Montessori scientific pedagogy as an integral of education departments? How can we be heard louder in the field of education?’

The start of the answer has come not only with the restructuring of *Communications*, but certainly also with the recent establishment of the AMI Global Research Committee. Steve Hughes explains the committee's scope, and spheres of activity. We also welcome Steve to the editorial board of this publication—his presence on the board will help strengthen our work in getting more knowledge of research to you via *Communications*.

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