

Maria Montessori's Philosophy of Early Childhood Education and its Implications for Nigerian Education

A. F. OYELADE
University of Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract. This study is on Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education and its implications for Nigerian education. Maria Montessori's thoughts, statements, and actions on early childhood education constitute her philosophy of early childhood education. It is important to study her philosophy of early childhood education because it has assumed popularity at various times in various parts of the world, including: Italy, Britain, and United States of America. It has also gained some recognition in Nigerian early childhood education. However certain details of her philosophy of early childhood education do not follow conventional process of early childhood education, although the process of education brings about speedy learning. It is therefore important to analyse her philosophy of early childhood education and its implications for Nigerian education. The research method employed in the study is the method of philosophical analysis. The philosophical analysis employed includes: logical, linguistic, expository, and critical analyses. It was found that Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education lays emphasis on recognition of the stages of development of children, enabling learning environment, individualised teaching, child-centred education, and on teacher's knowledge of child psychology. The education promotes personal development of children speedily, and societal development.

It was found that Nigerian early childhood education indicates recognition of Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education. The implications of her philosophy of education for Nigerian education therefore, are that the education should continue to feature in Nigerian early childhood education. It is therefore recommended that Nigeria pursues Maria Montessori's education with greater intensity.

Key words: Maria Montessori, philosophy of education, early childhood education, philosophical analysis, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Maria Montessori was born in Italy in 1870. She graduated in medicine from the University of Rome, Italy, in 1896, and was the first female medical doctor in Italy. Immediately after her graduation she worked in the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome where she specialised in working with mentally deficient children. Within two years of working with the children she got interested in their education. Thus, she went back to the university to study philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. In 1904 she became Professor of Anthropology.

Moreover, she got interested in taking care of the buildings in the poor areas (the slums) of Rome such that the buildings could look good and decent. Thus she joined the Association of

Good Building that was formed to take care of the buildings in the poor areas of Rome. Towards the end of 1906, the Director General of the Roman Association of Good Building entrusted to Montessori the organisation of the infant schools in the poor areas (slums) of Rome (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:194).

In the poor areas there was the need to keep the buildings neat and in good condition. There was also the need to have the children 'under school age' busy having some form of education when their parents were out to work. Thus the need of institute "House of Childhood" "a school" where the children under school age could be attended to by a teacher. The teacher would be responsible for the play and "work" of the children, while their parents were away at work. Thus came the institution of the school within the poor areas (the slum) of Rome.

By virtue of her successful experience with the mentally defective children in the psychiatric clinic in the University of Rome shortly after her graduation as a medical doctor, whereby the children were able to achieve in ordinary practices of life without depending largely on others, Montessori felt she could bring up normal children too to achieve in expected behaviours without their depending largely on others. These expected behaviours would include achieving in education too.

In the psychiatric clinic Montessori worked with the mentally defective children so successfully to the extent that they could do things generally independent of others. Moreover they performed well in their education to the extent that when they were presented for examinations with normal children, they did very well (Montessori, 1917:vol.1 chp. 3). Thus Montessori felt the children in the Home of Childhood (the school in the poor areas) should be taught along the lines of her educational method with the mentally defective children whereby the children would be able to achieve even better results than defective children (Montessori, 1917:vol.1 chp. 3).

Thus the children under school age (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:195) were to be taught by teachers that would recognise the various peculiarities of Montessori education. These peculiarities that made Montessori education

achieve better in terms of general behaviour of children and in terms of educational achievement constitute Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education. If Montessori could achieve good general behaviour and good educational performance in children under school age through the process of education, it would be worthwhile to study her thoughts on the education of children under school age (infants) (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:195; Montessori, 1912:45).

Moreover it would be worthwhile to study her thoughts on the education of children under school age and thereby consider the implications for Nigerian education. This is particularly important because Nigeria also has interest in the education of children under school age (infants) (FRN, 2013: 17-21; but see also 21-23). This study would therefore focus on Montessori's thoughts on education of children under school age, thus it would focus on her philosophy of early childhood education. It would also consider the implications of her philosophy of early childhood education for Nigerian education.

2. Research Method

This study is concerned with Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education and its implications for Nigerian education. It is a philosophical study so the study would employ philosophical research method. The method would include logical analysis, linguistic analysis, expository analysis and critical analysis of Maria Montessori's thoughts, statements, and actions concerning early childhood education. It would also include analysis of implications of her thoughts, statements, and actions for Nigerian education. The analyses would help to arrive at the clarification of her ideas about early childhood education and the implications of the ideas for education generally, and for Nigerian education in particular.

3. Maria Montessori's Philosophy of Early Childhood Education

This part of the paper would discuss Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood

education in terms of her thoughts, statements, and actions on early childhood education. The discussion would follow this trend;

Her thoughts, statements, and actions on:

- Children under school age (infants)
- Teaching writing and reading
- Teaching of number and calculation
- Literary activities; and
- The teacher

After discussing Maria Montessori's philosophy of education, Nigerian early childhood education would then be discussed.

4. Children under School Age (Infants)

Maria Montessori states that these children generally between the ages of 3 and 7 years (infants) have not fully acquired the co-ordination of muscular movements necessary to enable them perform deftly the ordinary acts of life; their sensory organs are not fully developed; their emotional lives are still unstable, and their volitional abilities are largely irresolute (Montessori, 1912:45). Montessori realised these in the course of her working with mentally deficient children in the psychiatric clinic, in the University of Rome.

Thus she wants the education of children under school age to recognise the need to provide learning facilities for the children in an environment that would encourage them to have freedom to interact with the facilities according to their various abilities, interests, and needs (Montessori, 1912:45).

The learning environment should be such that would encourage the children to interact freely with various learning facilities whereby the interaction would be seen as play, and through play they learn. The facilities would initially appeal to their senses rather than the intellect. Their senses of sight, touch, movement, hearing, and so forth (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:196). They would freely (under the watchful eyes of the teacher – such that they do not harm themselves) interact with the various materials according to their various abilities, interests, and needs, until they start to achieve appreciation of shape, weight, colours, sense of order, and so forth;

whereby they start to appreciate shapes of letters, (for instance in geometric figures like squares, rectangles, octagons) (Montessori, 1917:vol. 1, p.128).

Eventually depending on their various levels of psychological development they are able to move from concrete appreciation, to abstract appreciation; whereby they could start to write individual letters; and the combination of letters that form words; and then combination of letters and words that form phrases, and sentences (Montessori, 1912:226-227).

5. Teaching of Writing and Reading

The concrete process precedes the abstract process. The processes appear in three stages, and by the time the child is four years old, he would generally be able to write; while by the time he is five years old he would generally be able to read (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:209).

The stages of writing are in accordance with the following:

- Acquisition of control of the writing instrument;
- Reproduction of the forms (shapes, letters) by moving his fingers in the air;
- Composition of words out of the isolated sounds of letters mentally.

At the last stage, the child discovers he could write and he impulsively demonstrates the ability to write. It is spontaneous, he just discovers he could write (Montessori, 1912:288; Rusk & Scotland, 1981:206, 207).

The same goes for reading:

- Reading demands the inverse process
- reproduction of the sounds from the symbols
- fusion of the sounds into words
- proper pronunciation of the words
- recognition of the meaning of the words (Montessori, 1917:296).

At the last stage of demonstrating that he recognises the ideas in the symbols (the meaning of the words and eventually the meaning of the phrases and sentences) the child can be said to have the ability to read. For according to Montessori reading ability is not recognised until the child demonstrates the ability to

identify the meaning of what is read (Montessori, 1912:298; Rusk & Scotland, 1981:209).

At the stage that the child is able to read, he would be able to carry out the request in the written symbols. However it can be seen that both writing and reading processes feature preparatory activities. For instance in preparation for writing is word-building (Rusk & Scotland, 1981:209). Moreover preparation for reading is writing (Montessori, 1912:301).

The child develops muscular and motor abilities earlier than mental abilities. Thus writing abilities come naturally to the child in the process of interacting with the organised environment earlier than reading abilities (which feature largely intellectual activities) (Montessori, 1912:226-227).

6. Teaching of Number and Calculation

In the teaching of number, the “long stair” that is made to suit children’s gymnastic activities is used to teach length, spaces, discrimination of length, and so forth. The rods (a set of ten rods) in the long stair are of different lengths: from 1 metre length to 1 decimetre length. They are arranged in order. But they are later mixed up in such a way that the child’s attention is called to the difference in length such that in play way he could rearrange them according to the various lengths and counting 1, 2, 3, 4 and so forth (beginning from the shortest to the longest; but always starting from 1). Thereby the child is conscious of piece number 1, piece number 2, piece number 3, and so forth. He is then in a play way asked to put certain rods together in such a way as to form tens. For instance 1 is added to 9; 2 is added to 8 and so forth; whereby the child learns

- to count
- addition
- he then goes on to subtraction, multiplication, and division (Montessori, 1917:part 3; Rusk & Scotland, 1981:210, 211).

7. Literary Activities

Literary activities are supposed to be taught after writing and number, because having acquired the

skill of writing, reading and number (calculating) the child can then be naturally disposed to appreciate various literary activities (which can be learnt through lessons in grammar, imagination, drawing, music and so forth). Montessori states:

“Give the child an environment in which everything is constituted in proportion to himself and let him live therein. Then there will develop within the child that ‘active life’ which has caused so many to marvel because they see in it not only a simple exercise performed with pleasure but also the revelation of a spiritual life” (Montessori, 1917:vol. 1. p. 72; Rusk & Scotland 1981:198).

Thus literary activities can be taught after the fundamental skills might have been taught to the children in environment full of materials that could enable learning of writing, reading and calculation. Moreover, just as there are various preparatory activities for the various learning; the acquisition of the skills of writing, reading and calculation constitute preparatory activities for the learning of literary activities. The literary activities are manifested in abilities in grammar, imagination, drawing, music and so forth. The activities can be learnt naturally in environment that has enabling facilities when the children have attained the age of mental maturity to acquire the learning (Montessori, 1917:3).

Thus Montessori’s philosophy of early childhood education indicates that literary activities are engaged in by children with pleasure after they might have acquired the rudiments of writing, reading, and calculation. Moreover, spiritual appreciation is demonstrated in the children too after the acquisition of the basic education in writing, reading and calculation (Montessori, 1917:72 & Rusk & Scotland 1981:198).

8. The Teacher

Montessori’s philosophy of early childhood education recognises the role of the environment that is full of learning facilities appropriate to developmental stages of the child. But the teacher has to be involved in the arrangement of the learning environment (Montessori, 1912:371; Montessori, 1917:vol. 1. pp.19-20, 72). Moreover the teacher has to be child-

centred (Montessori, 1912:224; Montessori, 1917:vol. 1. p.128). A teacher that is versed in child psychology and experimental psychology, who realises the need to encourage individual learning of the children in the environment according to the various stages of psychological development of the children (Montessori, 1912:89, 107). "...the educative process is adapted to the stage of mental development of the child and to his interest, and not wholly subordinated to the necessities of a curriculum or to the teacher's scheme of work" (Rusk & Scotland 1981:196). The psychological discoveries of Piaget affirm Montessori's ideas about sensory-motor training in cognitive development; the child's natural inclination to proceed from concrete to abstract; and the phenomenon of stages in child's development (Rusk & Scotland 1981:213).

9. Summary

Montessori's thoughts about education discussed so far include her thoughts about the education of children under school age, particularly children between ages 3-7 years. The discussion include: the nature of the children involved; the features of their education in terms of writing, reading, number, calculation, and literary activities; and finally the quality of the teacher in the educative process. It has been seen that the education features writing before reading, it features largely self-education "auto-education" of the child which happens as a result of the enabling educational environment (Montessori, 1912:169). The children generally learn to write at the age of four and read at the age of five (Rusk & Scotland 1981:209). The method appears to be fascinating and education is more rapid than what is found in conventional early childhood education (Rusk & Scotland 1981:204). This is what makes Montessori philosophy of education popular (Rusk & Scotland 1981:204). Piaget affirms the recognition of stages of psychological development in the education of the child, and several other peculiarities of Montessori education (Rusk & Scotland 1981:213), including individualised instruction (Rusk & Scotland 1981:213).

Montessori's process of education at various times received acceptance in Italy, Britain, and some other developed nations including the United States of America (Rusk & Scotland 1981:212-214). In Nigeria the education receives attention of some proprietors of early childhood education institutions and the government too (see FRN, 2013:17-23).

10. Nigerian Early Childhood Education

It would be important to examine into some detail the interest that Nigeria has in early childhood education. In the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2013:17-23) the government appreciates that early childhood education can take place in Day-Care or Crèches for children 0-4 years old; while the education for children of 5-6 years old takes place in the Kindergarten. The education of children of 6 years old and above should take place in the primary school (6-11 years).

While the education of the children of 0-4 years old could be in the care of private school owners; education of the children of 5-6 years old would be the responsibility of the government (FRN, 2013:17-18) although private school owners are not prevented from running Kindergarten. In fact, they feature more in Kindergarten education than the government. The education of the 6 years old and above (that is the education in the primary school) is also the responsibility of government. For the government has the policy of giving universal, and compulsory education for 5-6 years old children (1 year Kindergarten); and for 6-11 years old to 13 years old + children (that is, 6 years of primary education, and the first 3 years of secondary education) (FRN, 2013:17-23). This is not to suggest that the government bars the private school owners from operating education for children in kindergarten, primary and junior secondary schools.

However the features of education that concern this study are those in the Crèche, Kindergarten, and Early Primary School (education for 3-7 years old children). According to the National Policy of Education (FRN 2013:17-23) the features of early childhood education in Nigeria include: recognition of the child's potential

(FRN 2013:18, 19, 20, 22); recognition of the child's needs (FRN 2013:19, 20, 21, 22); and recognition of his interests (FRN 2013:19, 20, 22, 23). It also includes provision of educational materials in the learning environment (FRN 2013:17-23).

The features of recognition of the child's potentials (capabilities), needs, and interests generally agree with the thoughts of Maria Montessori on early childhood education. So also is the recognition of need to provide educational materials (toys, and so forth), and professional teacher. It also recognises the teacher factor in organising enabling learning environment (FRN, 2013:56-58).

Thus Nigerian education appears to appreciate Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education. However Maria Montessori's philosophy of education indicates that the education does not end with pronunciation of words, calculation of figures, and literary appreciation; it continues up to appreciation of the meaning of the various symbols and utilizing the meanings for the child's self-development and the development of the society.

11. Implications of Maria Montessori's Philosophy of Early Childhood Education for Nigerian Education

It follows that Nigeria's interest in early childhood education has many areas of recognition of Maria Montessori's philosophy of education. The learning environment, the facilities, recognition of the capabilities of the child, his interests, needs, and the professional teacher factor are ample indications of Nigeria's recognition of Maria Montessori's philosophy of education.

Since Maria Montessori's philosophy of education has been found to be commendable; for instance because the process of education helps the child to learn faster than the conventional process, the child also achieves education for self-development and societal development in a natural setting; it would be desirable that Nigeria continues to pursue the

features of Maria Montessori's education in its early childhood education.

Maria Montessori's philosophy of education has positive implications, as mentioned above, for education generally and for Nigerian education in particular. So the continuous pursuit of the features of Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education in Nigerian education would be advantageous to Nigerian education. However there is the need to intensify the pursuit of provision of more learning materials and the provision of more teachers.

12. Conclusion

This paper has concluded that Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education recognises stages of development of the child (sensory-motor development, and then mental development). The philosophy recognises importance of enabling learning environment in the child's education. The philosophy recognises the need for individual learning; auto-education; and teacher that has knowledge of child psychology and experimental psychology. The philosophy recognises child centred education. It recognises the need for learning to move from concrete to abstract. It also recognises the importance of insisting that the child should not be considered to have learnt until he demonstrates that he can carry out instructions based on what he has learnt (and until he can make meaning out of what he has learnt). Based on the above mentioned features of the philosophy it is concluded that the philosophy of education is commendable.

Finally it is concluded that Nigerian early childhood education features indications of Maria Montessori's philosophy of education which is commendable.

13. Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned features of Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood education which help to achieve individualised learning, personal development and societal development it can be seen that Montessori's

philosophy of education deserves the popular recognition that it has earned at various times in various countries. It deserves to be pursued in Nigerian education as it is presently. But the pursuit should be more intensive in practical terms. For instance in terms of provision of adequate facilities and teachers (see Buhari, 2016:2, 3, 45).

References

- Buhari, M. (2016, December 15). "Budget of Recovery and growth" for 2017. *The Nation*, pp. 2,3,45
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (2013). National policy on education. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori Method*. Trans. A. E. George. London: William Heinemann.
- Montessori, M. (1917). *The Advanced Montessori method*. trans. F. Simmonds & L. Hutchinson. London: William Heinemann.
- Rusk, R. R. & Scotland, J. (1981). *Doctrines of the great educators*. Bristol: The Macmillan Press Ltd.