

A LOOK AT WALDORF AND MONTESORRI

By Barbara Shell

This comparison of certain aspects of Waldorf and Montessori educational philosophy is based on my personal experience as a teacher in Montessori and Waldorf school systems, with several years in each, following several years in public school teaching.

I would however, preface my remarks by stressing that there can be much difference from one classroom to another in any philosophy due to the style and interpretation of the individual teacher. However, in the main, there are several areas of contrast between Waldorf and Montessori. In both philosophies the young child is viewed with great respect and reverence. I will attempt to look at the following areas: 1) play and fantasy, 2) social development, 3) toys, 4) structure and order.

In Waldorf philosophy, play is viewed, as the work of the young child and the magic of fantasy, so alive in the young child, is an integral part of how the teacher works with the child. The teacher incorporates storytelling and fantasy into the curriculum.

In Montessori, there is a feeling that because young children have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy, fantasy should be postponed until the child is firmly grounded in reality. Montessori said that it is a mistake for children to amuse themselves with toys, that children are not really interested in toys for long without the real intellectual interest of associating them with sizes and numbers.

Waldorf philosophy feels that it is essential to realize the value of toys to help children to re-enact experiences from life as they actually happen. The less finished and the more suggestive a toy may be, the greater its educational value, for it really enlivens the imaginative life of the child. So toys in the Waldorf kindergarten may be rounds of the wood cut from birch logs, seashells, lengths of colored silk or cotton for costuming or house building, soft cloth dolls with a minimum of detail in faces or clothing, allowing for open-ended, imaginative play.

In Montessori, each manipulative material has a step-by-step procedure for being used and focused toward a specific learning concept. Example: Math counting rods are not to be transformed into castle walls. Also in the Montessori classroom much of the work the young child does is on individual learning tasks done separately. Each child will work independently on a small rug doing a different task from the other children with the teacher, a facilitator, to intervene only if the child requests help. Socialization takes place in not bothering children working, in helping a younger child learn to do a new task or in waiting one's turn if the child wants an activity already in use.

The Waldorf philosophy stresses that the child gradually learns to be a social being and that the development of the young child in the social realm is as important as everything else we do. The teacher has the role of orchestrating how this happens through modeling good social behavior with children, through joining together in movement activities, singing or games to develop group consciousness and by helping children humanistically work through disagreements.

Madame Montessori described the classroom, as a place where children are free to move about at will, where the day is not divided between work periods and rest or play periods. The children are free to choose their own activities in the classroom. This protection of the child's choice is a key element in the Montessori method.

In contrast, Waldorf sees the child thriving in a rhythmical atmosphere – knowing what he can count on from day to day and week to week. There are times for coming together and working as a whole group and times for playing individually or with friends, times for directed activity like crafts or baking or painting and times for creative play-acting a story through movement, doing finger games, watching a puppet show. The teacher takes advantage of observing the children at play and group activities, which will harmonize and balance these impressions she receives from observation. The teacher works with the seasonal themes of the year. A balancing of the impulses from nature are woven through the artistic activities using stories and songs and verses to enliven and capture the children's interest and imaginations.

A child longs for rhythm and order in his world. Both Waldorf and Montessori recognize this but interpret it in quite different ways: both feel the physical setting needs an underlying order to help the child feel secure. The Montessori classroom has an emphasis on reality to free a child from his fantasies where the Waldorf classroom enhances the child's world of fantasy and imagination using natural materials; crystals, shells, logs, as well as hand-made toys, gnomes, soft doll, carved wooden animals, to stimulate the child's play.

According to Joseph Chilton Pearce in his book Magical Child:

“Filling in the conceptual gap with imaginary material, ignoring all dissimilarities is the essence of child play. The great rule is; play on the surface and work takes place beneath. The child's mind plays on the basic conceptual brain set without altering it. Play reality, like adult reality, is neither world nor mind/brain, it is the world plus mind/brain. The child's intelligence becomes invested in his imagined transformation of self and world. And these are singularly compelling. His awareness locks into fantasy; reality becomes that play. For the child, the time is always now; the place, here; the action, me. He has no capacity to entertain adult notions of fantasy world and real world. He knows only one world, and that is the very real one in which and with which he plays. His is not playing at life. Play is life.”

As Piaget expressed it: (For the child) "Play cannot be opposed to reality, because in both cases belief is arbitrary and pretty much destitute of logical reasons. Play is a reality which the child is disposed to believe in when by himself, just as reality is a game at which he is willing to play with the adult and anyone else who believes in it ... thus we have to say of the child's play that it constitutes an autonomous reality, but with the understanding that the "true" reality to which it is opposed is considerably less true "true" for the child than for us."

Montessori sees the child as having an absorbent mind ready to soak up knowledge and experience like a sponge. Just keep supplying him with ever more challenging intellectual tasks from an early age and you will end up with an educated child. Is this really the healthiest way to approach the education of a young child?

No early thrust into intellectualism is found in Waldorf but a keeping alive and nourishing of the child's healthy imagination and creative thinking powers. The child has it all within himself and it unfolds slowly like petals of a maturing flower as the child moves from one developmental stage to the next.

In a Waldorf pre/kindergarten we do not aim to achieve premature flowers of learning much as these flowers might find appreciation. We rather forego such immediate satisfaction and focus our attentions upon the child's ultimate good and upon the protection of his childhood. We are looking toward a healthy, well-rounded adult in the future.