

## *Love and the Child in the Montessori Classroom*

CHRISTINE M. A. LAPIERRE

**ABSTRACT:** Love is intertwined with all aspects of the Montessori philosophy, including the way that the teacher builds a constructive relationship with the child. In order to do this, the teacher embarks on her spiritual journey to continuously better herself. In the midst of doing so, she develops certain spiritual qualities that are essential to constructing a positive relationship that respects the development of the whole child. She encourages the child to become independent, according to the stages of development. The epistemology of love, with its seven stages, also offers us a deep understanding of the love that exists between the Montessori teacher and the child. As the child is surrounded by this love, he cultivates a love for the environment that facilitates his learning.

**Keywords:** love, Montessori, environment, Montessori teacher, child, epistemology of love

**RESUMÉ:** L'amour est intimement lié à tous les aspects de la philosophie de Montessori, y compris la façon dont l'enseignant fonde une relation constructive avec l'enfant. Afin d'atteindre ce but, l'enseignant se lance dans un cheminement spirituel pour s'améliorer continuellement. En même temps, elle développe certaines qualités spirituelles qui sont essentielles à la construction d'une relation positive qui respecte le développement global de l'enfant. Elle encourage l'enfant à devenir indépendant, selon les étapes de développement. L'épistémologie de l'amour, avec ses sept étapes, nous offre également une profonde compréhension de l'amour qui existe entre les enseignants à l'école Montessori et l'enfant. Comme l'enfant est entouré de cet amour, il cultive un amour pour l'environnement qui facilite son apprentissage.

**Mots-clés:** amour, Montessori, environnement, enseignant Montessori, enfant, épistémologie de l'amour.

### *Introduction*

The Montessori philosophy is interwoven with the quality of love in a variety of ways. Maria Montessori spoke about love in many of its guises throughout her writings and lectures. Early on in the development of her work, she marveled at how her training courses brought together people of different political and religious affiliations in a peaceful manner. Montessori surmised that this was due to the “child’s power” (Montessori, 1995, p. 288); that is, adults loved the child. “It is from this love that comes the child’s power for unity” (p. 288). She added: “The child is the only point on which there converges from everyone a feeling of gentleness and love” (Montessori, 1995, p. 288). Since the child unites all people and barriers dissipate when adults come together for the purpose of helping the child, the child has much to teach us. Therefore, Montessori extended her discussion about love to how adults must also have love between each other. It is so fundamental to everything that we do, that Montessori affirmed that love is a reality, and not just a fantasy. It is part of creation itself: “This force that we call love is the greatest energy of the universe. But I am using an inadequate expression, for it is more than an energy: it is creation itself” (p. 290).

In order to expand upon her idea that love comes to us from the cosmos, and touches every living thing, whether it be human beings, creatures, or nature, Montessori (1995) eloquently portrayed the role it plays for us:

In man’s mind it has been exalted by fantasy, but in us it is no other than one aspect of a very complex universal force, which-denoted by the words “attraction” and “affinity”-rules the world, keeps the stars in their courses, causes the conjunction of atoms to form new substances, holds things down on earth’s surface. It is the force which regulates and orders the organic and the inorganic, and which becomes incorporated in the essence of everything and of all things...It is general unconscious, but in life sometimes assumes consciousness, and, when felt in man’s heart, he calls it “love.” (p. 293).

There are many kinds of love that are present in the Montessori classroom. In this article, I distinguish among three of them: the love between the teacher and the child, the epistemology of love, and the child’s love for the environment.

For the purpose of the discussion of love, I will differentiate between the Montessori philosophy and the Montessori Method. The Montessori philosophy often refers to how Maria Montessori understood the nature of the child, the education of the child, and the relationship between the adult and the child, whether it be the parent, teacher or other adult. The Montessori Method, on the other hand, usually indicates the educational method that Maria Montessori developed to implement her philosophy (Polk Lillard, 1972).

*The Love between the Teacher and Child*

According to Montessori, there are many kinds of love between the teacher and the child. She advocated that “If we study the child better than we have done hitherto, we discover love in all its aspects” (Montessori, 1995, p. 292). Instead of trying to name all the various kinds of love, I will describe the different ways that love exists between the teacher and the child.

To begin with, as mentioned in the introduction, Montessori was clear that there is a love that flows throughout all of creation that touches each one of us. When that love contacts the heart of the teacher, she can, in turn, direct that love to the heart of the child. This she will do as an integral part of her spiritual preparation (Montessori, 1995). Montessori accentuated the importance of the teacher bettering herself spiritually throughout her teaching career. The purpose of this inclination was for the teacher to nurture the teacher child relationship so that it would be peaceful and loving. It meant letting go of negative habits and ways of thinking that would impede its development. Because of the nature of the teacher child relationship, Montessori (1995) contended that the teacher needs to foster certain spiritual qualities that are particularly important for this to occur. Among these qualities is a deep love for the child.

Montessori elaborated on the quality of the heart of the teacher that this requires: “She must study how to purify her heart and render it burning with charity towards the child” (Standing, 1984, p. 298). If the teacher does not take this vital step, Standing (1984), a distinguished biographer of Maria Montessori, held that other parts of her training would not be as effective. P. P. Lillard (1972), an authority on Montessori theory and practice, elaborated that the teacher needs to be “involved in ever striving toward his or her own potential” (p. 78). In turn, Dwayne Huebner (1999), philosopher of

education and a well-known scholar in the field of curriculum theory, claimed that because “the spirit dwells in us” (p. 404), teachers can be open and receptive to the child, thus reinforcing Montessori’s statements. Also in support of Montessori’s admonition to the teacher to improve herself, Palmer (1993), author of several well-accepted books about teaching, invited teachers to walk an inner path of self-knowledge to reconnect with the teacher within.

The teacher demonstrates love for the child when he chooses some work and begins to concentrate. Concentration is central to the Montessori classroom. Once a child has begun to concentrate, the teacher must act “*as if the child does not exist*” (Montessori, 1995, p. 280). That is, the teacher needs to not interfere in what the child is doing unless she is asked. Montessori (1995) explained that the teacher’s real help to the child “comes from subjecting one’s love to discipline, using it with discernment” (p. 280).

Another facet of love that Montessori (1989) highlighted comes into play when a child is exhibiting misbehaviors, that she called “deviations.” She instructed the teacher that these behaviors disappear when the child begins to concentrate on some Montessori material that she has freely chosen in the classroom:

Nothing matters while the children are still deviated. Everything will correct itself after concentration has come. We may use any means we have to attract the children’s attention. Their attention is attracted through activity. Give them activity, attract them through sweetness. This can also be a method of love because we know what we are aiming at. We know that this energy exists inside the children and urges them on to do exercises which are necessary for their development. It is nature which brings the children to the point of concentration, not you. (p. 17)

Love for the child is also essential for the child to achieve independence, a salient characteristic of children in a Montessori classroom. For the child to become independent, he needs to have freedom to choose his own work in the classroom. The teacher, therefore, must embody the qualities that allows the child to do so, such as respect, humility, patience, and honor. Additionally, she ought to rely on her training where she gathered knowledge about the child’s development that follows certain stages of becoming more independent. Montessori (1995) asserted “We have to help the child to act, will and think for himself” (p. 281), and

underlying this help is the love that guides the teacher in allowing him to do so.

I turn now to a theory of knowledge, the epistemology of love (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), that informs our understanding of love and the child in the Montessori classroom.

### *The Epistemology of Love*

Palmer and Zajonc (2010) presented an understanding of love that offers a great contribution to the field of education in general, and to the Montessori field in particular. Advocating a holistic approach to teaching and learning, both of these scholars ascertained that “how we know what we know” (p. 29) can be best understood when “knowing and loving significantly overlap each other” (p. 94). In this section, I will progressively examine each of the seven stages of their epistemology of love and consider how they shed light on the teacher child relationship. The seven stages are: respect, gentleness, intimacy, vulnerability, participation, transformation, and imaginative insight.

To begin with, “respect” is present in the Montessori classroom when the teacher is genuinely interested in the child and her interests. If the mathematics material particularly attracts the child’s concentration, the teacher will be sure to give the child presentations with that material. By doing so, she is honoring the child and will interact with her with courtesy and consideration. Taking a positive approach as she pursues a greater understanding of each child, the teacher, at the same time, respectfully allows the child to just be.

The second stage is “gentleness.” By this term, Palmer and Zajonc (2010) meant that the teacher would approach the child gently in order not to warp their relationship. Montessori focused on the “new relationship” (Standing, 1984, p. 298) between the teacher and the child in her training. It meant that that the teacher would relate to the child gracefully and quietly. She would use a tone of voice that was soft, caring and kind, even when the child would be unruly. The teacher would model the characteristics of a peaceful adult so that the child would develop the foundation on how to become one too.

“Intimacy” is the third stage and in this stage, the teacher interrelates with the child with understanding and sensitivity. She observes the child as she really is, with “clarity and balanced judgment” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p.

95). Nothing is lost to objectivizing the child. Instead, the teacher becomes intimate with the child in a new way that takes into consideration all aspects of her development. Hence, the teacher does not judge the child when she is misbehaving. If the child is crying and seems upset about another child, the teacher seeks to comfort, validate and listen, before coming up with a resolution with the child.

The fourth stage is “vulnerability,” and it illumines how Montessori (1995) indicated in her writings that the child will teach the teacher how to teach him. The teacher needs to be open to being influenced by her observations of the child in order to know his needs. Therefore, the teacher must be comfortable with not knowing what to teach the child until the child reveals it to her in his interactions with the environment. Montessori believed that every child is born with a unique purpose in life. I once had a girl in my classroom who liked to work with geometric shapes and would choose that material right after arriving in the classroom in the morning. Since she demonstrated the same interests at home, her parents came to realize that she was drawn to activities that were much like those of an architect.

The next stage is “participation,” and in this stage, “an epistemology of love is experientially centered in the other, not in ourselves” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 95). The role of the Montessori teacher is to follow the child’s interests and not to dictate them to the child. When the teacher is presenting a lesson to a child, such as the pink tower, she focuses completely on the steps of how to work with the tower, and the child’s response to the presentation. Presentation after presentation, the teacher will gradually see the true nature of the child emerge which Montessori explored in her book “The secret of childhood” (Montessori, 1972b).

The following stage of “transformation” is a critical one. Resting upon the previous stages, this stage implies that the teacher is being transformed by her experiences with the child. The child brings her to a higher level of being because of the love (Montessori, 1995) that enfolds her. She represents for the teacher the true spirit of humanity. For instance, the Montessori teacher tries to remain humble and patient. She rejoices when the child has mastered an activity. This joy elevates the teacher’s spirit and she looks forward to more progress on the part of the child.

The last stage is “imaginative insight.” Montessori (1995) intuited this aptitude in her work. She encouraged the teacher to “keep her imagination alive” (p. 276), for “the Montessori teacher is constantly looking for a child who is not yet there...The teacher...must have a kind of faith that *the child will reveal himself* through work” (p. 276). In other words, when the child begins to concentrate on some work, he will show her his true nature. For example, the first steps of reading include learning the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. When the child is at the beginning stage, the teacher, nevertheless, sees the child in her mind’s eye as a successful reader, and behaves that way with him. In the meantime, she needs to respect that it is hidden within the child.

#### *Love for the Environment*

Maria Montessori (1995) accorded a great amount of emphasis on the environment as a place of learning. She underscored “the child absorbs his environment, takes everything from it, and incarnates it in himself” (p. 66), at the same time as he passes through the stages of development that stem from experiences in his environment. That is to say, “the things he sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul” (p. 62). Therefore, the teacher must make the environment as interesting and as appealing as possible, as a form of love for the child.

The environment in the Montessori classroom is called the prepared environment. In the classroom, the material for the child is placed on low shelves so that they are all easily accessible. There are several areas in the classroom: practical life, sensorial, language, mathematics, and culture, which includes science and geography. The material is arranged from simple to complex. Each activity in the classroom has a purpose. In practical life, washing a table, spooning beads from one bowl to another, and learning how to button on a dressing frame serve to develop concentration on a task. The sensorial materials are very important in helping to cultivate the child’s senses. Using the sound cylinders, the child matches them in pairs listening to the different sounds that they make. Other sensorial materials educate the child to foundational principles in mathematics, such as length with the red rods.

At the same time, the classroom must be aesthetic. Montessori (1995) advised the teacher: “All the apparatus is to be kept meticulously in order, beautiful and shining, in

perfect condition. Nothing may be missing, so that to the child it always seems new, complete and ready for use” (p. 277). Montessori believed that being in beautiful surroundings in the Montessori classroom enhances a child’s interest in learning. The child-sized furniture, consisting of tables, chairs and shelves, tends to be wooden because wood has a smooth, soothing quality to the touch. The materials are also made of wood, and of glass, not plastic, because they are more aesthetically pleasing and inspiring to the child. The children unroll and place mats on the floor to do a lot of their activities, since not all their work is done on the small tables. The Montessori teacher, who is also regarded as part of the environment, must “study her own movements, to make them as gentle and graceful as possible” (Montessori, 1995, p. 277). This she does in order to make the environment a place of peace and comfort for the young child.

In turn, the child has a sense of order that leads to a particular predilection for the environment, which Montessori referred to as “a *rapport*” (Standing, 1984, p. 272) between the child and the environment. Elsewhere, Montessori (1972b) stated “That irresistible impulse which unites a child with the objects around him during the sensitive periods is actually a love for his environment” (p. 103). The young child has a developmental need to find things in a certain place and to return them back to their proper place (Montessori, 1972b). For example, if the child wants to do a particular activity with the moveable alphabet, she knows where in the language area it will be, and she will put it back in the same place when she is finished with it. The Montessori classroom, therefore, is an ordered environment and the child loves to maintain the order that she finds there, strengthening the sense of order that is already within herself. Lillard (2007), renowned psychologist and researcher, pointed out that Montessori declared that order is important for a young child because the child’s mind is becoming orderly as “a reflection of the environment” (p. 312). Being cognizant of this concept, the Montessori teacher demonstrates her love for the child by being a guardian of the environment in the most effective way as possible (Montessori, 1995).

#### *Implications for Practice*

Since love is the building block for the relationship between the Montessori teacher and the child, she needs to be cognizant of herself as a loving being that is constructing an

environment for the child that is the foundation for him to become a loving and peaceful adult. Observing herself throughout the day and engaging in self-reflection activities outside of the classroom, will all be ways that she can progress along her path of spiritual development to develop those qualities that nurture the teacher child relationship. Hence, the teacher can learn from the epistemology of love on how to approach the child in a holistic manner, in order to discover the loving nature of the child in a very deep manner. Implementing the words of wisdom of Maria Montessori on how to make the classroom a place of beauty and order, the teacher also plays a vital role in enhancing the child's learning experiences within the classroom.

### *Conclusion*

In this article, I examined some of the multitude of ways that the teacher displays love for the child in the Montessori classroom. I then went into depth about how the epistemology of love, elaborated by Palmer and Zajonc, (2010) sheds light on the love that permeates the Montessori classroom. Thirdly, I explored how the child's sense of order is respected and reflected in the manner in which the teacher maintains the classroom for the sake of the child's development.

In conclusion, in the Montessori classroom, as we contemplate the love for the child we come to know and understand the child in deeper ways: "The study of love and its utilization will lead us to the source from which it springs, the Child" (Montessori, 1995, p. 296). The child represents for us the future of this planet. With this realization comes a responsibility for teachers to focus on perpetually changing themselves for the better, in order for the child to take her proper place in the world. Through this all the teacher echoes Montessori's (1972a) words that "we must make the child and his education our primary concern" (p. 55).

### *REFERENCES*

- Huebner, D. (1999). Education and spirituality. In V. Hillis (Ed.), *The lure of the transcendent* (pp. 401-416). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Lillard, A. S. (2007). *Montessori the science behind the genius*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Lillard Polk, P. (1972). *Montessori a modern approach*. New York, NY: Schocken Books Inc.
- Montessori, M. (1972a). *Education and peace*. Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company.
- Montessori, M. (1972b). *The secret of childhood*. New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group.
- Montessori, M. (1989). *The child, society and the world*. Oxford, England: The Clio Press.
- Montessori, M. (1995). *The absorbent mind*. New York, NY: Hold Paperbacks.
- Palmer, P. J. (1993). *To know as we are known*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Palmer, P. J. & Zajonc, A. (2010). *The heart of higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Standing, E. M. (1984). *Maria Montessori her life and work*. New York, NY: New American Library.

**Address for Correspondence**

**Christine M. A. Lapierre**

Email: [clapierr@ucalgary.ca](mailto:clapierr@ucalgary.ca)