



## 25<sup>th</sup> International Montessori Congress *Champion the Cause of all Children*

### *Congress Feedback*

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*The following article was prepared for the Australian Italian language newspaper, La Fiamma and highlights the participation of speakers from Italy.*

The 25th International Montessori Congress was held at Darling Harbour, Sydney from the 14 to 17 July 2005. This is the first time the Congress has been held in the Southern Hemisphere. Delegates came from all over Australia and Oceania as well as from parts of Asia, Europe, Africa, North and South America.

The aim of the Congress was 'to reinvigorate the Montessori movement restoring it to its original dimensions, that of a social movement, intended to champion the cause of all children, in all strata of society, of all races and ethnic backgrounds, within and beyond educational institutions.'

This was certainly achieved over the three and a half days with specific themes (The Essence of Education, The Essence of Service, The Essential Mandate) being explored and considered each day.

#### ***The Opening of the Congress***

The opening ceremony on the 14th set the scene and included an Indigenous Welcome from Richard Green of the Darug people followed by a performance by the Donooch Dance Company. Greg MacDonald (Trainer, Washington Montessori Institute, Maryland, USA) and Pamela Nunn (Auxiliary Trainer, Australian Montessori Teacher Education Foundation), the hosts for the Congress, welcomed delegates as did The Governor of New South Wales, Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC, and Andre Roberfroid the President of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) who also officially opened the Congress.

The various welcomes were then followed by an insight to 'Montessori's Cosmic Vision' presented by Mary Hayes (AMI General Secretary). Annette Haines (Director of Training, Montessori Training Center of St Louis, USA) went on to speak on 'The Totality of Montessori' before the screening of 'Montessori Passages'. This recently produced video was a moving, visual presentation of the stages of development of the child from birth to adulthood overlaid with quotes taken from the writings of Dr Maria Montessori. Finally, and fittingly, all were welcomed by Montessori children who wore the national dress and carried the flags of countries represented by the delegates.

#### ***Day 1: The Essence of Education***

This was a day to examine the different aspects that make up 'education' and then to distil this down into the essential qualities. 'Education as an aid to life'.

Dr Silvana Quattrochhi Montanaro emphasised the importance of understanding the vital inner directives of the child from birth to three years in 'The Foundation of the Human Being'.

Dr Silvana Quattrochhi Montanaro, has a degree in medicine and surgery with a specialty in psychiatry from the University of Rome. She is currently the Director of Training for the Assistant to Infancy Montessori course in Rome and San Diego.

She challenged the audience to help eliminate the obstacles we still place in the way of the child. These obstacles, she said, are easily removed and their removal involves no cost! Indeed society

will save money as the obstacles interfere with and compromise human development resulting in the need to spend money rectifying this later in the child's life. Obstacles which have no justification include the separation of the newborn from the mother at birth and in the days after. The use of a pacifier; restricting the vision and movement of the infant by placing them in cots and continued use of bottles which hamper the process of weaning; all of these impact negatively on the young child. The incorrect use of technology also prevents and stops the natural development of the infant and young child, again leading to later difficulties which need to be remediated.

Our lack of knowledge is shown when we place a pacifier in the mouth of a child and thereby cut the child off from communicating and interacting with us. The child craves human contact yet we prevent this from happening by plugging the child's mouth. Language development is also affected.

In this day and age we are bombarded with advertisements and techniques which offer us 'better ways' to bring up 'brighter babies'. There are CD's, videos, classes to take the baby to; yet the use of television, DVDs, video games and so on are of little help in the development of the first years. 'Baby Einstein', 'Baby Mozart' and other programmes like these put our children at risk of the life long need for special education. They are fast paced, over stimulating and at odds with the accurate impressions of real life required by young children.

We need to take up the challenge to defend the construction of normal development. We do not want to be working for the re-construction but for the support and help of the constructive work of the mind. By understanding the inner directives and needs of the child and providing the right environments that respond to these needs, we can enable the extraordinary potentialities of the human being to unfold.

Lynne Lawrence (Director of Training, Maria Montessori Training Organisation, London) continued this theme asking if we have the faith required to empower children to seek out solutions, to work for a common goal? Are we as adults ready to 'Change Within and Remove Obstacles to Development'. Lynne stated that the reform of the adult is an essential step to be taken when considering both the education of children and our interactions with each other. This involves a life long process of change and self-reflection. It involves humility, courage, strength, honesty, hopefulness and moral alertness.

Maria Matsumoto (Director of the Montessori Institute of Tokyo, Japan) spoke on the qualities of love, respect and careful preparation in all that we do. If we have a 'Reverence for Life', then education can foster a sense of awe and wonder, and we can have a profound respect for the world around us. Parallels were drawn between the Japanese Tea Ceremony and Montessori education. There is a sense of 'one opportunity, one encounter' and the need to use this as a once in a lifetime moment to make a positive difference.

Baiba Krumins Grazzini elaborated on 'Work: A Vital Instinct'. She said, everything we do, everything we know, everything we have requires and involves the work of others. Baiba Krumins Grazzini is the Director of Training at the International Centre for Montessori Studies in Bergamo and lives in Italy. She has conducted extensive Montessori research in collaboration with her late husband Camilla Grazzini.

Movement, activity and work constitute the very essence of nature. We depend on the children, as it is through them that mankind can be bettered and humanity can be transformed. The child's work is work of and for development. It is spontaneous work, freely chosen and freely carried out by the child. Maria Montessori discovered that spontaneous work is what is required for normal development and this is the child's natural way of life. Unfortunately, children are not given the opportunity for spontaneous, freely chosen work so consequently the instinct to work becomes deformed. Work then comes to be viewed as a means to an end, to gaining success and riches, power and possessions.

Education needs to be based on natural, normal development and this requires a fundamental reform of education which can only be undertaken by adults. We have to respect the work of the child and we need to protect the moral and spiritual forces that appear with every newborn child.

'Reality: The Most Powerful and Integral Key to the World' was explained by Silvia Dubuvoy (AMI Board member and AMI Trainer). An education based on reality prepares the child to perceive his environment in a precise and accurate manner. The task of the educator is to help the child enter the field of reality and to become a person who understands.

Finally, Eduardo Cuevas (Director of Training, Montessori Training Centre of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada and AMI Board Director) looked at the idea of 'Liberty: Spiritual Freedom and Moral Responsibility'. Human beings are spiritual beings in a physical body. Education should help the spirit within us to be free of the limitations of the physical body. The liberty we give the child allows for individual functioning, allows the child to live and interact with others, enhances social expression and provides for choices.

## ***Day 2: The Essence of Service***

This day focused on the idea of 'service' and how we each can contribute for the good of all society. Andre Roberfroid (AMI President) set the scene outlining 'Montessori's vision of service'. Cheryl Ferreira (Trainer, Maria Montessori Training Organisation, London) spoke passionately about how 'One Person Can Make a Difference'.

There was the opportunity to hear about 'The Resiliency of the Human Spirit' from the Reverend Bill Crews (Exodus Foundation) and his work with the homeless and abandoned youth who experience hardship and disadvantage in our society.

Tenzin Choegyal (Tibetan singer and graduate of the Tibetan Children's Village) spoke about the 'Education of Tibetan Children in Exile' on behalf of Jetsun Pema (the youngest sister of His Holiness the Dalai Lama). The Tibetan Children's Villages in Dharamsala have been operating for 43 years and care for over 15,000 children and young people. Projects include schools, day care centres, vocational training centres, youth hostels, old people's homes and an outreach programme for over 2,000 children in exile.

A congress Expo provided delegates with the opportunity to participate in discussions with Montessori teacher trainers and view various exhibitions including Montessori environments, Montessori materials, books and publications. Various initiatives which complemented the Congress theme and Montessori ideals were also showcased, such as sister schools, Exodus Foundation and Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media (SCREAM).

## ***Day 3: The Essential Mandate***

As the Congress drew to a close, we were invited to think about the nature of the essential mandate. What authority can we adopt to perform certain tasks or apply certain policies? Indeed what are these tasks and policies?

Maria Gabriella Lay outlined ways in which we can 'Work Together to Combat Child Labour'. Maria Gabriella Lay has been a Senior Communications Officer in the Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) since August 1997. She is responsible for the management of the Global Campaign to Raise Awareness and Understanding on Child Labour (GAC), a project aimed at mobilising key sectors of society in the fight against child labour.

According to the ILO's latest estimates there are around 250 million child labourers worldwide and of these, nearly 180 million work in situations that are considered highly hazardous. The safety and opportunity for these children to develop normally is compromised on every level. This is a staggering number of young people who are deprived of the right to grow peacefully and to realise their potential.

Maria Gabriella designed a programme 'Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media' (SCREAM) which encourages young people to participate in and commit to the global campaign against child labour. The programme raises awareness, deepens ethical development and helps educators and young people to promote the understanding of social justice

issues as a base for universal peace. The young are indeed an active force and represent the future of humankind. Through an awareness of social justice issues, the young can become agents of change throughout their lifetimes.

David Kahn (Executive Director, North American Montessori Teachers' Association) presented 'The Social Evolution of the Little Community'. This was illustrated by examples of communities of Montessori adolescents working together to understand how natural and human systems interact evolving towards higher levels of human solidarity and world cooperation.

'Montessori—A Vital Approach to Education for Children and Potential Teachers in Remote Area of Australia' was presented by Jean Little (Indigenous Elder). Ian Mackie (Head of Campus Aurukun of Western Cape College in Queensland) then spoke on the situation faced in remote areas of Australia and steps which have been taken to improve opportunities for young indigenous people. This session was concluded with the screening of 'Montessori and Indigenous People: We Share Our Dreams' illustrating beginning interaction and development between Montessori education and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

'The Century Past: The Montessori Revolution in Retrospect' was introduced by Monte Kenison (Director of Training, Montessori Teacher Training Center of Northern California). A pictorial overview of the first century of the Montessori movement, this was followed by Molly O'Shaughnessy (Director of Training, Montessori Training Center of Minnesota) outlining 'The Century Forward: A Vision of the Montessori Movement for the Next Century'.

The finishing touches were provided by Renilde Montessori. Renilde is the youngest granddaughter of Maria Montessori. She lived and travelled with her grandmother as a child and also attended Montessori schools. She has been actively involved in the work of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) as a lecturer, examiner and trainer as well as serving as the General Secretary and later as President of the AMI until the end of August 2004. Renilde currently resides in Spain.

Renilde Montessori spoke eloquently on the cornerstones of the Montessori edifice—love of the environment, following the child and education as an aid to life. Using the words of Maria Montessori and excerpts from the AMI Articles of Association endorsed by Maria Montessori herself in 1929, Renilde drew out the importance and relevance of these phrases.

And so we came full circle to discover that the essential mandate is none other than absolute dedication to education as an aid to life. If we heed our essential mandate and allow the children to inform us on how to help them fulfill their unfathomed potential then there is hope for mankind. There is the possibility for mankind to transcend its present sorry state of imbalance between constructiveness and destructiveness. To rectify the imbalance of achievements in science and technology and political imbecility of high ethics and muddled moral values.

The Congress closed with the Sydney Community College Choir singing 'The Prayer' with the refrain of

We're dreaming of a world that has no violence  
A world without injustice, war and hunger  
Where neighbours give a helping hand to strangers as a sign of  
friendship, brotherhood and love.

The choir were then joined by the audience singing 'Dona Nobis Pacem' (Grant us peace) before the children returned to farewell participants and invite all to join in the centenary celebrations of the Montessori Movement in 2007.

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