



25th International Montessori Congress
Champion the Cause of all Children

Congress Feedback

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A welcome to the land by the indigenous people of Australia and an exhilarating Aboriginal performance by the Doonooch Dance Company opened the 25th International Montessori Congress in Sydney, Australia, on July 14, 2005.

The Congress was a gathering of Montessorians from around the world. Hosted by the Australian Montessori Teachers Education Foundation and Australian AMI Alumni Association under the auspices of the Association Montessori Internationale, the event was three years in the planning and involved more than 100 volunteers from Australia and New Zealand.

The theme was “Champion the Cause of All Children” and the key objectives of the Congress were to:

- develop a keener understanding of the Essence of Education;
- awaken the appreciation of the Essence of Service; and
- bring forth a culmination of a personal and collective commitment to an Essential Mandate for a peaceful future.

The opening ceremony culminated in the colourful and touching sight of children from Montessori schools around Sydney entering the auditorium dressed in national costumes to honour the delegates of the 37 countries represented.

Speaker Annette Haines of the United States told delegates that Montessori was a “BIG idea” – more than a method of education, more than early childhood education, more than elementary education or infant care, and more than elegant teaching materials, but a social movement that can champion the cause of all children, within and beyond educational institutions.

Over the three days delegates were reminded again and again that the Montessori revolution – the sudden, radical and completely different world view of childhood and human nature –remained unfinished and were called on to redefine their role in serving the children of the world, to reaffirm their belief in the child as the hope for mankind, and urged to be committed to taking action and find ways to serve the child.

New AMI President Andre Roberfroid of France told delegates that the idea that “education of children is the key to a better world” is not a message exclusive to the Montessori movement and assured the Congress that Montessorians were not alone in their “adventures and dreams”. He described how, in May 2002, the United Nations General Assembly held a Special Session on children where the international community, representing 190 countries, approved a declaration that stated: “We call on all members of society to join us in a global movement ... to build a world fit for children”. Mr Roberfroid challenged the Congress to answer the question: “How can the Montessori movement join the global movement and what will we bring that will make our contribution specific and effective?”

He said that the Montessori movement could claim a first original contribution to the global movement for children. “Dr Maria Montessori demonstrated how the environment could stimulate the child’s own capacities and created with great details and precision the optimal environment for this to happen. You, the practitioners of the Montessori approach, you bring to the global movement an effective process whose success has been largely demonstrated around the world and in many cultures.”

Mr Roberfroid challenged the Congress to think how the Montessori message and practice can be disseminated sufficiently to truly make a difference for the world of children – how can we reach beyond the limited number of privileged children, in the affluent parts of the world that have access to Montessori? How can more teachers be trained, how can Montessori continue to be further “elaborated, enriched and perfected”, how can we develop our vision of service, our life’s mission, how can we champion the cause of all children?

“...humanity can hope for a solution of its problemsonly by turning its attention and energies to the discovery of the child and the development of the great potentialities of the human personality.”-- Dr Maria Montessori

Briton Lynne Lawrence told delegates that the Montessori movement has “an approach to education that is capable of nurturing human beings of all nations, cultures and creeds – an education that empowers children to take responsibility for themselves and others, to seek out solutions, to face difficulties and overcome them, to work together for the common good”. She asked: “And what do we teach them? To quote Pablo Cassals, we teach them that ‘2 and 2 are 4 and that Paris is the capital of France!’” She said that what children need most if they are to achieve their potentiality are “adults united in the certainty of their **faith** that children have within them the power of their own self-construction; **humble** enough to believe that children have an enormous capacity to develop into beings far superior to ourselves; **diligent** in the creation of environments that will nurture them; **courageous** enough to give freedom to the individual child while being strong enough to set limits for the group until spontaneous social cohesion takes place; **honest** enough to identify qualities in ourselves that may hinder our abilities to see the child clearly or act supportively; **patient** enough to let the child unfold according to his own personal developmental trajectory and **hopeful** as we wait for the child to reveal himself.”

During the three days of the Congress delegates heard many AMI trainers from around the world share their knowledge and wisdom. Maria S Matsumoto of Japan illustrated to delegates how the principles of Japanese tea ceremony ; harmony, respect, tranquillity and purity are also essential in Montessori. She called upon adults to live in the moment “with a heart of hospitality” and enjoy being with the child in the here and now. Baiba Krummins from Italy reminded the Congress how work is a vital instinct that lends vitality, meaning and interest to human life. She discussed how humans have transformed the world beyond nature through their work and asked what story of mankind we will reveal to our children – the story of human collaboration or the story of rivalry, war and aggression? Cheryl Ferreira of the UK told delegates: “Whatever you chose to do, you will make a difference, make a start, we cannot do nothing” and urged delegates to work and find out what their “individual cosmic task is and to work toward it”. Eduardo Cuevas G. of Canada reminded the Congress of the relationship between spiritual freedom and moral responsibility.

“He will be free when he has sufficient knowledge not only to distinguish the good from the bad, but to understand the social utility of each.” -- Dr Maria Montessori, The Advanced Montessori Method.

Silvia Dubovoy from the US discussed the importance of reality in unlocking the creative powers of the mind, the constant influence on children of a growing range of media and suggested that the effect of these influences have yet to be realised. Italian Dr Silvana Quattrocchi M. spoke passionately about the need for environments that respond to the needs of the baby and young infant, allowing the unfolding of the human personality.

Molly O’Shaughnessy from the US assured the Congress that “our time has come” and observed that “the mission for the evolving Montessori paradigm can be found anywhere igniting a new perception of children’s needs in the context of the whole of humanity. The Montessori movement has its hand ready to aid life with a vision of the past blended with the future.” She suggested the Montessori social revolution could be taking place in adoption homes, children’s museums, United Nations, hospitals, child advocacy law firms, orphanages, tenement houses, refugee camps.

As the Montessori movement makes a concerted effort to expand the availability of quality schools and teachers throughout the world, Ms O’Shaughnessy suggested that partnerships must also be forged with others working on behalf of children. The reality of “acts of service” and potential

partnerships for the benefit of children to children were brought alive for delegates during the Congress – with poignant presentations from the Tibetan Children’s Village about the education of Tibetan children in exile and Montessori indigenous projects in Northern Queensland and Sydney. Delegates also learnt of the work undertaken by the Exodus Foundation working in Sydney with homeless youth, the role of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, and had opportunities to talk at the Congress Expo with representatives from Educateurs sans Frontières, and UNESCO’s Associated Schools Project.

The Congress called for commitment to action and was the impetus for the launch of the Montessori Children’s Foundation in Australia by Renilde Montessori, granddaughter of Dr Maria Montessori, on July 15. Now, for the first time in the Montessori movement history in Australia, there is a vehicle than can provide active support for the work of Montessori educators serving disadvantaged children. The ultimate aim of the foundation is for all children in Australia to have the possibility of attending a Montessori programme regardless of their location or socio-economic circumstances and an important focus in facilitating this goal will be the training of indigenous Montessori teachers.

Just when the task of the “Montessori revolution” seemed overwhelming, delegates were reminded that Dr Montessori herself saw our work as still in its infancy.

“Although it is quite true that man as an individual can improve and that society can be based on principles of justice and love, all of us are aware that these goals do not constitute a reality just beyond our grasp, but rather an aspiration whose fulfillment lies far in the future.” – Dr Maria Montessori, Education and Peace ix.

Ms O’Shaughnessy suggested to delegates that “if each of us went home to the 36 countries from which we came, and made one new connection – one ripple in the water -- the effect would be phenomenal. Small individual initiatives become widespread and weave themselves into the permanent fabric of society. As Robert Kennedy said: ‘Those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance’.”

Renilde Montessori, in her elegant finishing touch to the Congress, reminded the delegates that a very important part of our essential mandate is to “reveal to all of human society the nature of the child and the means to it allow it to fulfill its potential, thereby contributing to the betterment of mankind”. We have been, she suggested, remiss in this aspect “since we have heard over and over again ‘you people have a treasure, why do you hide it, why don’t you show it, why don’t you share it?’” It is time for the Montessori community to reveal our “treasure”, to show it and share it for the betterment of all humanity! This is a challenge to be faced by local and global Montessori communities.

The Congress closed with a heartfelt declaration and standing ovation from all delegates.

SYDNEY DECLARATION July 17, 2005

Let us now translate our Montessori dreams to actions – because a ‘great reform can only be accomplished through actions’. Let us declare a call to action and with new resolve, work together on behalf of children everywhere. Keeping in mind the ideas discussed at this conference, let us vow to act sooner rather than later, because the lives of children today, in both rich nations and poor, are in a state of crisis.

To find out about contributing to the Montessori Children’s Foundation in Australia, visit www.montessorifoundation.org or e-mail: montessorifoundation@bigpond.com

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