# A Look at Waldorf and Montessori Education in the Early Childhood Programs

by Barbara Shell

This comparison of Waldorf and Montessori educational philosophies is based on my personal experience as a teacher in both Montessori and Waldorf school systems. I would like to 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.

Although the young child is viewed with great respect and reverence in both philosophies, there are several areas of contrast between Waldorf and Montessori, including their approach to play, fantasy, toys, social development, structure and order, and intellectualism.

**Play, fantasy and toys**

In Montessori, there is a feeling that young children have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy, and therefore fantasy should be postponed until the child is firmly grounded in reality. The tasks and activities the children do are reality oriented. 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. In Montessori, each manipulative material is focused toward a specific learning concept and has a step-by-step procedure for being used. Math counting rods, for example, are not to be transformed into castle walls.

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

In Waldorf, we feel 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 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, etc., allowing for open-ended imaginative play.

Waldorf's emphasis on play in early childhood is well expressed by Joseph Chilton Pearce, in his book *Magical Child*, when he writes "The great rule is: play on the surface and the work takes place beneath. 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, "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" for the child than for us."

**Social Development**

In the Montessori classroom, much of the young child's work is focused on individual learning tasks, performed separately. Each child works independently on a small rug, doing a different task from the other children. Only the teacher, as facilitator, may intervene if the child requests help. Socialization takes place in not bothering other 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 anything 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 to humanistically work through disagreements.

**Structure and order**

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/she can count on from day to day and week to week. There are times for coming together and working as a whole group, times for playing individually or with friends, times for directed activity like crafts or baking or painting, and times for creative play (such as acting a story out through movement, doing finger games, watching a puppet show). The Waldorf teacher works with the year's seasonal rhythms and themes, weaving artistic activities, stories, 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, and both feel the physical setting needs an underlying order to help the child feel secure. But the two philosophies interpret it in quite different ways: the Montessori classroom emphasizes reality, to free a child from his fantasies. The Waldorf classroom enhances the child's world of fantasy and imagination to stimulate the child's play.

**Intellectual development**

Montessori sees the child as having an absorbent mind, ready to soak up knowledge and experience like a sponge. The theory is that, by supplying a child with ever more challenging intellectual tasks from an early age, you will end up with an educated child. Waldorf does not believe this is the healthiest way to approach the education of young children.

Rather than introducing an early intellectual focus, Waldorf instead seeks to nourish and to keep alive the young child's healthy imagination and creative thinking powers.

The child's intellectual potential lies within, and it unfolds slowly, like petals of a maturing flower, as the child moves from one developmental stage to the next.

In Waldorf early childhood classrooms, we do not seek to produce premature flowers of intellectual learning, much as these flowers might find appreciation. We rather forego such immediate satisfaction, and focus our attentions upon each child's ultimate good, and upon the protection of his/her childhood, with the goal of a healthy, well-rounded adult in the future.

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