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# Humanism In Maria Montessori's Philosophy Of Early Childhood Learning And Development

## Introduction

This essay will explore how the humanistic perspective in psychology relates to Montessori education and how it can be applied in a Montessori classroom to enhance teaching and learning. The humanistic perspective was developed within the field of psychology in the 1940s onwards in critical response to the limitations posed by the reductionist and determinist dominant psychodynamic and behaviourist perspectives within psychology (Pavlovic, 2017; Jingna, 2012). Developed and expanded upon by theorists including Otto Rank, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May and Maria Montessori amongst others humanism by contrast recognises that an individual has an inherent drive towards self-actualisation and focuses upon the whole person (Jones-Smith, 2011).

Notably Maria Montessori believed that it was critical to develop the whole person over the course of their lives. Her Montessori Method adopts a child centred educational approach which sees the young child as naturally eager for knowledge who is able to imitate learning when provided with a supportive and prepared learning environment (Montessori, 1966). This essay will explain how Montessori education and humanism are connected, will describe how a Montessori teacher could use humanism in teaching and learning within a Montessori context and will explore how humanism can influence education in a Montessori context. This paper will also reflect upon the author's educational role as a Montessori teacher and provide examples of the application of humanism for the development of a classroom lesson plan in a Montessori classroom with specific reference to the theorists that underpin the examples given of teaching and learning.

In tackling the first element of this paper, this discourse will now explain how Montessori education and humanism are philosophically connected. The humanistic perspective was developed within the field of psychology in the 1940s onwards in critical response to the limitations posed by the dominant psychodynamic and behaviourist perspectives within psychology (Pavlovic, 2017; Jingna, 2012). Psychodynamic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud (1909; 1900) and expanded upon by Jung (1964), Adler (1927) and Erikson (1950) has its limitations in that it ignores thinking processes, places excessive emphasis on psychological factors without consideration of biological and genetic factors that can influence mental health, is overly deterministic and simplifies the human mind into the id, ego and superego making it overly reductionist (Pavlovic, 2017). The humanistic perspective criticises psychodynamic theory because it proposes that we have no conscious free will over our own behaviour which leaves very little space for the concept of personal agency or free will (Aloni, 2013). Likewise limitations of behaviourism as proposed by John Watson (1913) and expanded upon by others including Watson & Rayner (1920), Thorndike (1905), B.F. Skinner (1971; 1948), Hull (1943) and Chomsky (1959) is that it too is overly deterministic, suggesting a lack of free-will on the part of the individual while also being reductionist and ignoring our own thinking processes and biology.

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and Rollo May humanism by contrast recognises that an individual has an inherent drive towards self-actualisation and focuses upon the whole person (Jones-Smith, 2011). This view is shared by Maria Montessori who believed too that children were naturally eager to learn and were able to imitate learning in a supportive and prepared learning environment (Montessori, 1966). Her philosophy values the human spirit and the holistic development of the child with due regard for their cognitive, physical, social and emotional domains (Montessori, 1966). Montessori believed in fostering a respect for the young child who is seen as a worthy person 'occupied with the task of developing himself into a mature human adult' (Montessori, 1966; p. 34). Nutkins et al (2013), Melhuish et al (2013) and Naughton & Williams (2009) maintain that Maria Montessori's methods embraced the view of the child as independent, self-confident and naturally curious with a natural desire to learn and work towards self-actualisation. In her *The Absorbent Mind* Montessori noted that 'no one can be free unless he is independent' thus recognising the importance of autonomy towards helping a child towards self-actualisation (Montessori, 1995; p. 54). In this way we see a strong connection philosophically between humanism and Maria Montessori's approach to teaching and learning.

This next section shall explore how a Montessori teacher could use humanism in teaching and learning within a Montessori context and how humanism can influence teaching and learning. This author argues that humanism can influence teaching and learning as it promotes the view that the learning process should work towards helping children to achieve self-actualisation, self-understanding and self-realisation (Berehova, 2017). Self-actualisation according to Abraham Maslow helps an individual grow towards fulfilment of their highest needs or as man's aspirations to achieve his goals and fulfil his potential (Maslow, 1943). Self-realisation refers to knowing oneself (Berehova, 2017). Teachers could therefore adopt Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to assist children towards the process of self-actualisation which includes satisfying a child's psychological needs including by providing warmth, water, food and rest and providing an environment which is full of movement (Pavlovic, 2017). In a Montessori classroom children are free to move around with the activities of Practical Life providing a fertile backdrop for the chance to enhance gross and fine motor movements (Pavlovic, 2017). The second element that Maslow claims is important on the path towards self-actualisation is the need for safety which the Montessori classroom can adopt by creating a classroom which is safe, accessible and organised so that a child is able to feel secure by knowing their world is in order (Maslow, 1943). The third need of 'belonging' could be easily adopted into a Montessori setting by ensuring a mutual respect for the Montessori environment where children are encouraged to develop friendships with their peers in lessons on Grace and Courtesy and encouraged to show kindness, compassion, understanding and empathy towards others (Pavlovic, 2017).

The fourth need identified by Maslow is the need for self-esteem which can be encouraged in a Montessori classroom by fostering success amongst children (Maslow, 1943). This is ideally suited to a Montessori classroom because it supports the adoption of material and lesson plans that promote self-correction that builds in control of error such that children can identify their own mistakes and correct it themselves (Hallam et al, 2016). Maria Montessori was a firm believer herself that correcting every error that a child makes in the classroom was not conducive to healthy learning and development and it could lead eventually to a child becoming depressed (O'Donnell, 2014). Self-Actualisation was the final and ultimate need that all individuals had which could only be achieved once the earlier needs had been obtained (Hallam et al, 2016). This could be supported in a Montessori classroom by promoting independence, autonomy and helping a child reach their full potential (Fromm, 2013). Fortunately, this humanistic element is already a key feature of the Montessori Method which utilises self-

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correcting material to help a child self-correct thus promoting autonomy, self-reflection and their own desire to learn and grow (Fromm, 2013). However humanism has the value of reinforcing the use of such materials and lessons in the Montessori classroom as a means of promoting a child's self-actualisation.

Humanist Tim Kasser (2006) in his book 'The High Price of Materialism' reinforces Maslow's own theory, highlighting that the psychological needs for greater human happiness lie in safety, security, competence, efficacy, self-esteem, connectedness and autonomy which is the freedom of being self-directed (in O'Donnell, 2014; p. 117). Montessori teachers then could draw upon humanism in teaching and learning by promoting all of these various elements in the early years setting so that children feel safe and secure and engage with materials and lessons which promote their competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Connectedness can be promoted by preparing an environment that supports natural peer-to-peer social interactions to enhance socio-emotional development (Pavlovic, 2017). Additionally autonomy and independence can be supported by providing materials that self-correct and support learning instead of focusing on just direct instruction.

Additionally lessons could encourage children to engage in project work, experiments and to play with material that promotes exploration and play. For instance moveable alphabets, a pink tower, sound cylinders and hands on tasks such as watering flowers are all autonomous activities which children could engage in that enhances learning and development, on the child's own terms. Carl Rogers believed that to achieve self-actualisation people needed to be open to experiences, live in the moment, trust their feelings, employ creativity and have a fulfilled life where an individual is happy and satisfied with their life (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1959; Rogers, 1951). He argued too that children have the need for a positive regard from other people and to feel self-worth (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1959; Rogers, 1951). These can be adapted in the Montessori classroom by promoting respect for every child, listening to them, involving them in decisions and adopting an emergent curriculum which is responsive to children's interests in order to create meaningful learning experiences. The endorsement and application of the sixteen quality standards of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland is also paramount to fostering self-worth amongst children in the delivery of a quality early years learning environment (CECDE, 2006). In this way we can see how Montessori teachers could use humanism in teaching and learning and how humanism can influence education in a Montessori context.

This paper will now reflect upon the author's educational role as a Montessori teacher. The Montessori teacher is responsible for implementing the Montessori Method and the philosophy of Maria Montessori in her teaching pedagogy. The role of the teacher here is to be present by being physically, mentally and emotionally prepared to support the child in the classroom setting to enhance their learning and development (Montessori, 1966). The teacher in the Montessori classroom is an observer who is prepared to intervene less and less as the child develops and grows but who is able to create and provide a prepared classroom setting to enhance self-directed learning opportunities (Montessori, 1966). Their role then is to create stimulating, engaging, empowering, informative and interesting environments which are emergent and inspire children while also enhancing their autonomy and independence (Montessori, 1966). This paper argues that in doing so the humanist perspective in psychology supports this approach and adds further value in shaping the quality of the learning experience for children. The educators role as a Montessori teacher is to ensure that the principles which underlie Montessori schools are adopted in practice into their own setting including the promotion of self-

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education, individual instruction, the use of didactic materials, a specially prepared environment and adopting the role of a trained directress where the emphasis is on playing an enabling role which supports learning rather than teaching and who is always available to respond to the unique needs of each child while serving as a positive role model who can guide children towards independence, greater self-confidence and self-actualisation (Montessori International, 2019).

This paper will now provide examples of the application of humanism for the development of a classroom lesson with specific reference to the theorists that underpin the examples given of teaching and learning. This sample classroom lesson would be based upon the 'practical life' element which is a fundamental part of Montessori education where they provide children with opportunities to learn how to do living activities in a purposeful way (Montessori, 2013). The primary aim of Practical Life activities is to aid in the development of social skills and independence and indirectly they help to promote fine motor skills alongside enhancing concentration, a sense of responsibility, intellect and personal will (Montessori, 2013). This provides a perfect opportunity to adopt humanistic principles into the Montessori classroom. The lesson plan itself would be based upon an emergent curriculum, that of the interests expressed by the children themselves. Previously children had expressed an interest in flowers, herbs and plants outdoors and so an activity which involved looking after plants and flowers in the outdoors seemed an appropriate Applied Exercise within the Practical Life aspect of the Montessori curriculum. Humanism then is adopted early on in this lesson plan with the exercises in question centering on the interests of the child thus promoting the self-directed learning that is put forward by Carl Rogers in his work (Rogers, 1954).

The sample lesson would begin with circle time where children would be introduced to the activity with this time providing an opportunity to promote a child's safety needs and a sense of belonging which have been identified as important factors in enhancing a child's motivation towards self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954). Student-centred teaching and self-directed learning are core features of Carl Roger's own psychological theory on education (Rogers, 1954). We can draw on it in the application of activities to promote looking after the plants, herbs and flowers that are in the garden attached to the Montessori school. Children will fill a watering cans from the outdoor tap and will water all the plants, flowers and herbs in the garden. This promotes their psychological needs including being able to move around in the outdoors and having the freedom to utilise materials which promote self-direction i.e. watering can is able to be filled with water and emptied. They will also spray weeds that have accumulated on the stones using a spray bottles and they will use hand tools to scoop up plant food and place it on the soil around the flowers and herbs to promote their growth. Children will also be provided with material including small pots, fresh soil, compost and bulbs. The bulbs will be laid out in such a way that there is a picture of what each flower looks like. Children will be encouraged to plant a bulb and will look after it in doors until it is big enough to be planted. This promotes self-direction such that children can draw upon their own knowledge to plant the bulb, feed and water it and take care of it which supports a humanistic approach, respecting the autonomy and independence of the child. Additionally to support a positive emotional relationship with the child it is important that the Montessori school teacher adopts genuineness and acceptance of the child (Rogers, 1961).

In conclusion it is quite evident that, based upon an analysis of humanism and Maria Montessori's philosophy of early childhood learning and development, that they are highly compatible and congruent and are mutually reinforcing. This is because Maria Montessori

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herself was a humanist and so she designed her Montessori Method to reflect the classic principles of humanism; that of autonomy, free will and a desire for self-actualisation (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The Montessori Method emphasises active learning, autonomy and self-directed learning (Montessori, 1966). Humanists content that children have an innate potential and desire to learn and an ability to realise their own direction in life (Elkins, 2009). Humanists can also enhance the Montessori Method further including through the work of Carl Rogers amongst others who emphasise the importance of developing a climate which fosters positive regard from others and promotes feelings of self-worth in children (Rogers, 1961). In a society that is witnessing a rise in mental health issues impacting children and young people it is now more than ever that we need to promote self-worth in young children. In conclusion the humanist perspective quite clearly relates positively to Montessori education with this setting being an ideal environment to support and reinforce the values underpinning humanism.

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