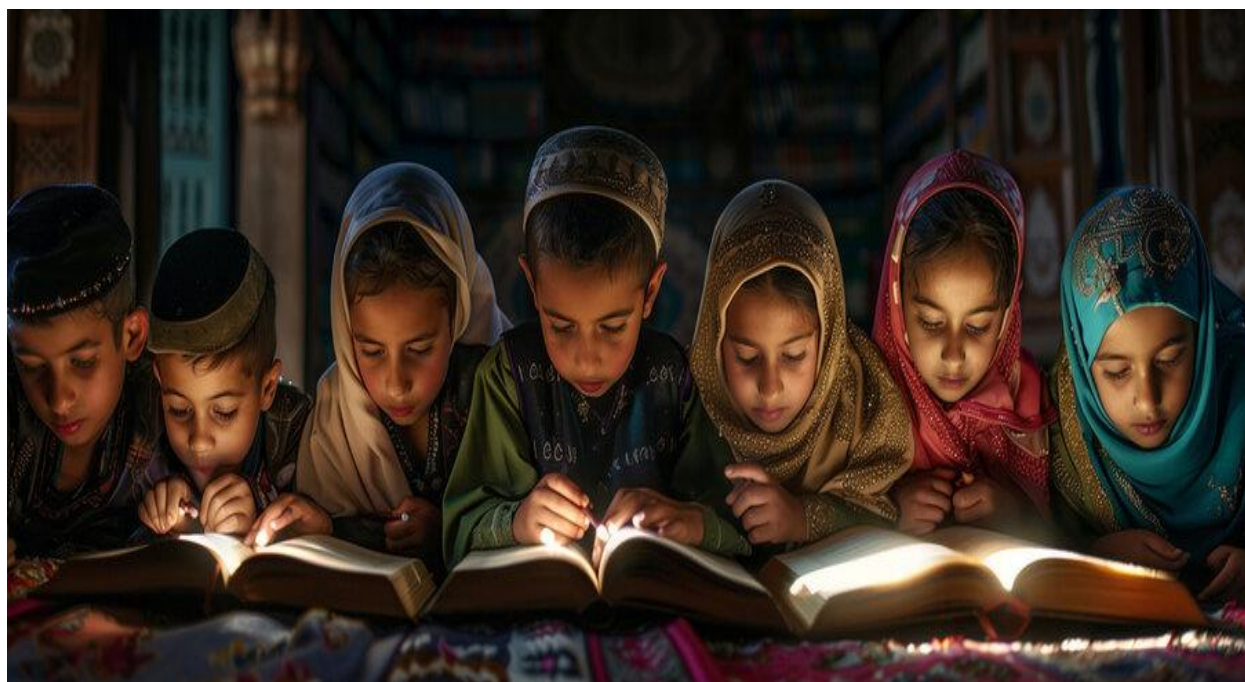


Perspectives on Child Education: Montessori and Al-Ghazali



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Childhood is characterized by innocence, exploration, and inquisitiveness. As young learners, children bravely embrace the trial-and-error approach to learning. The energy and curiosity displayed by children during their formative years marvel many parents and teachers alike. Here, we will explore some of the ideas about child education put forth by Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). The concepts articulated by these two great educators—one from the West and the other from the East—hold significant relevance even in our modern, globalized world.

Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori discussed many challenges faced by children in Italy in her book “The Secret of Childhood.” As the first female medical doctor in Italy, she later shifted her focus to psychology and became a prominent educator. Montessori recognized that children were often deprived of their social rights in education. She observed that they were subjected to overwhelming tasks and received little affection

or respect as individuals. During her time, the situation for children in Italy was deeply troubling. The state prioritized the rights of adults, neglecting the social well-being and education of children.

Montessori believes that adulthood is the reflection of what one has learned and experienced during childhood. Besides that, Montessori asserts that adults—both parents and teachers—should respect children in their process of growing up and cater to their needs. Montessori further disagrees with the tradition of paying greater attention to a labouring mother than to the newborn infant. Montessori in her own philosophical way of thinking argues that an infant child has also undergone a challenging journey, passing through a narrow passage from the mother's womb, and has faced the trials of life and death before being born into a broader world outside its initial abode in the mother's womb. Reflecting on her own experiences with children, she notes that this dilemma persists due to adults' failure to view children from their perspectives, which leads to an inability to provide proper attention and education for them.

Al-Ghazali

In contrast to Montessori's life background, Al-Ghazali was a prominent Islamic scholar from Khurasan, known for his expertise in Islamic law (Fiqh al-Shafi'i) and theology (Kalam al-Ash'ari). He studied under several reputable Muslim scholars of his time, including Imam al-Haramayn and taught at the University of Nizamiyyah in Baghdad. After going on a soul-searching mission to many parts of the Middle East, Al-Ghazali wrote extensively, focusing on human nature, the spiritual dimension of man, the spiritual diseases of the heart (amrad al-qulub), and the purification of the human soul (tazkiyatul nafs). His major work, *Ihya 'Ulum al-din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), reflects his insights gained through personal reflection and Sufi practices.

He believed that parents play a crucial role in a child's upbringing, describing children as a trust from God and likening them to "uncut diamonds" that parents must shape and guide. Al-Ghazali advocated for an educational curriculum that included religious teachings, Quranic memorization, reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, and moral education, emphasizing the importance of nurturing a child's character from a tender age.

Al-Ghazali, in his views on child education, places great emphasis on the roles of parents, who, according to him, should observe their children's education from birth. This is further explained in *Ihya' Ulum ad-Din*, which states that parents are accountable for their children, whose hearts are uncorrupted, pure, and untainted, and therefore inclined to accept whatever is presented to them. Al-Ghazali asserts that children raised with good manners will grow up to become good human beings, for which their parents, teachers, or guardians deserve reward from God. Conversely, parents who deprive their children of proper education are liable for their bad behaviour as those children grow into adulthood. According to Al-Ghazali, the ultimate aim of education is to develop a learner's character and personality by enabling them to distinguish between true and false, good and bad, and right and wrong.

Recognizing Children's Worth

Children should be treated with respect and care, viewing them as a trust from God. According to Montessori, adults should support children's choices and help them learn in ways that suit them, rather than imposing their own ideas on the submissive minds of the children. This approach encourages children to develop skills, independence, and a positive self-image.

Montessori emphasizes that parents should act as guardians rather than controllers, providing a safe and nurturing environment for holistic education. This nurturing helps raise responsible individuals who contribute to a healthier society. Children who grow up in a loving and supportive home, with proper education and care, are better equipped to become great citizens and contribute to the development of a strong nation.

Similarly, Al-Ghazali stresses that children are a trust from Allah. He advocates for treating children with respect, avoiding negative focus on their weaknesses, while also being firm in teaching them about religion. He believes adults are accountable for their children's religious education.

In general, both Montessori and Al-Ghazali highlight the importance of respecting children and nurturing their development, aligning their views on how to raise them responsibly.

The Absorbent Mind

Montessori's concept of the "absorbent mind," highlights how children learn differently from adults. From ages three to six, children use their conscious absorbent minds to actively select information from their environment, enhancing their senses and developing skills like differentiating and matching colours. Before age three, they learn through their unconscious absorbent mind, shaped by their surroundings and experiences.

Montessori emphasizes that a child's development is influenced by the environment and acknowledges the role of the soul in a person's growth, contrasting humans with animals by stating that each child has a unique creative spirit.

Al-Ghazali's principles align with Montessori's ideas, particularly regarding play. He believes adults should encourage play during children's leisure time, as it fosters learning, skill mastery, physical development, and happiness. Play serves as both a learning tool and a way for children to relax after studying.

When it comes to the role of education in human life, both Montessori and Al-Ghazali emphasize that education is not solely for intellectual development but also for the development of the learner's soul.

Critical Developmental Phases

The concept of "sensitive periods" in child development, as described by Montessori, refers to specific times when children learn certain behaviours more effectively. Montessori emphasizes the importance of observing these periods rather than testing children, noting that sensitive periods often occur in early life, particularly during the rapid development of physical and language skills.

Al-Ghazali's perspective aligns with Montessori's ideas, suggesting that sensitive periods may occur between the ages of seven and twelve. He argues that at seven, children can be taught to perform prayers, making it a suitable time to instill values such as humility, honesty, and the importance of giving. This age aligns with Montessori's observations about rapid development, and the transition to the *akil baligh* phase around twelve marks significant physical growth. Generally, both Montessori and Al-Ghazali emphasize the importance of nurturing appropriate behaviours and skills during these critical developmental windows.

A Structured Learning Environment

According to Montessori, children learn by fostering independence, particularly during their “sensitive period” from birth to five years. This environment, whether in a classroom, home, or playground, should engage children’s senses through light, colors, and sounds, encouraging exploration and new experiences. This approach aligns with Al-Ghazali’s principles, which advocate teaching children to avoid dependence on others, such as begging for sympathy or stealing. These habits can hinder a child’s development into an independent adult, highlighting the importance of fostering self-reliance in early education.

Independent Learning

Auto education is the concept of children educating themselves through engaging activities in a prepared environment. This approach encourages learning, reflection, and self-satisfaction. It aligns with Al-Ghazali’s principles, which emphasize the importance of teaching children to avoid negative influences, practice moderation, and adhere to ethical eating habits. By following these guidelines, children can participate in activities that foster their learning and personal growth.

Teachers

The perspectives of Montessori and Al-Ghazali on the role and attributes of teachers in child education seem to be a little different. Montessori emphasizes a “child-centred” approach, where teachers detect sensitive periods in children, provide experiences for potential development, and maintain minimal supervision, promoting self-reward and intrinsic motivation rather than giving compliments. In contrast, Al-Ghazali adopts a “teacher-centred” view, focusing on the qualities of the teacher, such as being a role model and regarding teaching as a charitable act. He advises teachers to show love for teaching, avoid insulting children, and tailor their instruction to each child’s capabilities to prevent intimidation. Despite their different emphases, the concepts of teaching by Montessori and Al-Ghazali share some intersections.

Reward

When discussing the concept of reward in education, Montessori and Al-Ghazali present contrasting perspectives. Montessori emphasizes the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation in students. She believes that teachers should avoid giving compliments or external rewards, allowing children to develop a sense of self-reward

and internal satisfaction from their accomplishments. This approach encourages a deeper engagement with learning, as students learn to appreciate their own efforts.

In contrast, Al-Ghazali supports the idea of public praise as a form of reward. He advocates for recognizing and celebrating good behaviour to promote happiness and encourage positive actions in children. Additionally, when children make mistakes, Al-Ghazali suggests that teachers and parents should offer gentle guidance, helping them understand the error without harsh criticism. Ultimately, while Montessori focuses on cultivating self-motivation, Al-Ghazali highlights the role of external acknowledgement in reinforcing good behaviour. Both approaches offer valuable insights into the dynamics of reward in education.

Unlike Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), whose theories, such as the Oedipus complex, often cast a shadow over childhood innocence, Montessori and Al-Ghazali present a more positive view of children. While they differ slightly in their approaches to childhood education, both emphasize the importance of nurturing by parents and teachers during early childhood, highlighting the need to support children's natural development. Both offer hope for humanity's potential to evolve into a higher being. Each person can unlock their hidden potential by recognizing the powers that lie within them.

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