

Research Note

Louise Dixon Boyle and Maria Montessori

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Louise Dixon Boyle (1875–1953), a member of the Bahá'í community of Washington, D.C., for fifty-six years, was an intelligent and active woman whose record of service to the promotion of the Bahá'í teachings and the betterment of society is rich and varied.¹ Conscious of the forces of social change, the impact of progressive scientific ideas, and the issues confronting the Western world in the early years of the twentieth century, Louise Boyle sought to find ways to bring to the attention of leaders of thought the teachings of the Bahá'í religion that related to their fields of interest, and to encourage her co-religionists to familiarize themselves with current thought and to consider the means by which it might be used to introduce Bahá'í perspectives on the issues of the day.

While the biography of Louise Boyle has yet to be written, some of her contributions have already been described in brief, principally in the area of the advancement of race unity² and her membership on the executive board of the Bahá'í Temple Unity (1920–1922), the elected institution that evolved into the National Spiritual Assembly, the national governing body of the Bahá'ís in the United States.³ The present research note aims to highlight another dimension of Boyle's activity. Piecing together fragmentary information, it focuses on Boyle's involvement in the field of education, examining, in particular, her interest in the work of the Italian physician and educator Dr. Maria Montessori (1870–1952).

THE CONTEXT

From its inception at the turn of the twentieth century, the Washington, D.C., Bahá'í community benefited from the diversity of its membership, the presence of a number of talented and well-educated individuals and people of means, whose efforts were reinforced by prominent Bahá'í teachers from Iran, such as Mírzá Abu'l-Faql, who resided in the city from 1902 to 1904.⁴ The community grew rapidly as a result of personal contacts, public meetings, and the organizational skills of its members. Increasing personal links between Bahá'ís from the East and the West led to the formation in 1910 of the Washington-based Persian–American Educational Society, a Bahá'í-inspired association open to all and designed to serve all Iranians. Initially, the provision of assistance to the Tarbíyat School was the priority task of this new society.⁵

In the course of His travels in North America 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Washington, D.C., in 1912. Receptions were held in His honor “at which outstanding figures in the social life of the capital were presented to Him” (Shoghi Effendi 289). 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed a number of large gatherings, including one at Howard University. In these meetings He expounded, “with brilliant simplicity, with persuasiveness and force” the “basic and distinguishing principles of His Father's Faith,” teachings which He characterized as “the ‘spirit of the age’” (Shoghi Effendi 281–82).

Louise Boyle was clearly inspired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States and by the breadth and social relevance of the subjects He discussed, and by the way He introduced the Bahá'í Faith to the diverse audiences He addressed. She also had the opportunity to meet with 'Abdu'l-Bahá on several occasions. No record has been found concerning the content of the meetings that took place in Washington, D.C., and in Dublin, New Hampshire.⁶ However, in a letter dated April 1914 addressed to Mrs. Agnes Parsons, a prominent member of the Washington Bahá'í community, with whom she collaborated on a number of Bahá'í activities, Boyle confides in Mrs. Parson that, during a third

meeting, in Philadelphia, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had given her many instructions about teaching.⁷

ENCOURAGEMENT TO ACTION

From the time Louise Boyle accepted the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged her in her efforts to serve the religion she had embraced. Writing to her in an undated Tablet revealed after her pilgrimage, which took place in the spring of 1900 (Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith* 2:158–59), 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "Wert thou informed of that which God hath ordained unto His maid-servants in this blessed, holy and primal life, in this Wonderful Age, thine heart would fly with joy and gladness."⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls upon her to appreciate the great privilege she had in visiting the Resting-place of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. He exhorts her to return to her native country, bearing the glad-tidings of the Kingdom of God, and to rejoice in "the numberless favors of God."⁹

From letters written by Louise Boyle to various members of the Washington, D.C., Bahá'í community, it is evident that Boyle was deeply interested in social issues and in the progressive ideas that were current in society. She had a particular interest in finding ways of relating modern scientific concepts to the teachings of the Faith, and in fostering innovation in the ways the Bahá'í religion and its conception of the Manifestation of God were presented to leaders of thought.

Typically, she communicated her ideas to a number of receptive individuals in the community. From time to time, she also wrote articles that were published in Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í journals. These articles illustrate Boyle's deep personal interest in current scientific thought and social issues and their importance to the contemporary age. They indicate the scope of her reading and the range of sources she consulted. Her articles demonstrate Boyle's desire to explore the correlation of such social and scientific issues with aspects of the Bahá'í teachings and her conviction that such a correlation would provide the means for presenting the Bahá'í Faith in a logical and systematic manner to leaders of thought.

Initially unsure of her approach, on occasion, Boyle submitted her ideas in writing to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In one instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá read her notes, made a number of additions to the text, then returned the notes to Boyle, at the same time addressing to her a Tablet dated 1 April 1913, which conveyed His response. The Tablet reads:

The article which thou hast written is very eloquent. It is an indication that through the Bestowal of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh the power of composition is being developed in thee; thy pen is moving and thy tongue is speaking. . . .

I have commanded to print and publish this article in the *Star of the West* so that all the believers in the East and the West may read it.¹⁰

The article entitled "Meeting the Capacity of the Seeker" subsequently appeared in the issue of *Star of the West* dated 17 May 1913. In the preamble Boyle states: "In giving the world this knowledge of the Day of God, no duty impresses itself so persistently upon the Bahá'í as the necessity to meet the capacity of the seeker, and to realize among human beings a marked dissimilarity in approaching the teachings" (70). The main body of Boyle's article deals with the challenge and importance of understanding the vital role of the Manifestation in providing timely guidance to the world of humanity, a function she describes as "The perfect meeting of the demand with the supply, the need with its fulfillment, . . . one of the fundamental laws of God" (70). She contrasts the extent and nature of humanity's understanding of the guidance of God with "those holy ones [who] possess in its fullness in this day that "universal divine mind" whose power is "conscious, not acquired" (70–71). Finally, Boyle draws attention to the wise and judicious manner in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá presented the teachings of the Faith during His public addresses, and she encourages her fellow believers to follow His example in order "to protect the Cause" (71).

Boyle's interest in progressive issues is further reflected in her active membership in the Twentieth Century Club, a woman's organization concerned with social welfare and the promotion of science, literature, and art, and in which the members were encouraged to present speeches.

Boyle sought the guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the desirability of her participating in this organization, and, in a Tablet translated in July 1913, she received His clear endorsement to proceed:

O thou daughter of the Kingdom! I have told thee before and now I repeat again: In meetings and assemblages turn thy face toward the Kingdom of Abhá, then loosen thy tongue and speak with utmost confidence and zeal. Rest thou assured in the confirmations of the Kingdom of Abhá; especially in the matter of the Twentieth Century Club the President of which has asked thee to become an active member. Before entering the meetings read thou a commune, beg for assistance, then deliver the address.¹¹

Furthermore, writing in 1913 to Mrs. Charlotte Dixon, Boyle's mother, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed pleasure at her daughter's activities. In the Tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked Mrs. Dixon to convey His greetings to Boyle and He comments on her potential to render service to the Cause: "Convey my respectful greetings to thy revered daughter—Mrs. Louise Boyle. She is endowed with great capacity—encourage her to deliver speeches in the meetings with infinite attraction and be occupied in teaching the Cause. If she practiceth this she will make extraordinary progress."¹²

MODERN EDUCATION AND THE MONTESSORI PHENOMENON

The social, economic, and political changes occurring in the world at the end of the nineteenth century created the need for schools to broaden their aims and curricula. In addition to the promotion of literacy, mental discipline, and good moral character, schools were expected to help prepare children for citizenship, for employment, and for individual development and success. The development of education in the twentieth century saw the crystallization of three foci of study—the child, science, and society. These central themes, which underpinned the progressive educational movement, were derived both from European educators and theorists, including Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori, and from

Americans such as John Dewey, Henry James, and others. In addition to proposing a child-centered approach to education, such theorists placed new emphasis on providing a scientific basis for education, resulting in more systematic methodology, and the establishment of a number of experimental schools. The social impact of schooling was widely studied, driven by the belief that schools could be a vehicle for influencing society or the individual.¹³

Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian educator and physician of the early twentieth century, was an active proponent of educational reform. She won international recognition for designing an educational system to aid children in the development of intelligence and independence.¹⁴ Her first book, published in Italian in 1910, was translated into English as *The Montessori Method* and appeared in 1912. The book served to make her ideas accessible to the English-speaking world, led to the spread of her methods, and, before long, gave rise to the establishment of Montessori schools.

Montessori's teaching strategies and her discoveries about the process of learning impacted the field of education in the United States. The school she set up in a Roman slum in 1907 achieved remarkable results and within a couple of years had attracted the attention of both professional educators and the general public.¹⁵ The release of her book in North America was eagerly awaited due in part to the widespread interest generated by what a contemporary observed described as "the enthusiastic and ingenious articles in *McClure's Magazine* for May and December 1911, and January 1912" (Holmes xvii). An eminent Harvard professor, Henry W. Holmes, contributed a long and detailed "critical introduction" to the English translation of Montessori's book, in the beginning pages of which he highlights some of the unique features of the approach:

It is wholly within the bounds of safe judgment to call Dr. Montessori's work remarkable, novel, and important. It is remarkable, if for no other reason, because it represents the constructive effort of a woman. We have no other example of an educational system—

original at least in its systematic wholeness and in its practical application—worked out and inaugurated by the feminine mind and hand. It is remarkable, also, because it springs from a combination of womanly sympathy and intuition, broad social outlook, scientific training, intensive and long-continued study of educational problems, and, to crown all, varied and unusual experience as a teacher and educational leader. . . . These resources, furthermore, she has devoted to her work with an enthusiasm, an absolute abandon, like that of Pestalozzi and Froebel, and she presents her convictions with an apostolic ardour which commands attention. A system which embodies such a capital of human effort could not be unimportant. Then, too, certain aspects of the system are in themselves striking and significant: it adapts to the education of normal children methods and apparatus originally used for deficient; it is based on a radical conception of liberty for the pupil; it entails a highly formal training of separate sensory, motor, and mental capacities, and it leads to rapid, easy, and substantial mastery of the elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic. All this will be apparent to the most casual reader of this book. (xvii–xviii)

Dr. Maria Montessori made her first visit to the United States in 1913 and a second in 1915. She spoke to a variety of audiences about her ideas and teaching methods, including a memorable speech before an estimated five thousand people in Carnegie Hall in 1915 (Hacker 26). Later that year Montessori attracted worldwide attention and publicity when she demonstrated her approach in a special “schoolhouse” made of glass at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco. The committee that brought her to San Francisco included Margaret Wilson, the daughter of United States President Woodrow Wilson. During her second visit Montessori also conducted a teacher-training course and addressed the annual conventions of both the National Educational Association and the International Kindergarten Union. This may well have represented the high point of the interest in the Montessori Method in North America. Subsequently, her work came in for increasing criticism from educators, and, for a time, interest in her approach waned. Nevertheless, her legacy

appears to have been assured through the resurgence of interest in her ideas in the 1960s (American Montessori Society; Montessori Foundation).

LOUISE BOYLE AND THE MONTESSORI MOVEMENT

Louise Boyle was actively involved in the pioneering initiatives to promote the Montessori approach to education in the Washington, D.C., area. Boyle was in close contact with the small group of individuals who gave leadership to this venture, including Alexander Graham Bell and Mabel Hubbard Bell, Miss Margaret Wilson, and the Montessori-trained teachers who worked with the Bells and in a demonstration Free School. She was a member of the Montessori Educational Association, established in 1913 under the auspices of the Bells, and assumed a degree of administrative responsibility for the organization of its activities. And, it was to Louise Boyle that Dr. Montessori turned in 1914 for assistance in making some of the arrangements for her second visit to Washington. Boyle's keen interest in educational innovation is also reflected in the articles she wrote about education and the contribution of the Montessori approach. The contents of several of Boyle's articles will be briefly outlined in a later section of this paper.

THE LETTERS OF LOUISE BOYLE CONCERNING THE MONTESSORI MOVEMENT

In her letters addressed to Mrs. Agnes Parsons, a trusted friend and fellow member of the Washington Bahá'í community, Boyle provides interesting insights into the nature of her association with the Montessori Movement. The content of several of these letters, from the Agnes Parsons Papers, is outlined below.

5 March 1914. Writing to Mrs. Parsons on this date, Boyle explains her desire to find a way to present the Bahá'í teachings to thinking people, such as Mrs. Bell and colleagues involved in the Montessori Movement. She states: "The practical application is that I cannot give the teachings to my

co-workers out in the world,—of the New Pedagogy, for example,—until I can give it in a language intelligible to them” (5). Boyle illustrates her concern by recounting a recent conversation she had with Laura Dreyfus-Barney, a Bahá’í visiting from Europe, about her goal of being able to convey the Bahá’í conception of the Manifestation of God in “rational or scientific” terms. She describes for Dreyfus-Barney the work of an early nineteenth-century Belgian statistician named Quetelet, who defined the notion of the “medial” type of human being, one who exemplifies universal qualities, both intellectual and moral.¹⁶ Boyle apparently saw the possibility that this idea of the “medial” type might serve as a useful analogy for the Manifestation of God. By conceptualizing the Manifestation as, for example, the “Medial Moral Genius of a New Age,” Boyle believes it might be possible to foster understanding of the dynamic relationship between the Divine and humankind and the role of the Prophet as a stimulus to human progress.

1 April 1914. In this long and detailed letter addressed to Mrs. Parsons, Boyle elaborates on some of the themes set out in her earlier correspondence. She indicates that she is “completely absorbed in the necessity to give the Message to broad and liberal-minded people who are waiting for us to teach them” (1), and, in relation to her work with the Montessori Movement, she again takes up the subject of “the scientific treatment of the Manifestations” (5). She writes:

I have been guided step by step in the Montessori work and through my intense appreciation of the spirit of it, which the Master¹⁷ long since approved and understood, have really studied and written a little on the subject.¹⁸ A review of mine of her best work *Pedagogical Anthropology* will appear sometime in the *Yale Review*. Other magazines are waiting for copy I cannot seem to find time to send; there is great demand. It is truly Bahá’í work, but I am feeling my way. (5)

Boyle encourages Mrs. Parsons to read Montessori’s *Pedagogical Anthropology*, or at least her review of it. She notes that while Montessori

refers to the “Medial Man,” “the merest suggestion of the Medial Moral Man” is to be found in her book. In an attempt to gain a clear understanding of “the brief allusions,” Boyle carefully studied Quetelet’s book, *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties*, and reports: “It was helpful to me as confirming, even in the phraseology, my own conceptions about the Manifestations” (5–6). Nevertheless, Boyle provides the following assurance to Mrs. Parsons: “Do not get the idea that we can, as Bahá’ís, turn to any definite scientific books and use them literally, or readily for any purpose in Bahá’í teaching” (6). She informs Mrs. Parsons that in teaching the Faith she would like to use “the lesser focal types as examples,” referred to by Quetelet, and to explain “the law by analogy,” though not in a dogmatic way (6). She writes:

To me this LAW of GOD—the way it happens that a supreme focal human type becomes the divine instrument once in ages—is as much our Bahá’í Message as the fact that such a spiritual phenomenon has occurred and is in our midst. And this aspect of the message, this rational reference merely—(I should not dwell upon it nor create a dogma of it, or expect every soul to be interested to be so taught)—seems to me our weapon for the scientific, logical mind. (7)

Bringing the focus back to her contact with the Montessori Movement, Boyle tells Mrs. Parsons that she is not currently using this new method of presenting the Bahá’í Message to any of her friends, since she is concerned that some members of the Bahá’í community might misconstrue it as “unwarranted interpretation” (10). She justifies her decision on the grounds that that when her “dear friends,” Miss George, the director of the Children’s House (the Montessori School), and translator of Montessori’s book, *The Montessori Method*, and Miss Fletcher, her first assistant, attended a Bahá’í meeting, “they were not impressed” (7) by the presentation of the teachings. For the present, then, she is concentrating on the professional aspects of her contact with her colleagues. She writes: “I am engaged in this other work with them and they do not yet know the Bahá’í caliber fully enough to thrust the Message upon them” (7).

Nevertheless, she envisages that “the time will come when you [Mrs. Parsons] will be instrumental in giving these people the message, and that I must be ready to help you in at least a small degree” (7–8).

13 June 1914. In this letter Boyle sets out for Mrs. Parsons her thoughts about the Montessori work and the potential significance of this activity for promoting the interests of the Bahá’í Faith. To this end, she encloses a copy of her article entitled “Scientific Pedagogy and Maria Montessori” (discussed below), in the hope that Mrs. Parsons might “gain an idea, at least, of what this all means to the Bahá’í Revelation.” And she expresses the wish that Mrs. Parsons might “find the leisure sometime in which to come into direct touch with the spirit of this woman-educator and scientist,” in order to “better understand how wonderful an instrument she is in this age” (1).

Boyle describes “the practical condition here in Washington among the progressive educators.” She recounts how Mrs. Bell recruited Miss George for a trial period after seeing her experimental school in Tarrytown, and she explains what transpired next:

After that experimental season at the Bell’s we were all called together to decide whether or not we should have a permanent and larger school, and it happened (as I have since recalled) that it was a Bahá’í who first offered to guarantee a sum of money, to which others added, to stand by Mrs. Bell on this project. . . . Well, Miss George and her assistant, Miss Fletcher, were placed in charge of the pay-school and it has been very successful this past year. Miss George has been training there about eight other young women who have assisted her in the work. (1)

Boyle then describes the nature of her personal involvement with the Montessori activities. She writes:

From the first I have been mainly interested in the movement as it applied to social service and I have served on the Friendship House

Committee, the small group of women who have directly managed the free school at this settlement. Last summer Miss George went to Rome to confer with Dr. Montessori and it was arranged that the National Association should be formed. . . . The pay schools all over America came under the auspices and inspiration of the Association. . . ; but its free schools are its “demonstration work” and its means of allaying [*sic*] the new principles to social service.

Most of the members of the association are interested in some pay-school in one or other city and in the discussion of the method for their own children; there are very few Montessorians who see the bigness of this work at all. And I am having to go outside the active workers in the association and am now trying to bring into it such minds as will enhance its strength and really make it a vital, intelligently active organization. (1–2)

Though appreciative of the efforts of her co-workers in the field of education, for example, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell’s willingness to stand as the head of the association to enhance its credibility, and the sacrificial services of the teachers, Boyle nevertheless expresses frustration at what she regards as their lack of vision, which she attributes to the fact that “they have not had the Bahá’í training” and to their apparent inability to see the “deep relation” between the Montessori Movement and “the new age” (2).

Boyle returns to the subject of the Medial Man, describing conversations she had in Philadelphia with academics and educators, who apparently were either not familiar with the concept, or considered it a mere detail. She, then, explains more fully her views to Mrs. Parsons:

You see, what has actually happened in this—Eighty years ago, when Quetelet conceived of this scientific explanation of genius and the medial type, Bahá’u’lláh was a young man; the new age was on and its vibrations permeating everywhere. This Frenchman [*sic*], ahead of his time, caught them and gave his message; but there had to come in other more practical knowledge of the laws of evolution,

which are invaluable to our present unifying of religion and science,—and after those laws are fully established in the world, Quetelet is revived, and today you and I stand in possession of a scientific exposition of the Medial Human Type. We have a phraseology to use in giving the message to logical thinkers, as you see. And, it was a woman who gave this message to the English-speaking nations. . . .

Of course we must get the Message to Montessori; but it is all so vast a theme and she does not speak English! I am not engaged in personalities in the matter anyway; but in the significance to our work of this rational explanation of the Manifestations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has told us to unify all our work with scientific discovery, and you may imagine my emotions when I came upon this in a matter into which I had been led like a child by the hand, fearing all the while I might be giving too much time to something not strictly Bahá’í. (3–4)

Boyle sees the theoretical formulations of people such as Quetelet, Emerson, Schopenhauer, and others as providing bridges of understanding, “as bringing down to our human level the lofty utterances of the Focal Types themselves!” (4–5). She underlines their intuitive understanding of the Bahá’í Message and speculates about what might happen if this understanding were to become conscious. She writes:

. . . this new school of scientists, represented by Lodge in England and Bergson in France, who are taking practical methods over into the realm of the ideal, are the New Psychologists; to them spirit is reality. Of course the materialists will fight them; but the joy is that they are expressing the age and are bound to persist. Montessori and these men already have the Bahá’í Message and are giving it forcefully on the plane of reality, and what I am impatient to do is to ask them to contemplate the actual phenomenon they are describing to see what more they might say! (5)

Boyle brings her discussion of these themes to an end by confiding in Mrs. Parsons that she has been “struggling with these things for years”

(6). She is conscious of the need to proceed with caution. In this regard, she mentions her paper entitled, “Scientific Pedagogy and Maria Montessori,” stating: “I could only sketch the ‘Oneness of the world of humanity’ and intimate the medial man . . . ; but can you not see ahead to a possible time when we may print facts if we approach them in such a spirit, of analysis and logical argument?” (5). Finally, she expresses optimism in the value of engaging in “such fundamental social service as will worthily proclaim the Bahá’í spirit” (6).

17 June 1914. In a postscript dated 17 June 1914 attached to Boyle’s letter of 13 June 1914 addressed to Mrs. Parsons, Boyle apologizes for the delay in mailing the earlier letter. It seems that Boyle had loaned the only additional copy of her paper to one of her Montessori colleagues, Mrs. Hitz, a prominent Washington matron, who had shared it with one of her friends, “Miss Margaret Wilson, who took it home to her father and asked to keep it” (1). In describing her article and the response to it, Boyle writes:

My first formal review of the book appears in the July Yale Review and although I refer to this later article as a “review” it is so much fuller and more comprehensive. . . . Miss Margaret was thrilled by the concept of the Medial Man and Quetelet’s theory of genius, and Mrs. Hitz, who has quite a mind, feels that the Wilsons will eventually be a power in the broad aspect of the Montessori work, and perhaps in giving the Revelation in its best way. Miss Margaret is on our executive board and has been impressed intuitively heretofore. . . . (1)

Promising to make a copy of the article for Mrs. Parsons, Boyle expresses the hope that Parsons would see how she had attempted to dovetail her paper with the Bahá’í teachings, and that she would appreciate “how by training people in the Law of the lesser focal types we prepare them for the Universal Revelator” (1).

Boyle concludes by mentioning she was invited to present a speech on the Montessori message in Philadelphia at a large formal dinner at the

Walton Hotel, during the first annual meeting of the Organic Education Society. She shares the following general observation about Montessori lecturers:

The Montessori lecturers, all I have heard, merely give the principles and the method; they do not get into the background of this whole matter, which is its relation to social service. You see it is the Bahá'í training which enables one to grasp this and give it thus early. All will see it in time. I could not but feel that my work was real Bahá'í work. . . . (2)

Circa 8 October 1914. Addressing Mrs. Parsons as “My dear spiritual Mother,” Boyle describes a request for assistance she received from Dr. Maria Montessori and the efforts she exerted on behalf of the supporters of Montessori in Washington, to make the necessary arrangements for Montessori’s visit to the recently established American University in that city.¹⁹ It would appear that Dr. Montessori was keen to demonstrate her Method in an academic setting, and the new university, which had a public service orientation and greater flexibility, might be receptive to her approach. Boyle saw the potential value of Montessori’s visit for advancing the cause of progressive education and she hoped that indirectly it might also contribute to the promotion of the Bahá'í Faith. Prior to taking on the task, Boyle sought the guidance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Her letter to Mrs. Parsons captures her excitement, the challenges involved in endeavoring to make the necessary arrangements, and suggests a high level of support for Montessori’s visit.²⁰ Boyle writes:

Dr. Montessori cabled asking me to make her arrangements with the new American University opening in Washington this fall. Of course, everything personal had to be dropped! I wrote the Beloved ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asking Him to do this work, to sustain and bless it; that Montessori, in coming to America, might prove an instrument of Spiritual awakening, and this new institution become the herald of Bahá'u'lláh. The members of our Association were at various points

of the Capital, and all letters written had to have carbons, distributed in many directions. . . . In face of much labor and many new arrangements of organization, I cannot hope to write you the details, and in the absence of the head of the University, consultation by correspondence has not yet developed the final facts, which alone enable us to say M. is coming to Washington. She desired to establish ultimately in our country a scientific laboratory of educational research. And a new and elastic institution like this occurred to me as offering many possibilities. President Wilson, through Miss Margaret, was good enough to say unofficially that he felt it the right place, or a good place, for these activities to commence.²¹

Louise Boyle's request for guidance from 'Abdu'l-Bahá about Montessori's projected visit to Washington was honored with a response. A copy of a Tablet dated 31 October 1914 addressed to Boyle has been located.²² A provisional translation of the Tablet reads as follows:

Thy letter hath been received. Thou hast written that Dr. Montessori is coming to the U.S. to promote the system which she hath devised for the education of children. Every concept needeth to be supported by a force. Today the penetrating power in the world of existence is confirmation from the Abhá Kingdom. Any system that is confirmed by that [power] is definitely effective in the realm of existence and will be realized.

Also, the human world will not turn into a celestial paradise by the promotion of one thing. The education of children is but one matter. Any useful matter which is the cause of advancement of the world of humanity is like one element. A single element cannot confer life. But once the elements come together, creation taketh place. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh's Cause and His heavenly Teachings bring together all the perfections which include the education of children; unity of humankind; harmony between religion, science, and reason; equality among all human beings; the breathings of the Holy Spirit; oneness of women and men; elimination of religious prejudices; heavenly

manners; fragrances of the Merciful; universal peace. Thus the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh combineth all the perfections.

Those who desire the advancement of the world of humanity in every respect must turn to the Abhá Kingdom that the divine power may assist and the pervasive power of the Word of God may turn the nether world into the mirror of the celestial realm. Therefore, thou shouldst exert thine utmost to revive Dr. Montessori with the divine spirit and so implant the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in her heart that it may become a clear mirror reflecting the rays of the sun of truth, enabling her to carry out this system of educating the children. If this happeneth, be assured that the Holy Spirit will assist and reinforce her from the realm beyond and, as it is her highest wish, her system will be materialized in the world of existence. Convey to her my greetings and tell her: "O doctor! Let thy aim be exalted and thy goal lofty that thou mayest be the cause of spiritual and material progress in the human world. This is My advice. Shouldst thou arise to carry it out, thou wilt immediately feel a new spirit and a new power within thyself."

Upon thee and upon her be the Abhá glory.

It is interesting to note, that, as of August 1919, Boyle apparently had not received the Tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed for her in 1914, though it is evident that she had become aware of its existence. Writing to Mr. Joseph Hannen, a leading member of the Washington Bahá'í community, on 14 August 1919, Boyle states: "Ahmad [Sohrab] tells me that a Tablet was revealed for me in about October 1914 on the subject of education, in reply to a letter of mine in regard to my work.²³ It was found impossible to send this Tablet because of the war and Ahmad embodied it in the Diary of those days."²⁴ She requests Mr. Hannen's assistance in locating a copy of the Tablet, which she believes to be pertinent to her current activities in the field of education. There does, however, remain a degree of uncertainty as to whether Louise Boyle ever received the Tablet.

Thursday. In a letter dated simply "Thursday," Boyle inquires which group of children at a Montessori school Mrs. Parson would like to visit,

a class in Miss George's school or one at the Friendship Settlement. Boyle informs Mrs. Parsons that the school financed by Mrs. Bell closely resembles the Montessori model of a "Children's House." However, it is her view that the striking results obtained with the children "from the very humblest parentage" at the Friendship Settlement are more impressive, and are, therefore, of greater interest.

13 February 1917. The next reference to Dr. Montessori appears in a letter addressed to Mrs. Parsons in February 1917. Boyle begins by expressing her delight that Mrs. Parsons is arranging meetings at which the Bahá'í teachings are being presented in an appropriate way to people of capacity. She then comments as follows about Montessori and her knowledge about the Bahá'í Faith:

Dr. M is receiving the teachings just as fast as I feel, according to my humble guidance, it is best she should from me, and she seems most sympathetic and receptive. Knowing how trying and full her life is, and just how she stands in many relationships I do not give her much. She says she is going to have the stone set and wear it, and that she "loves" the calendar; but as you know, we must be most careful not to speak of these things. . . . (2)

Boyle is evidently concerned about presenting the teachings of the Faith in the right way to Montessori. She reflects on the state of the world, the politically troubled times, the days of crises and war, and how the turmoil and suffering caused by such events, operating at a subconscious level, often acts as a stimulus to great artists and thinkers. She takes as an example Montessori, stating she "must have been and is such a reflector, while knowing nothing of the teachings" (3). Boyle believes history will ultimately disclose the source of Montessori's innovative ideas; she is convinced such ideas do not just come from nowhere. She makes the following observation about Dr. Montessori's sensitivity to the spiritual forces of the age: ". . . now that she has read some of our literature, she is lecturing on "Peace" and repeating some of her most sublime ideas. Many

would say she got them all from the London Talks [of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá]; but she really uttered them nearly twenty years ago in the University of Rome. Her lectures are published, but few have read them“ (3–4).

As World War I dragged on, Maria Montessori decided to return to Europe. The absence of additional archival correspondence between Louise Boyle and others would suggest that Boyle’s involvement with the Montessori Movement was overtaken by other interests and priorities.

LOUISE BOYLE’S ARTICLES

In the preceding sections mention has been made of a number of articles written by Louise D. Boyle concerning the ideas of Dr. Maria Montessori. To date, three such papers have been located. The contents of these articles are reviewed in brief below. The articles are significant not only because they illustrate Boyle’s tentative, yet creative, efforts to correlate Montessori’s ideas with some of the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith, but they also demonstrate her attempts to vindicate the unique contribution of the Montessori approach to education. By embedding her presentation of Montessori’s work into the European scientific and intellectual tradition, Boyle attempted to counteract one of the prevalent criticisms leveled at Montessori, namely that she offered simply a “Method.”

“Scientific Pedagogy and Maria Montessori” (The Yale Review, June 1914). In this article, Boyle calls attention to the recent emergence in America and Europe of “Scientific Pedagogy”—the establishment of new departments of study in American universities, including clinical psychology, industrial arts, and vocational guidance, and the introduction of scientific methods, such as “the use of psychometry and anthropometry” within these departments (1). She writes, “. . . pedagogy is to be elevated to the rank of a definite science and is to become, like other sciences, a field of practical research” (2).

She traces the contributions of the “progressive thinkers” who have contributed to the “new science of Man,” describing the application of anthropology to fields such as pedagogy (for example, by Giuseppe Sergi

and Maria Montessori), medicine, and criminology (by De Giovanni, Morel, and Lombroso). Boyle attributes to Montessori a movement away from the focus of attention on the pathological to the study of “the concept of the perfect norm, or medial human type,” a concept derived from the “Theory of the Medial Man first propounded by Quetelet in 1835 and revived by Prof. Giacinto [*sic*] Viola under the guidance of present-day biometry” (4–5). According to Boyle, based on “the analogy of the medial morphological man,” Quetelet derived his concepts of “a Medial Intellectual and a Medial Moral Man,” and she mentions that in his classical work *Social Physics or the Development of the Faculties of Man* (translated into English in 1842), he propounds an interesting theory regarding genius. She writes:

The medial intellectual man should be to his nation and century “what the centre of gravity is to the body”: he should centralize and keep in equilibrium the movement of thought of his epoch, giving it expression in works of art or science. While there has never existed a man of such intellectual power as to sum up all the thought of his time, . . . the man of genius is he who does express a large part of the ideas of his epoch, and it is precisely this power of synthesis which constitutes the inborn quality of genius. . . . (6–7)

Continuing the analogy: the medial moral or religious genius “interprets the universal and eternal spirit of life in humanity”; aiding its upward progress by appealing to the best in each. When he speaks to mankind of the guiding ethical principles of life which each feels profoundly in the depths of his own heart, new spiritual vigor is instilled, and he is believed when he teaches of a happier future toward which humanity is advancing. (8)

Boyle provides two detailed examples of the manner in which Montessori’s work is promoting “the practical realization of the medial man,” namely, “the intermingling of the races and social reforms establishing ‘the brotherhood of man,’” both of which Boyle believes represent

the spirit of the age. In concluding the paper Boyle places the theoretical concepts she has been discussing within a broader spiritual context and she underlines the uniqueness of Maria Montessori's work:

The synthetic concept of the individual is the basis of all the great religions of the world, and it is this which gives the new pedagogy its peculiar vitality,—the blending of the practical with the ethical, the positive with the ideal. Montessori is the distinct product of a new age which has unified religion and science. She stands for the accuracy of intuition operating through trained intelligence. All great educators have been mystics, but so long as the realm of the ideal remained unexplored by practical research every spiritual concept savored quickly of the sentimental or became confused with dogma. (11)

The Montessori Message to the Annual Convention of the National Education Association, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1914. Prepared for the National Convention of the National Education Association, Boyle's paper bears the subtitle "True Education, the Basis of a New Civilization." The opening paragraph reads as follows:

To understand Maria Montessori as the originator of a method is to miss entirely the order of her genius. It is only through recourse to an enlightening literature, much of which has not yet been translated into English, and through careful study of the modern progressive educational movement as it assumes the dignity of a New Science of Man—Modern Anthropology—that one can trace clearly the relation of Montessori to our rapidly developing age. She is the product and sufficient exponent of this movement which, in its broadest interpretation, embraces the development of an ideal civilization. She has clearly defined and demonstrated those modern educational principles and ideals which, before her definition and demonstration, were felt but dimly and were but partially and inadequately expressed. (1)

In order to provide an appropriate context for understanding “the spirit of this woman-educator in its true setting,” and to demonstrate that her approach is soundly based in principles as well as in methodology, Boyle describes the European roots, both social and intellectual, from which Montessori’s work emerged. Boyle views Montessori’s volume entitled *Pedagogical Anthropology* as the fruition of this scientific process, and she characterizes her as “the true prophet of the New Pedagogy” (4–5).

In the remainder of the paper, Boyle quotes from the speeches of Montessori, including her comments about the need for education to be scientifically based and to uphold moral standards, and her message to teachers on the freedom of the child.²⁵ She also tentatively correlates some of Montessori’s ideas with concepts found in the Bahá’í Faith. Thus:

Montessori believes that the intensive scientific activity of the past has prepared the world to solve the problem of a universal morality; and that if it is not yet within our power to achieve a social reform based upon the complete eradication of degeneration and disease—since society can only be purified by degree—it is nevertheless clearly within our power to prepare the way by incorporating the principles of the new social ethics in our schools.

Today the man of honour and of power is not he who works for himself but for humanity. “Let not a man glory in this that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this that he loves his kind” is the ethical code of the Twentieth Century. . . .

To prepare the conscience for such a “triumph of the free and peaceful development of life,” after the long series of struggles in its mere defenses, Montessori conceives as constituting “the very essence of the New Pedagogy”; and she believes the evolution of modern thought and of our social environment is rapidly promoting its advent. (8–9)

“Education in the New Age” (Star of the West). This paper is more readily accessible to the general reader and serves as an example of Boyle’s writing style. It illustrates her capacity for logical analysis, the

manner in which she cites scientific evidence, including the contribution of Montessori to education, and the way in which she relates her theme to contemporary social issues and endeavors to enlarge the context of the discussion by correlating, either directly or indirectly, her analysis with the spiritual and social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Boyle's active support of modern, scientifically based educational endeavors, particularly the work of Dr. Maria Montessori, appears to have derived not only from the potential Boyle saw in the systematic application of Montessori's ideas to the development of the individual child, but also from her belief that the Montessori approach was in accord with the spirit of the age and could, therefore, serve as an important vehicle to improve the lot of humankind. In addition, Boyle identified in the writings of Montessori a number of ideas which she felt might well be useful in presenting Bahá'í theological concepts to members of the thinking public.

In later years, Louise Boyle's interest in education was focused on the promotion of the Tarbíyat Schools in Iran. She served on a special committee constituted for this purpose and had major responsibility for raising funds for scholarships to further the development of these schools.²⁷

NOTES

1. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.
2. See, for example, discussions in Morrison and in Buck.
3. For example, *Star of the West* 11.4 (1920): 72, reports Boyle's first election in 1920. A brief description of this institution is found in Shoghi Effendi 262, 332, 348.
4. Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl Gulpáygání, a prominent Bahá'í scholar and author.
5. For basic historical information concerning the development of the Bahá'í community in Washington, D.C., refer to Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith* 1:116–20, 130; and Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith* vol. 2, chapters 10 and 16, and pp. 354–61.

6. Reference to meetings in Washington, D.C., and in New Hampshire is contained in Hollinger 61 and 105.

7. Louise Boyle, letter dated April 1914 to Mrs. Agnes Parsons. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, undated Tablet to Miss Louise Dixon. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, undated Tablet to Miss Louise Dixon. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet dated 1 April 1913 to Mrs. Boyle. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet translated in July 1913 to Mrs. Boyle. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet to Mrs. Charlotte Dixon. Louise D. Boyle Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

13. A useful discussion of the development of education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is found in the entry entitled "Education, History of" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

14. For a succinct discussion of the life and contribution of Maria Montessori, and the correlation of some of her ideas with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, refer to Hacker 19–33.

15. For additional information refer to Willcott 147–65.

16. (Lambert) Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) was a Belgian mathematician, astronomer, and sociologist known for his application of statistics and the theory of probability to social phenomena. His book, *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties* (1842), developed the concept of the *homme moyen* ("average man") and established the theoretical foundations for the use of statistics in sociology. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9, *Micropaedia*, 855.

17. The term "Master" is a reference to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

18. While it is not known precisely to what Boyle is referring, other evidence suggests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been informed of the ideas and approach of Dr. Maria Montessori as early as 1912. For example, in the entry for Monday, 1 April 1912, in *Mahmúd's Diary*, it is recorded that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Austin told 'Abdu'l-Bahá about Mrs. Montessori, the founder of the famous school in Rome. It states: "She has managed the school in such a way that now most of the schools in

Europe and America are following her standards" (Zarqání 25). Furthermore, a letter dated 15 July 1937 from Mrs. May Maxwell to Marion Holley (Hofinan), cited in Nakhjavani, contains the following statement, made in relation to the early training of her daughter. In it, Mrs. Maxwell explains that she engaged a Montessori teacher and set up a small school in her home. She then comments on its impact on her daughter and she provides a comment attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá about Montessori. She writes: "It [the Montessori school] really did wonders for her and the other eight children, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with whom I discussed Montessori's work in 1912, said that she was the greatest modern psychologist" (7).

19. The American University in Washington, D.C., was chartered by an Act of the United States Congress in 1893. The university trustees finally broke ground in 1896. Money was hard to come by so it took a long time to hire teachers and start holding classes. The first students were admitted in 1914 and President Woodrow Wilson officially dedicated the university on 27 May 1914 (American University).

20. For the purposes of this limited research note, no comprehensive search has been undertaken to determine whether or not the efforts of Boyle and her colleagues in Washington, D.C., succeeded in providing a platform for Montessori at the American University.

21. Mrs. Agnes Parsons Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

22. Papers of Mírzá Ahmad Sohrab, International Bahá'í Archives. Used with permission of the Universal House of Justice.

23. Mírzá Ahmad Sohrab, a Persian Bahá'í, was a major translator of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets into English. He kept diary notes of the events that transpired during the time he rendered services to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

24. Louise Boyle, letter to Mr. Joseph Hannen, 4 August 1919. Hannen-Knobloch Family Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

25. As mentioned on page 9 of Boyle's paper, Dr. Montessori's Message to Teachers entitled "Freedom of the Child" was published in a 1914 issue of the magazine of the Montessori Educational Association.

26. Boyle's pamphlet entitled *The Laboratory of Life* is a further example of her scholarship.

27. See *Star of the West* 11.13 (1920): 226.

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