Understanding the Montessori Approach

Early years education in practice

Barbara Isaacs

A David Fulton Book

Series edited by Pat Brunton and Linda Thornton

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Isaacs, Barbara, 1949–
Understanding the montessori approach : early years education in
practice / Barbara Isaacs. – 1st ed.
p. cm.
1. Montessori method of education. I. Title.
LB1029.M75I85 2012
371.39'2–dc23
2011037312

ISBN: 978-0-415-58502-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-58503-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-12480-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Palatino and Future
by Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Routledge team for commissioning this book and helping in making it ready for publication. My thanks go to all of my Montessori and early years colleagues, Montessori students and the children in Montessori and other settings where I have taught and which I have visited, for allowing me the opportunity to learn from them. Special thanks go to Jenny Paramonov for her editorial support and patient help with the many drafts of this book.

My thanks and admiration go to Tina Bruce, for allowing me to benefit from her generosity of spirit and her continued support for nurturing understanding of the pioneers of early childhood education.

Introduction

> We do not see him . . . as the helpless little creature lying with folded arms and outstretched body, in his weakness. We see the figure of the child who stands before us with his arms open, beckoning humanity to follow.
>
> (Montessori 1992: 119)

Maria Montessori was one of the pioneers of early childhood education, and has made a significant contribution to our understanding of children. Her aim was to unfold the potential of each individual child. Her pedagogy recognises that young children are active learners, needing choice and independence, whilst being guided by a sensitive teacher who facilitates their learning by preparing an environment favourable to their development. The children who benefit from these experiences grow into confident adults, keen to continue to learn and curious about life and all it has to offer, whilst being respectful and considerate. In Montessori's view, they become the heralds of social change.

This book is one in a series that focuses on a specific approach to early years education. Each volume highlights the ethos and values which underpin the pedagogy.

Some of the titles relate to specific and recent curricula and approaches such as the New Zealand Te Whāriki or the Forest Schools, whilst others have contributed to our understanding of early years care and education over a longer period of time beyond the early years, such as Steiner Waldorf and Montessori education. Like Steiner Waldorf's, Montessori's own view of education and pedagogy (Kramer 1976, Standing 1984) was influenced by the work of Rousseau, Pestallozi, Itard and Sequin. In turn, her work had an impact on her twentieth-century contemporaries such as Anna Freud, Susan Isaacs and the Macmillan sisters, who were also deeply engaged with children. An awareness of Montessori's writing enabled them to consider what she had to offer young children, reject or embrace her ideas and develop them further.

There is no doubt that Montessori made a contribution to our understanding of children in the twenty-first century. Her celebration and recognition of the young child as an active learner is embedded in current early years practice across the world. For example we see her legacy particularly in the sphere of learning environments, as evidenced in the continuous provision advocated by the Early Years Foundation stage (EYFS) (DCSF 2008).

International aspects of Montessori education

Even before Montessori was able to establish the first Casa dei Bambini in the slums of Rome in 1907, she gained a reputation across Europe for her ideas about a child's need to learn through the senses as well as about a woman's role in society. At the turn of the twentieth century, she presented several papers at conferences in Berlin and London. Following the opening of the first Montessori nursery in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, she published her first book *The Montessori Method* (1912), explaining her discoveries and views about young children's learning. In the summer of 1913 she conducted the first training course in Rome, which focused on her approach to teaching and learning of young children. All three events laid the foundation for Montessori teacher training and for the international interest in Montessori education, both of which continue to thrive today.

During the 2007 centenary of Montessori education, over 16,000 schools were identified internationally as committed to the Montessori ethos and pedagogy; spanning from Sikkim in Asia, to the Aboriginal communities of Australia, to South and North America, across Africa and into Europe. Montessori nurseries and schools operate primarily within the private sector. However, there are a growing number of state or government-run schools in the United States and Sweden, with continued support for Montessori education in the Netherlands and an emerging interest in England.

In the UK there are approximately 800 Montessori schools, most of which provide Montessori education to children at pre-school age. Of these schools, 640 belong to the Montessori Schools Association (MSA), representing over 3,000 Montessori practitioners. Since 1995, when the funding of pre-school education was introduced across the UK, we have witnessed growing professionalisation of the Montessori movement within the country. Montessori day-care and children's centres, nurseries and schools are demonstrating high standards in the delivery of Montessori education by meeting the statutory requirements of Ofsted as well as participation in Montessori quality assurance schemes. The MSA February 2011 survey of Ofsted reports (Montessori St. Nicholas Charity 2011) in relation to Montessori nursery provision indicated that 88 per cent of settings achieved good or outstanding outcomes in their inspections since the introduction of the EYFS in September 2008. The Montessori practice today continues to demonstrate the relevance and validity of the pedagogy; the root of the method's success lies in its focus on the individual child and the child's role in contributing to society.

Structure of the book

This book aims to take the reader on a journey – explaining the roots of the Montessori approach and its international impact, looking at how Montessori schools and classrooms are organised and how children from birth to the teenage years are supported in their learning. It also addresses some of the current challenges which Montessori education faces.

Chapter 1 explores the history of the Montessori approach and the reasons for its continued relevance and appeal in the twenty-first century. It examines the discoveries made by Montessori in the first Children's House and how they affect our practice, while also considering the global aspect of the Montessori approach and its significance to the lives of children today.

Chapter 2 examines Montessori's view of the child's development from birth to twelve and explains some of the specialist Montessori terms used in her writing. These are further elaborated upon in the glossary found in the Appendices.

Chapter 3 focuses on the organisation of Montessori schools and the principles which underpin Montessori education across the various age groups. It presents examples of Montessori schools around the world and illustrates the structure of a typical day in a Montessori setting for babies and toddlers, nursery and primary school age children. Classroom organisation is explained alongside the changing role of the teacher as the child settles and grows older.

Chapter 4 examines the principles of child-initiated learning across the age groups and the role of the teacher in facilitating learning in Montessori classrooms. Observation as a key assessment tool is considered and the absence of formal testing discussed. Learning experiences for babies and toddlers, nursery and primary school age children are described.

Chapter 5 explains the role of the learning environment as the key component facilitating children's development in the Montessori approach. An international perspective on the range of Montessori learning environments indicates the changes in the learning environment reflecting children's ages. The range of Montessori learning materials and activities is discussed in relation to children's stages of development and their learning environments. The role of the teacher in the context of preparation and maintenance of the environment is discussed.

The final chapter, *Chapter 6*, reflects on the benefits of self-directed learning and the contribution it makes to children's self-image in the context of criticism levied against the Montessori pedagogy. It also makes links with current research and Montessori's own vision for the future of mankind. It explores challenges to the Montessori approach presented by today's outcomes-led view of education.

The *Appendices* are intended to provide a resource for those wanting to find out more about Montessori education. They include information about learning in Montessori secondary schools, a glossary of terms, a brief summary of key Montessori texts, and a list of leading UK and international Montessori organisations.

The structure of chapters

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction summarising the content. They include a discussion of the topic supported by relevant references to Montessori texts and to current research, as well as a critique of the Montessori approach where appropriate. The key points which appear at the end of each chapter are intended to highlight areas of interest for readers' consideration and to prompt reflections on the Montessori approach. It is hoped that the reflection included at the end of each chapter will engage readers in discussions with colleagues and fellow students regarding the relevance of the Montessori method to their own practice. The references are intended to spark interest in further reading.

1 Historical context

This chapter explores the history of the Montessori approach and the reasons for its continued relevance and appeal in the twenty-first century. It also considers the global aspects of the Montessori approach and its bearing on the lives of children today. It examines the discoveries made by Montessori in the first Children's House and how those findings impact Montessori practice today.

> Education must concern itself with the development of individuality and allow the individual child to remain independent not only in the earliest years of childhood but through all the stages of his development. Two things are necessary: the development of individuality and the participation of the individual in a truly social life. This development and this participation in social activities will take different forms in the various stages of childhood. But one principle will remain unchanged during all these stages: the child must be furnished at all times with the means necessary for him to act and gain experience. His life as a social being will then develop throughout his formative years, becoming more and more complex as he grows older.
>
> (Montessori 1992: 56)

Montessori's beginnings

Montessori's early life

Montessori was born in Chiaravale, in the Ancona province on the east coast of Italy, on 31 August 1870, the year in which Italy became a republic. The new political structure heralded changes in society and spawned new possibilities for education. Montessori was one of the beneficiaries of the emerging new political and social trends in Italian society in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Montessori was the only child of Renilde Stoppani, a niece of the renowned naturalist Antonio Stoppani. Renilde supported her daughter's aspiration to study mathematics and the sciences and later, to become a doctor. Montessori's father, Alessandro, was of a military background and rather conservative in his outlook on life. As a civil servant, he and his family moved several times until they finally settled in Rome in 1875, when Maria was five years old. At the age of fourteen the young Maria joined a technical school for boys, hoping to become an engineer. Her subsequent interest in biology led her towards the medical sciences. Gaining entry into the University of Rome to study medicine was a real challenge; she was opposed by both her father and the establishment. Nonetheless, she achieved her goal and entered the University of Rome School of Medicine in 1892.

Becoming a doctor

Her student life was not easy; she funded her university studies by tutoring and scholarships. As the only woman admitted into the programme of study, she faced ridicule and difficulties in attending some of the courses. For example, she was not able to participate in the dissection lectures because it was considered inappropriate for a woman to share the lessons with men. She had to work alone in the evenings. Kramer (1976) mentions that Montessori hated the smell of the dead bodies. This must have added a further obstacle and confirms her determination to become a doctor.

Montessori achieved her aim in 1896 when she graduated with double honours. For the first time, her father acknowledged and applauded her determination to join the medical profession. She was one of the first two women to become doctors in Italy at the time. For the next ten years she devoted herself to practising medicine both in a small private clinic and in the hospitals of Rome, working with women and children. Her appointment as an assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome gave her the opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the lives of children with various levels of mental disability. They became her inspiration for further study, particularly of the work of two French doctors, Jean Itard (1775–1838) and Eduard Séguin (1812–1880). Following her study and observations of children in the Psychiatric Clinic, she formed the opinion that they needed suitable education more than medical treatment. She expressed this view for the first time at a meeting of teachers and lecturers in Turin in 1898. This was the beginning of Montessori's focus on pedagogy rather than medicine.

Following the Turin presentation, she was invited to give a series of lectures on the observation and training of children with disabilities to the teachers in Rome. These lectures were instrumental in the foundation of the first state Orthophrenic School in the city. This meant that all the children with special needs in the city had the opportunity to attend. Montessori was the first director of this clinic. For the next two years she and her colleagues worked tirelessly to observe children and train teachers, testing and developing Séguin's and Itard's ideas in the process. Their efforts were recognised when some of the children from the Orthophrenic School passed state school examinations and were able to enter mainstream schools. This was the beginning of Montessori's consideration of general education for all children in Italy.

Medical profession leads Montessori towards work with children

At the same time, Montessori continued her advocacy on behalf of women and children. Her concerns for their plight were voiced at a feminist conference held in London in 1900, where she was critical of child labour and supported Queen Victoria's programme against it. Montessori's commitment to the rights of women and children continued until her death in 1952.

Between 1898 and 1900 Montessori gave birth to a son, Mario. We know that he is the son of a Doctor Montessano, a medical colleague, whose aristocratic background barred their marriage. However, there is a lack of clarity in the Montessori records as to when exactly Mario was born and why he was not given his father's name. He was brought up in the countryside outside Rome and Montessori visited him frequently. She revealed the truth about his parentage when he was fifteen; from then on Mario lived alongside his mother and became her assistant. Montessori never spoke about Mario's origins – he was known as her adopted son. Only at Mario's own funeral in 1982 was his father publicly acknowledged for the first time. The twentieth century gave us the opportunity to delve deeper in our understanding of the human psyche, and there is no doubt that Montessori's denial of her son during his early years must have had a profound effect on her attitude to children as well as on her research and writing. We can only speculate on how her life would have unfolded had she kept Mario and brought him up herself.

Establishing the first Montessori nursery: The Casa dei Bambini in Rome

Following her work with teachers in Rome, Montessori realised that further study of the philosophy and anthropology of education would be beneficial to her, and she enrolled, once again, as a student at the University of Rome. It was during this time that Montessori translated the works of Itard and Séguin into Italian. In 1904 she became a Professor of Anthropology at the university. The ten years between her graduation in 1896 and 1906 can be seen as the preparatory period for the work which commenced in 1906. In that year Montessori was invited to set up a school in a newly built social housing estate in the San Lorenzo slum district of Rome, where migrants from the countryside and abroad came to live in search of work in the city. At that time in Italy, compulsory education started at the age of six. The director of the housing project wanted children under that age to be looked after whilst their mothers went to work. Montessori was approached to lead this project and so began to establish the first Children's House (Casa dei Bambini). All she was given were the rooms for the nursery school. There was no money for furnishings, educational materials or teachers. Montessori had to be enormously creative in ensuring that her project succeeded.

Thus, her team reassembled office furniture to make chairs and tables appropriate for a child's size. They introduced a range of toys donated to the school and also incorporated some of the materials Montessori trialled in the Orthophrenic School. There was no money to pay a teacher's salary, so Montessori employed the daughter of the caretaker to help her care for the children. When the school opened on 6 January 1907 at 53 Via Marsi, Montessori made a now-famous speech in which she committed to provide well for the fifty children in her care (Montessori 2007b).

She began her project by ensuring that all the children attending were clean, weighed, measured and provided with nourishing food, so caring for their physical needs. She realised that the parents were very interested in being involved and that the children had the power of introducing basic hygiene and orderly habits to the families. This was as much a social experiment as a pedagogical one. During the inaugural address delivered at the opening of the second Children's House in 1907, Montessori (2007b: 336) stated that traditionally,

> The home is shut off not only from education but also from social influences. In the Children's Houses we see for the first time the possibility of effectively establishing

> 'closer links.' This school is located in the same building as the children's homes and the teacher lives in the midst. The parents know the Children's House belongs to them. . . . They can go there at any hour of the day to watch, to admire, to meditate.

Thus the school was placed at the heart of the community.

Montessori did not have preconceived ideas about the educational content of the children's day. Rather, she observed the children and these observations constituted the basis of what we know today as the Montessori approach.

The early days of Montessori education

Montessori's two-year engagement with the two Children's Houses in San Lorenzo and the establishment of the Casa dei Bambini in Milan's Umanitaria, a Jewish Socialist Centre, by Anna Maccheroni in 1908 all contributed to discoveries documented by Montessori herself in *The Montessori Method* (1912) and further elaborated upon by Kramer (1976), Standing (1984) and others.

Montessori's aim was to nurture each individual child so that s/he could reach her/his full potential as a human being. She believed that this was made possible by providing a favourable environment which would nurture self-development under the guidance of sensitive and empathetic adults (MCI 2009). To achieve this aim, she instinctively recognised that movement and manipulation are the keys to learning in the early years; therefore, that young children are active learners. This discovery translated into encouraging children to help look after the classroom and its environs, and to the development of materials for educating the senses. To this day, these two areas are the bedrock of all learning in Montessori nurseries.

Montessori (2007b) recognised that for self-development to take place, children need freedom within limits to explore the favourable environment specially prepared to meet their developmental as well as individual needs. In an atmosphere of autonomy which is supplemented by a wide range of accessible activities, the child would reveal the true potential of the human being and could be nurtured to achieve it. She observed that children as young as three were able to select activities which engaged them and so were able to repeat them whilst deeply focusing on the task. This type of activity fulfilled the children's individual needs, demonstrated their ability to concentrate for long periods of time and facilitated development of self-discipline and awareness of others. This, for Montessori (2007a, 2007b), was the sign of true liberty.

The children in the first Children's Houses demonstrated real satisfaction with the activities on offer. Montessori believed that the personal fulfilment gained from engaging in a self-chosen activity was a reward in itself, therefore there was no need for further praise. The spontaneous nature of children's learning also means that children who are able to become involved in activities embark on purposeful tasks and achieve satisfaction for their whole being without extrinsic incentives. Therefore, under these circumstances there is no need to establish rewards as a means of motivation or implement sanctions as a form of punishment. This idea, which underpins the Montessori approach, has been the cause of much misunderstanding and thus will be revisited in later chapters.

Even though Montessori initially employed the caretaker's daughter to help in the first Casa dei Bambini, she came to realise that if her findings from the first Children's House and her understanding of children were to be available to children outside the San Lorenzo district, she needed to share her research. Such was the interest in her work that she was able to offer the first training course for teachers in August 1909. This training course was followed by the publication of her first book *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicata all educazione infantile melle Casa dei Bambini*. The English translation was published under the title *The Montessori Method*. Montessori disliked this title because it implied that it was *her method* rather than the scientific pedagogy of observing children.

Her discoveries between 1907 and 1908 attracted much attention in the Italian and international press. This was possible because of printing innovations and the growth of cheap newsprint as well as of general interest in education across the world, particularly in Europe and the United States. Following the success of the first training course, which was attended by participants not only from Europe but also North America, South America and Asia, preparations were made to establish schools in all four continents. This coincided with the publication of articles about Montessori's work with children in US-based *McClure's Magazine* in May and December 1911. The publicity and interest in Montessori's first book contributed towards the decision to devote her time to teacher training and writing.

Montessori education around the world

Following the death of her mother in 1912, with whom she lived, the forty-two-year-old Montessori began to travel and deliver lectures not only in Italy but also abroad. She offered the first international course in Rome in 1913 and it was attended by ninety students from all over the world. This was followed by a short visit to the United States in December of the same year, where she met, amongst others, Alexander Graham Bell, Helen Keller and John Dewey. She also visited Harvard University. The Montessori Educational Association of America was established during her first visit. In 1914 a second international course was delivered in Rome, during which Anna Maccheroni, Montessori's friend and colleague who set up a school in Milan in 1908, participated in demonstration classes while Claude Claremont, engineer and Fellow of the British Psychological Society, acted as an interpreter. The following year Montessori returned to the United States to participate in the San Francisco Pan American Exhibition, where she established a Montessori classroom in a specially constructed glass pavilion so that visitors could witness the Montessori classroom in action. This was also the first time Mario accompanied his mother on an international visit.

However, Montessori was never to return to the United States. This was the result of criticism of her work by William H. Kilpatrick (1914), an influential pedagogue of the day. It is thanks to the efforts of Nancy McCormick Rambusch (1962) that awareness of the Montessori approach revived in North America in the 1950s. Rambusch was also the first president of the American Montessori Society (AMS), which has become one of the leading organisations in Montessori education in the United States today.

Montessori spent much of her time between the two world wars in Europe, working first in Spain and then in England. At this time she developed ideas for the education of primary school age children, which were published in two volumes entitled the *Advanced Montessori Method*. In 1920 Montessori visited Amsterdam for the first time, and there she found a country ready to embrace her ideas. *The Call to Education*, a magazine edited by Montessori and published in Amsterdam in 1924 and 1925, documented the growth of the Montessori movement in countries as far apart as Panama, South Africa and Bulgaria. To this day Holland is the only country in the world where Montessori schools operate as an integral part of the education system and are funded by the state from the age