



Montessori Learning in the 21st Century

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & TEACHERS

M. Shannon Helfrich

Foreword by

André Roberfroid

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info@newsagepress.com



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CHAPTER ONE

The Century of the Child



Imagine the curtain of the twentieth century opening upon a stage. Gathered on this stage are many of the great minds of the world, poised to begin the mission of this new era declared the “Century of the Child.” Among those great minds were Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Anna Freud, and a young woman named Maria Montessori. They would be among the early leaders of the new century guiding humanity to a greater understanding of the nature of the child, and creating a new vision for child development and education.

Over the next fifty years, these great thinkers performed key roles on the world stage that significantly influenced the dawning of a new reality for the twentieth century children—and beyond. Each of these individuals was a genius in his/her own right. Each contributed greatly, from a particular perspective, to the understanding of a child’s nature regardless of race, class, or culture, and ultimately, to an understanding of our humanness. There has been no other time in history when so many great minds, all working simultaneously yet independently, escalated in such a dramatic way knowledge and understanding of the child.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the child was a forgotten citizen. The common byword of the day in the Western world was “the child is to be seen, but not heard.” Children were shuffled away; out of sight, out of mind, until such a moment

when they were brought forth as proof of a parent's prowess and fertility. Children had no rights and were considered little more than small animals to be cared for and tolerated until the great moment when the "rational mind" appeared. The magical "age of reason" was thought to appear in the child somewhere around age seven. It was at this age, educational authorities determined a child's formal education could begin.

EARLY INSPIRATIONS FOR DR. MONTESSORI

While these influential thinkers turned their thoughts to life, learning, and the patterns of development, not one of them took up the cause of the young child more than Dr. Maria Montessori. In 1896, Maria Montessori became the first female to earn a medical degree in Italy, graduating with honors from the University of Rome Medical School. As a young physician, Dr. Montessori worked in the hospital wards, lectured at the University of Rome Medical School, and conducted research in the psychiatric clinic connected to the university.

It was through her research work on the development of the brain that Dr. Montessori first went to the local insane asylum looking for research subjects. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the only means to study the human brain was through research on subjects with abnormal brains. The best resource for subjects was the local insane asylum housing inmates ranging from the criminally insane to young children living in poverty who were labelled "misfits of society." At the insane asylum, children were housed alongside adults in a single institution. As a relatively new democratic nation, modern Italy did not have the resources to create separate institutions for those who needed to be removed from society and for young children imprisoned simply for trying to survive in a poverty-stricken environment. Thus, children were lumped in with adults in what was little more than a "friendly prison." It was here that

Dr. Montessori first met children living under the direst of circumstances.

While research at the Orthophrenic Hospital was conducted on subjects of all ages, Dr. Montessori was particularly drawn to the conditions and circumstances of the children.



AMI Archives, The Netherlands

Dr. Maria Montessori in 1909.

Dr. Montessori was horrified at the very thought of young children being housed with criminally insane adults. She was also mystified by the asylum staff's treatment of the children, many of whom considered the children little more than unmanageable animals.

One particular day, Dr. Montessori arrived just as the children were finishing lunch. She witnessed the children scrambling on the floor in search of fallen crumbs of bread. The caregivers at the asylum interpreted this behaviour as evidence that the children were little more than animals. However, Dr. Montessori viewed this behaviour as that of stimulus-starved

children. The asylum was devoid of toys, educational materials, or even the simplest items of everyday life. The stark nature of this environment left the children limited to the most mundane sources of intellectual stimulation.

Dr. Montessori witnessed the children's great curiosity and intensity even as they explored the breadcrumbs. Her heart went out to these impoverished children living in such a sensory deprived environment and it became her mission to save as many of them as she could.

First, Dr. Montessori pleaded with the staff for the separation of the children from the asylum's population of primarily insane criminals. She also took advantage of the fact that the research subjects she chose would be removed from the insane asylum and taken into residency at the Orthophrenic Hospital. Dr. Montessori found herself adding more and more children to the list of research subjects in an attempt to get them out of the insane asylum.

While her research and that of her colleagues revolved around the medical aspects of treatment, Dr. Montessori was drawn to the children's strong desire to learn. She realized early on that the surrounding environment must play a role in supporting and nurturing a child's development. She was drawn to researching the potential of these children.

Dr. Montessori gave a great deal of thought and energy toward understanding the anthropological dynamics of the abnormal child. She also recognized how important it was for children to have decent hygiene and a healthier diet. As a part of her research, she began to chart the physical development of the children as their overall health began to improve. At the same time, Dr. Montessori became increasingly curious about the learning potential of these disadvantaged children. She believed they had innate powers that could be tapped into, even when there appeared on the surface to be little potential still remaining in these so called "mentally defective" children.

THE WRITINGS OF ITARD AND SÉGUIN

Dr. Montessori began researching academic writings regarding instructional techniques that might be used with the children from the asylum. She found little, aside from the writings of two French medical doctors from the 1800s, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard and Edouard Séguin. Both of these men had worked with children labelled as “mentally defective.”

Dr. Itard became a surgeon and worked in the army during the French Revolution in the 1790s. In 1796, Dr. Itard was working as a surgeon in the hospital at Toulon, France. He showed great talent and was later accepted for an internship in Paris. In 1800, Itard became the chief physician for the National Institute for the Deaf and Mute in Paris. Around this same time, a “wild boy” was discovered in the forest near Aveyron, France. He was twelve years old, mute, and walked on all fours at the time he was discovered.

Many of Dr. Itard’s contemporaries considered this boy to be nothing more than an abandoned, mentally retarded child. However, Dr. Itard believed the boy had simply been isolated from human contact for too long. He worked with the Wild Boy of Aveyron, later named Victor, for five years. He believed he could teach Victor through stimulation of the senses and adaptation to social norms.

Dr. Itard had only limited success in his work with Victor. However, he was later awarded for his work as one of the earliest teachers advocating for special teaching methods to educate disabled children. Today, Dr. Itard is hailed as the “father of special education.” His writings formed the basis for the work of Edouard Séguin, who also did some of the earliest work with mentally retarded children.

Dr. Séguin came from a family of prominent physicians and received the best medical training that existed in the early nineteenth century. Interested in psychology, he studied under Dr. Itard who was instrumental in directing Dr. Séguin’s interests toward the needs of mentally retarded children.

In 1837, Dr. Séguin began to work with his first mentally retarded patient. He began with stimulation of the senses, following in the footsteps of his mentor. He firmly believed that mental deficiency was not a matter of an abnormal brain but of an abnormal “nervous system.”

Dr. Séguin’s class of mentally retarded patients grew rapidly. He focused on the development of instructional activities that would serve to stimulate the individual sense organs as the portals to the mind. Sensory training and motor training with age appropriate activities were key components in working with the impaired students. Dr. Séguin applied these techniques and provided a rich, stimulating environment for his subjects. He also created educational guidelines that involved intellectual and physical tasks specifically to help disabled students develop independence and self-reliance.

Dr. Séguin’s educational guidelines influenced later work by others educating children with special needs. Sadly, despite his accomplishments, in many ways Dr. Séguin considered himself a failure since he could not find a cure for mental deficiency.

The writings of these two doctors inspired Dr. Montessori. She also realized they were the only documented practical attempts to teach children with mental deficiencies. Dr. Montessori went to Paris and translated these writings word-for-word by herself so she would not miss any nuance of inspiration. While both Drs. Itard and Séguin felt they were unsuccessful in many aspects of their work, both developed important techniques for working with disadvantaged children. Dr. Montessori recognized the tremendous value in their educational approaches.

Montessori teachers today will recognize the influences of Dr. Itard in the use of the moveable alphabet and of Dr. Séguin, in the matching of pairs material in the sensorial area—tasting bottles, sound boxes, color tablets. These techniques and the learning materials described in their writings served as Dr. Montessori’s beginning point.

DR. MONTESSORI CREATES HER OWN PROGRAM

Her lectures at various medical and educational congresses, especially the Educational Convention in Turin in 1898, led to greater prominence. Italy's Minister of Education appointed Dr. Montessori as the Director of the Orthophrenic School, a new medical-pedagogical institute in Rome. In this position, Dr. Montessori gave lectures to teachers on learning abilities and appropriate techniques for teaching children with learning difficulties.

For two years, Dr. Montessori trained teachers to use the techniques she had developed. Oftentimes, she was in the classroom working with the children as much as the teachers she was training. During this exciting time of developing her program, Dr. Montessori believed these teaching techniques would be appropriate and beneficial for all children. However, she also faced the scorn of her colleagues. Many of Dr. Montessori's medical contemporaries accused her of lowering herself to the level of a kindergarten teacher. This criticism did not deter Dr. Montessori from her research and application of a new approach to teaching children.

Dr. Montessori's initial work with children who had been labelled "defective and hopeless" was so successful that many of these children passed the state examination that "normal" children took in the public schools. Many educators wondered what magical instructional techniques Dr. Montessori had discovered that made it possible for her "defective" students to excel beyond the "normal" students. At the same time, Dr. Montessori wondered about the limitations of Italy's state educational system.

In 1904, Dr. Montessori gave up her direct work with the children at the Orthophrenic School, resigned from all hospital obligations, and closed her private medical practice. She chose to again become a student at the University of Rome. This time, she studied philosophy and anthropology. She also continued to lecture at the University about her experiences working with children at the Orthophrenic School.

THE FIRST CHILDREN'S HOUSES

In 1906, Dr. Montessori was offered the opportunity to create a series of schools for infants in the tenements of Rome. A group of wealthy bankers, calling themselves the Instituto Romano di Beni Stabili (Roman Good Building Institute) was revitalizing abandoned housing complexes. In the late 1800s, there were sections of Rome that had large housing complexes partially built but never finished due to a series of economic recessions.

This group of bankers bought the abandoned buildings and refurbished them to provide housing for people from the countryside moving to the city to work in factories. At the time, these tenements were considered a great example of urban renewal. The bankers were quite proud of their efforts and were determined to do the same in several other parts of Rome.

The first housing area refurbished was the San Lorenzo quarter, a very poor neighborhood within Rome. Workers who lived in these buildings considered them a great improvement over their previous living situations. The bankers got great positive press coverage for their successful efforts. There was only one problem; San Lorenzo was "infested" with a gang of young children who were left to their own devices while their parents were at work. The children were vandalizing the buildings and creating mischief.

The Director of the Roman Association for Good Building asked Dr. Montessori to take charge of these wayward children who ranged in age from two to seven years on a type of "home school" setting. The owners gave Dr. Montessori one apartment for her needs, but not much more. She opened the first of these "infant schools" in the San Lorenzo quarter on January 6, 1907, which is the Feast of the Epiphany, a special Christian celebration.

Dr. Montessori called her schools *Casa dei Bambini*, or as we know them today in Montessori education, Children's Houses. Dr. Montessori opened two Children's Houses in the tenements. The remainder of her schools were opened in other venues throughout Rome and later Milan because of a growing enthu-

siasm for her successful approach to teaching children. A series of sixteen schools was to become the foundation and the catalyst for a great social and educational experiment. Dr. Montessori only opened a couple of Casas for this group of bankers before striking out on her own.



M. Shannon Helfrich personal collection

The original Casa die Bambini in Italy, 2007

The openings of Casa dei Bambini in Rome and Milan allowed Dr. Montessori a variety of children from diverse backgrounds to become part of the experiment. For example, she opened a Montessori school at the British Embassy for the education of the staff children. The Catholic Franciscan Sisters opened a Montessori school specifically for children orphaned by the 1908 Messina, Sicily earthquake that killed some 70, 000 people. From this point on, Dr. Montessori dedicated herself to a deeper understanding of the nature of learning in children.

DR. MONTESSORI'S TRAVELS TO THE UNITED STATES

In 1911, Alexander Graham Bell (the inventor of the telephone) read about Dr. Montessori's teaching methods in "McClure's," an American literary and political magazine. The

magazine had featured a series of articles by Josephine Tozier that described Dr. Montessori's work as "this marvellous new educational approach." Bell offered to help Dr. Montessori get to the United States to lecture about her findings because of the growing interest in her educational approaches. Samuel McClure, editor and owner of "McClure's," saw the opportunity to spread the word through a speaking tour and the creation of a Montessori Department in his magazine, which would offer ongoing information on Dr. Montessori's work. In 1913, Dr. Montessori made her first visit to the United States, sponsored by Samuel McClure. She travelled and lectured throughout the United States and was a huge success.

Dr. Montessori returned to the United States for a second—and last—visit in 1915 to help set up a Montessori classroom exhibit at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, also called the World's Expo, in San Francisco. When Dr. Montessori arrived at the venue she quickly saw the challenge of setting up a model classroom in an open space. She wanted to protect the children and still give the visitors a close-up view of what was happening inside. Dr. Montessori resolved this challenge by having a series of glass walls erected around the open space. Bleacher seats were provided outside the glass walls for the observers and visitors. This "glass classroom" soon became a favorite stopping place at the World Expo.

Thousands of parents applied for their children to be accepted into the model classroom at the World Expo, but only 30 children were chosen. Dr. Montessori allowed the classroom sessions to be conducted by two of her American teaching students. A favorite time for visitors was just about lunch time when they could watch the children prepare their own food, then serve each other with great elegance. Visitors were mesmerized with how the children conducted themselves with great grace and dignity. The Montessori exhibit was awarded both of the gold medals for Education at the close of the 1915 World Expo.

MONTESSORI APPROACH EXPANDS WORLDWIDE

Despite prejudices and discouraging articles written against the Montessori approach, and the advent of two world wars, Dr. Montessori's work continued to grow in influence and application throughout the world. Dr. Montessori spent the remainder of her life exploring the means to educating "man" to his fullest potential. She wrote prolifically about her discoveries and trained teachers worldwide who used her methods.

Dr. Montessori never considered herself an educator, but always saw herself as a researcher. The children were her subjects and from them she learned everything she needed to know to meet their needs. She did not believe that her discoveries were ever hers, but that they belonged to the children. Indeed, it was not her method, but rather the children's method since they were the authors who revealed their natural way of learning to her.

Despite Dr. Montessori's humility in taking credit for her work, she interpreted what she observed in the children's learning. Her interpretation of these observations and the creation of activities for the children was truly Dr. Montessori's genius. She learned much from her study of Drs. Itard and Séguin's writings and findings. She also expanded her understanding by sharing ideas with her contemporaries. However, it was Dr. Montessori's insight that gave structure to the application of the ideas and the creation of a teaching or "pedagogical system" for early childhood education.

Dr. Montessori eventually expanded her exploration of the learning needs of children to include six-to-twelve-year-old students, young adolescents, and the young adult. She saw the need for a specific type of environment and a particular set of learning activities and techniques appropriate for the development of the full human, or what she called "the new man." Today in Montessori, we think of this as the development of "the new human." Dr. Montessori saw early learning as the process of creating the whole of the new personality of the individual. In

essence, each child is creating the core of the man or woman he/she will become in the years that follow.

Dr. Montessori survived two major world wars, the second of which could have easily destroyed her life's work. She became increasingly convinced that the only way to change society was through the education of the young child. She believed that children with a strong positive sense of self, and a respectful positive attitude toward others, could become the basis for a new society. Dr. Montessori envisioned this new society based on cohesion, respect, and dignity. It would be a society grounded in peace, not war.

Throughout her lifetime, Dr. Montessori was quite vocal in her message regarding the nature of peace and the role of education. Her efforts were recognized with nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize in both 1949 and 1950.

Dr. Montessori's legacy exists today through the organization, the *Association Montessori Internationale* (AMI), which she created with her son, Mario Montessori. Today, her legacy is carried out in AMI training centers throughout the world and in all classrooms where teachers still apply Dr. Montessori's original principles in the twenty-first century.