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MARIA MONTESSORI LIBERATING THE CHILD

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Having read this chapter, you should be able to:

- recognise Montessori's background as a person and as an educator
- understand her major philosophical ideas
- critically analyse her theoretical perspective
- evaluate how her work has influenced other philosophers
- consider how her theories could be applied in practice.

KEY WORDS

spiritual embryo; absorbent mind; conscious mind; abstract thinking; sensitive periods; directress; prepared environment; child-centred

INTRODUCTION

Maria Montessori is one of the most well-known educationalists in the field of early education. It is a testament to her hard work and tenacity that, despite advocating a style of education which was in opposition to the ideas and philosophies of the time, Montessori schools are as prevalent now as they were a century ago and her philosophy continues to influence practice in mainstream settings today.

From her work as a clinical paediatrician, Montessori developed a unique approach to teaching which relied heavily on careful and clinical observation originating from her work with special needs children. She identified that by 'tapping into' the individual needs of these seemingly uneducable children she was able to teach them to attend to their personal needs and care for their environment, as well as in some cases learning the three Rs (writing, reading and arithmetic) using specially designed materials developed from her work with Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and his pupil Édouard Séguin.

Keen to try her ideas on 'normal' children, Montessori applied her ideas to her work with children in the *Casa dei Bambini*, the school she set up to meet the needs of the children in the slum areas of Rome.

Her work began with practice, and from this her theories naturally developed and evolved. Relying on careful observations of the children in her care, she identified where learning potential lay and maximised this in terms of the materials and experiences she provided. She also drew from her first-hand experiences of education, identifying that children were learning in a largely didactic manner, working from a curriculum designed for societal interest rather than the needs of the child. She saw this educational experience as one which was largely demotivating and responsible for some of the problems inherent in education at the time.

Through allowing children a sense of freedom in their education and the opportunity to select their own learning experiences, within the boundaries of respect for the materials and one another, Montessori observed that they could sustain interest in an activity for significant periods of time and would frequently repeat experiences until mastery was achieved. At this point they would return the materials to the shelf from which they came before proceeding to the next learning experience.

It is from these early observations that the Montessori Method was born, which not only forms the basis of Montessori Education today but has also influenced some of the key features of early years education and beyond. Montessori left a legacy which has not only impacted on the way in which children are educated, but also encourages reflection on the role of the teacher from educator to facilitator.

MARIA MONTESSORI, THE PERSON

Maria Montessori was born in Chiaravalle, Italy, in 1870, the same year in which the unification of Italy took place. She was born into a country that was undergoing

significant political, social and economic change, in which there was considerable political and economic struggle between the classes, and which was mostly governed by a male-dominated electorate. It could, however, be said that she herself was to some extent protected from the class struggle going on around her, being brought up as part of Rome's growing middle class because of her father's work as a civil servant.

Montessori's upbringing was traditional, although her parents had somewhat contradictory views on life. On the one hand, her father, Alessandro Montessori, was conservative and naturalistic, discouraging Maria from following an academic path and encouraging her into teaching, which at the time was perceived to be an appropriate role for a woman. On the other hand, Montessori's mother, Renilde Stoppani, had more liberal and progressive views, and it was perhaps her influence which led Montessori to pursue a technical rather than classical education, which ultimately resulted in her studying medicine at the University of Rome in 1892. It is a testament to her determination and tenacity that she succeeded in a male-dominated environment, being the first woman to graduate from medical school in Italy. Despite the challenges which this presented, including her father's disapproval and ridicule from fellow students, Montessori went on to exceed all expectations, including being awarded the Rotti prize and the scholarship that accompanied it.

On graduating in 1896, her early work was at San Spirito Hospital, working as a surgical assistant, which later led to her working at children's and women's hospitals and then establishing her own private practice. It was while working at the clinic that she became involved with a colleague with whom she had a son, Mario. The couple never married and, as a result of the stigma attached to unmarried mothers in Catholic Italy, Mario was sent to live with foster parents in the countryside. Montessori remained in contact with her son but presented as his aunt. Mario was later acknowledged by Montessori, and he grew very fond of his mother, continuing to promote her ideas after her death (Kramer, 1988 [1976]).

In her role as a physician Montessori was exposed to the hardships of the class society in Italy and here she showed a social responsibility which exceeded expectations. It was this work that resulted in her being invited to visit Rome's asylums, where she first met the children who were to change the course of her life and the direction of her work from medicine to education, for which she is best known today. She became fascinated by the 'idiot children' in the asylums and began to apply some of her medical techniques to observing children with learning difficulties. Through astute observation she noticed that children who had previously been thought to be uneducable responded to her methods. This she attributed to her careful observations, which meant that she was able to respond to their individual needs, and she began to deduce that the problem lay with the approaches of the teachers and the environment, not with the children as was the common misconception. Influenced by the work of the French physician Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and his pupil Édouard Séguin, she began to develop her own methods for teaching pupils with special needs.

In 1906 Montessori was invited to work with the children of migrant workers living in the tenements of the San Lorenzo district of Rome, viewed as one of the worst slum areas in Rome; the original intention was to prevent the children roaming the streets and 'getting up to mischief' while their parents were at work. Montessori's response was to create the first *Casa dei Bambini*, or Children's House, which was designed as a home environment in which the children could develop their own activities. With a limited budget at her disposal, she furnished the environment simply, using miniature versions of equipment which would be found in their own environment, often making the resources herself. Once established, she applied her skills as a medical practitioner and observed the children at work with the equipment, evaluating closely which equipment the children responded to best and discarding any that they did not use.

Through her observations Montessori noted that the children could sustain concentration on an activity for considerable periods of time, and that through absorbing information from their environment they possessed the ability to educate themselves. As with her earlier observations in the asylums, she ascertained that with the right motivation children were equipped to learn and, more importantly, were motivated to do so. By providing a structure in which children took personal responsibility, Montessori realised that they learned very easily and gained considerable self-worth from doing so.

It was these early observations at the first *Casa dei Bambini* that set the context for Montessori's subsequent work with children as she continued to develop methods and materials which are still associated with Montessori schools today. Her work bucked the educational trends of the day, in which children were not seen as individuals with specific needs and in which all children were given the same work which was delivered in the same way. Montessori started from the child, recognising that learning began with the senses and providing materials that allowed them to explore and investigate using all their senses, but perhaps of more significance was her work with the families of the children who lived in the slums. She saw school as an extension of the home environment and believed in the importance of building relationships with the parents and encouraging them to realise how special their children were (Daly et al., 2006).

Maria Montessori died in 1952 and left a legacy of theories and writings which have had a significant influence on practice today. The *Casa dei Bambini* became 'a tool for social change both for children and their mothers' (Isaacs, 2007: 8) in Italy and gathered worldwide acclaim, particularly between 1907 and 1914 when opportunities arose for Montessori to promote her unique view of children and their learning (Isaacs, 2007).

MONTESSORI'S THEORY

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Montessori's theory was grounded in her careful and clinical observations of the children with whom she worked, initially in the mental

through their senses. Montessori saw the sensitive periods as ones in which 'small children are endowed with a special psychic nature' (2007 [1967]: 4), during which they were given to certain areas of growth which were related to movement, language, order, small detail, refinement of the senses, and the social aspects of everyday life (see Table 2.1). Montessori believed that sensitive periods were present from birth in all children from around the world, and that these would emerge when a child was predisposed to learn that particular skill at a particular time; moreover as one sensitive period passed the next would subsequently emerge (O'Donnell, 2013). Montessori also theorised that if a skill was not mastered during their sensitive period then it could be mastered at a later stage but with far more effort required of the child, often leading to frustration.

Montessori's early work was very much built on her observations of the children in the *Casa dei Bambini*, who she saw as progressing through the unconscious absorbent mind, where the child 'learns everything without even knowing he is learning it' (Montessori, 1975: 73), into the absorbent mind plane. During this period Montessori saw the child as translating the unconscious into the conscious through the physical exploration of the environment. She observed that 'he was always busy with his hands' and 'cannot think without his hands' (1973: 63, 67).

The child's need for order and structure is also prevalent at this stage, with children needing to feel secure in their environment. Here Montessori noted that the child developed a familiarity with their environment during the unconscious absorbent stage and as they moved into the absorbent mind stage would show anxiety and discomfort if the routines and structures changed. For example, a child who expects to find a certain toy in its usual place may become unduly stressed when it is not where it should be.

An underlying feature of the Montessori Method is the importance of freedom and individual choice, with Montessori strongly advocating the importance of allowing children choice if they were to become individual and creative learners who were to fully absorb the world around them. In harmony with this notion was the favourable environment, which allowed children this freedom of choice and gave them the confidence to become active agents of their own learning. She believed that the environment should be structured in such a way that children were able to choose their own activities using resources which scaffolded their learning. Through this children developed a sense of self-control and self-respect, with freedom coming with responsibility rather than being seen as a laissez-faire approach to learning. She also believed that through this method children developed into independent and confident decision makers who were capable of taking responsibility for their own learning and that of others.

Perhaps the most controversial feature of the Montessori Method at its time was the role of the teacher, who Montessori referred to as 'the **directress**'. At a time when the role of the teacher was to present knowledge and facts in a largely didactic manner, Montessori instructed her teachers to step back and observe, reflecting

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Table 2.1 An overview of Montessori's sensitive periods

Sensitivity to	Description	Role of adult
Order Age 1 month+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for/love of order • Categorises perceptions, makes sense of world • Supports security and exploration and orientation • Inner orientation supported by predictable routines • Normal development supported by consistent, stable and predictable environment • Sorts/categorises experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide consistency of support • Create order and structure through routine • Provide a prepared environment • Activities to promote sorting, matching and pairing
Language Age 0-6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language vital to intellectual or cognitive growth • Babies in womb show sensitivity to familiar voices • Watches movement of lips and tongue when listening to adult • Basic sentence patterns and mastery of at least one language developed without direct teaching • Tuned into language above all other sounds • Absorbs structure of language without difficulty • Develops inflections and accents of language most frequently exposed to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide language-rich environment • Materials and activities to develop vocabulary • Opportunities to use language – express feelings, share ideas • Converse with children • Expose to story, song and rhyme
Movement Age 0-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins in womb as embryo begins to stretch and move • Continues from birth – turning head, grasping small objects • Rolling, crawling, sitting, standing, eventually walking • Ability to walk facilitates exploration • Development of fine motor skills as well as gross motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place objects in easy reach of babies, e.g., mobiles • Provide opportunities to practise walking • Provide environment which is freely accessible for practising movement • Provide push/pull objects or objects to carry
Small objects Age 6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops as infant becomes more mobile and environment widens • Child becomes drawn to small objects, e.g., pebbles, blades of grass • Attention to small detail • Helps to build their understanding of the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities to explore natural environment • Give children time to explore • Small world play
Social aspects of life Age 3+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readiness to take place in a group • Aware of own role within a group • Widening of social circle • Cooperation with other children • Forming of early friendships • Awareness of needs of others • Develops social skills and adopts culturally appropriate behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote opportunities for children to mix with others outside of own age group • Create family situation, i.e., shared mealtimes • Reinforce good manners and appropriate social norms • Utilise games with rules • Circle time and group play
Refinement of senses Age 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen through a natural curiosity to explore environment through the senses • Picking up objects and putting in mouth to absorb qualities of objects through taste and touch • Selective response to sense stimuli, required to avoid overwhelming senses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep children close so they can experience everything around them • Freedom to explore • Avoid inhibiting experience by providing a safe environment • Provide materials to stimulate the senses

her own methods in the *Casa dei Bambini*. The teacher was to regard the child respectfully, appreciating their unfolding development, and respond to their specific needs. While this may have appeared a somewhat passive role, Montessori did not want the children's natural tendencies to be suppressed, but instead wanted the teacher to be able to act as a facilitator of the child's learning, creating and maintaining an environment that was conducive to learning, while also acting as scientist and researcher learning from her observations of the child and acting accordingly.

It is fair to say that Montessori's theories predominantly lay in her work with children in the early stages of development. However, this is not to say that other stages of development were neglected and in her later work she focused on the later stages of childhood (6–12 years), which she saw as a period of great transformation and metamorphosis (O'Donnell, 2013). In this period the child is no longer controlled by the absorbent mind, but begins to develop their own freedom of mind, showing a thirst for knowledge and a desire to learn. At the same time children develop a sense of moral responsibility and social justice, wanting to become part of the social hierarchy of the classroom. Montessori also observed that children at this stage show a natural desire to help others, which supported the parallel teaching that was seen in her classrooms with older children supporting the learning of their younger peers.

As a prolific writer and observer of children it is impossible to capture the full range of Montessori's theories in this chapter. However, it is important to note that she saw her work as being first and foremost with the children, the influence on practice by far superseding the theory behind it. Montessori's theories were developed alongside her work with the children and evolved from her observations that schools were not happy places for them.

LINKS WITH OTHER THEORISTS

Montessori was one of several philosophers who rejected the idea that children were empty vessels who were waiting to be filled and shaped through a curriculum in which children were not seen as individuals with specific needs, but in which all children were given the same work at the same time (Daly et al., 2006). The notion of children as individuals was first advanced by John Locke in the seventeenth century, who suggested that, rather than empty vessels, newborn babies were 'like a blank slate' who could be shaped by the social and environmental experiences which would affect their character and mental abilities in later life (O'Donnell, 2013). However, Locke himself was not known to put his theories into practice and it was the work of subsequent philosophers, including Montessori, which was responsible for changing the views of educators towards how children were perceived through the practical application of their theories.

This 'progressive' view of education was first theorised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw children as individuals capable of exploring the world around them, acquiring

knowledge through their explorations. In opposition to Locke, who firmly believed in nurture as the force behind development (O'Donnell, 2013), Rousseau advocated nature, viewing the child as 'a noble savage who would develop intellectually if left uninhibited' (Beatty, 2012 [1922]: 76). Rousseau developed a stage theory, believing that children developed in stages and that at each stage they had their own specific needs.

A century later, as Montessori developed her own philosophies, echoes of both Locke and Rousseau's work can be seen, reflected through her own stage theory as well as her view of the child as an individual who was heavily influenced by the environment. However, Montessori incorporated both nature and nurture into her own theories, believing both to have equal importance in the development of the child.

Comparisons can also be made with the work of Friedrich Froebel, who believed that children were inherently creative and that play should be used as a vehicle to facilitate a child's creative expression. Froebel also advocated the environment as essential to educating young children, creating the *Kindergarten*, meaning 'children's garden', as a place for children to learn. Like Montessori, Froebel developed his own set of learning materials which he called gifts, designed to maximise the senses to enhance learning. However, there are differences in the application of these materials since, while Froebel advocated creative expression and imagination as a means for learning, Montessori herself rejected the idea of creativity and imagination, believing children should be engaged in activities which mimicked 'real life', seeing play as the child's work.

Montessori was also influential in the work of key theorists in the field of education, including both Piaget and Erikson. Piaget's *La Maison de Petits*, where his experimental work with children took place in the 1920s, was originally a modified Montessori institution, and Piaget himself was president of the Swiss Montessori Institution in the 1930s (O'Donnell, 2013). Both Montessori and Piaget were constructivists, believing that children constructed their knowledge from the world around them. They both developed their own stage theory, although here their theories differed. Piaget's theory centred on a hierarchical structure, in which children passed through specific stages at a certain age; Montessori, however, disagreed with this, and while her 'sensitive periods' could be seen mirrored in Piaget's work she acknowledged that all children were different and sensitive periods could not be determined by a specific age. Indeed, despite the obvious influence of Montessori on Piaget she later came to disagree with much of his work, particularly regarding how his work was conducted.

More recently the term Heuristic Play was coined by Elinor Goldschmied, which she pioneered together with Treasure Baskets (Hughes, 2016) as a means by which babies and toddlers can investigate their environment freely and independently. Treasure baskets reflect Montessori's identification of a child's sensitivity to both the refinement of senses and small objects, as babies who are able to sit up are presented with baskets of small natural objects which can be explored freely without the need for adult intervention. According to Hughes (2016), objects in the treasure basket 'Provide a gateway towards independent contact with the outside world and create the first opportunity

for making choice and decisions' (2016: 19). Moreover, as children become more mobile Heuristic Play is introduced, continuing the refinement of sensitivities to senses and small objects but also incorporating the sensitivity to movement. As with the treasure basket, the toddler is presented with carefully chosen natural objects. However, the more mobile toddler is able to interact more freely with these, experimenting with the objects they find which is the precursor to developing their understanding of the world and applying problem solving and mathematical thinking.

CRITIQUING MONTESSORI

It cannot be denied that Montessori's work transformed attitudes towards early childhood education in the early twentieth century, and many aspects of her work can still be seen reflected in early years practice today. Yet her work was not without its critics, and it is important to consider whether all her philosophies and principles can be applied to education today. Indeed, while the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum in England has echoes of her work, it could be argued that there are many elements which are not evident, suggesting that these may be outdated and not relevant or transferable to society today.

The Montessori system of education has been criticised for its rigidity, and the idea of all settings using replica materials delivered in an identical way could be seen as contradictory to a system which prides itself on seeing every child as unique and individual, particularly in a society which is becoming increasingly diverse. Montessori 'spoke [of a] vision for a better world in which education would be a catalyst and principal agent for global harmony, peace and happiness' (O'Donnell, 2013: 172), and even acknowledged the need to adapt to an increasingly technological society, reflecting again a philosophy which was ahead of its time. Yet she could never have predicted the way in which changes would happen and, in view of this, the lack of perceived flexibility in the Montessori approach must call into question its relevance in the fast-moving society of today.

Even at its peak the Montessori Method had its critics, particularly in respect of Montessori's attitude towards play and imagination. John Dewey criticised Montessori for curbing children's creativity, believing that children should be allowed to explore materials in whatever way they wished rather than the strict approach adhered to by her. On visiting Montessori environments in America, Beth Stubbs noted an absence of materials for dramatic and imaginative play (O'Donnell, 2013) – not surprising given Montessori's view of fantasy play as having little or no importance in a child's education (Roopnarine and Johnson, 2005). This was elaborated on in a disparaging report by William Heard Kilpatrick (1914), who stated that the apparatus in the Montessori school offered a 'meagre diet for normally active children' (1914: 28) and noted that playing with the didactic material was strictly prohibited, reflecting Dewey's view that strict adherence to the intended function of material stifled creativity.

A further criticism of the Montessori approach can be seen in respect of the lack of social interaction, with some critics claiming that Montessori made no emotional provision in her approach to education (O'Donnell, 2013). While she had indeed provided an environment designed to meet the social and emotional needs of the children, critics suggest that the discouragement of social interaction between children within this environment was in discord with their emotional needs. When seen in the context of a lack of opportunity for children to work out their emotions through the medium of play, it can be argued that the environment could indeed stifle a child's social and emotional well-being. This too was observed by Kilpatrick, who saw the Montessori child as 'an isolated worker' (1914: 14) where even the teacher, or director, was seen to stand to one side, rarely interposing.

APPLYING MONTESSORI IN THE CLASSROOM

The application of theory to practice is not difficult to see in terms of Montessori education, principally because Montessori's theories were centred on classroom practice and improving learning conditions for children. According to the North American Montessori Teachers Association (NAMTA, n.d.) there are approximately 25,000 Montessori schools worldwide, with around 18% of these being in the United States. However, statistics are invariably difficult to pin down, given that some schools are operating under the Montessori name without gaining the required certification needed to demonstrate they are complying with the specific criteria of a Montessori school.

Maria Montessori had a clear vision for the education of young children which was based around her view that an educational environment should attend to the holistic needs of each individual child. Each child should be allowed to proceed at their own pace, using imaginative teaching materials designed to be self-correcting in order that they could identify and correct their own mistakes. The role of the teacher was that of a facilitator who was guided by the child. Montessori ensured that all teachers were trained in her methods and any setting which carried the Montessori name would have a consistent approach to design and use of the environment and the materials within it.

The materials designed by Montessori were developed from her aforementioned work with Itard and Séguin, and were comprised of a whole series of objects, varying in size, shape, colour and texture and including three-dimensional shapes and letters designed to be felt and manipulated by the children (Kramer, 1988 [1976]). Using her observations of the children working with the materials Montessori was able to modify them, adapting the objects to meet the specific needs of the children, so that materials originally used for engaging children with varying needs could be used equally well in the mainstream classroom. As observed by Kramer (1988 [1976]) this apparatus first designed for the deficient and later adapted for normal children subsequently became the Montessori material and the Montessori method' (1988 [1976]: 89).

An observation made by Montessori when introducing the modified materials to the children in the *Casa* was that children who had previously appeared sullen and withdrawn were naturally drawn to these didactic materials and would favour these over the more traditional toys of dolls or balls. Furthermore, while the *retarded* children had to be coaxed and encouraged into using the material, children in the *Casa* would immediately interact with the material in the appropriate way and would persevere until a task was completed. Montessori also observed that not only did their powers of concentration change, but the children also became more socially aware and communicative. Montessori observed that

[f]rom timid and wild as they were before, the children became sociable and communicative. They showed different relationships with each other. Their personalities grew and they showed extraordinary understanding, activity, vivacity, and confidence. They were happy and joyous. (1972 [1936]: 5)

Kramer (1988 [1976]) observes that the material became known as the 'didactic apparatus', designed as it was to be self-correcting: through a process of trial and error children could rectify their own mistakes, 'refining his [*sic*] perceptions at the same time that he was gaining a sense of autonomy, of mastery over the objects in his environment' (1988 [1976]: 121). Moreover, the role of the teacher was one of observer, who once they had initially showed the child how to use the materials would then stand back and allow the child to 'teach himself' (1988 [1976]: 121).

It was, then, this approach which formed the legacy which still remains in the Montessori schools of today, and while materials and environments may have evolved to reflect each decade, the principle remains the same. In every Montessori classroom learning resources are developed from high-quality materials and are designed to develop a child's senses individually. It is rare to see textbooks in a Montessori classroom – children learn from the environment and the materials within it with a sense of freedom to move around the classroom choosing where they wish to learn and with what. While this may appear a somewhat arbitrary approach to a child's education, learning is certainly not left to chance – 'the children were introduced to each piece of material individually by silent demonstration or a three-period lesson' (O'Donnell, 2013: 164) – and it is not unusual for children from the age of four years to show an interest in reading and writing using Montessori's specially designed metal insets, sandpaper letters and movable alphabet (O'Donnell, 2013).

Children in a Montessori classroom are encouraged to work independently but in parallel with others. Montessori firmly believed in the rights of the child and while she recognised the rights of each child to an individualised education, she also instilled into the children their responsibility towards others in their environment and the environment itself. Therefore, it is not unusual in a Montessori classroom to see older children teaching their younger peers, supported by parallel grouping, and all children regardless of their age know to return equipment to its rightful place once finished with. Indeed, a key principle of the Montessori approach sees children undertaking

practical life skills alongside the more commonly recognised curriculum areas. Such skills require children to take first-hand responsibility for their environment, including care of plants and animals, cleaning equipment and undertaking household chores.

Montessori education advocates a stress-free environment in which children are protected from the tests and examinations which characterise mainstream education. Montessori teachers are skilful observers of their pupils, rendering summative assessments unnecessary since they already have a clear knowledge and understanding of their children's progress. Likewise, Montessori classrooms lack the competitive nature of mainstream classrooms, since Montessori advocated self-discipline, borne from children being interested and engaged with activities – there is no place for the rewards and sanctions which typify classrooms today. She believed that self-dignity was best developed through intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (Roopnarine and Johnson, 2005).

While Montessori schools remain faithful to the philosophies and theories of their founder, it should not go unobserved that Montessori's philosophy can also be seen as influencing practice in mainstream schools and, while not officially acknowledged, the parallels between her work and the current Early Years Foundation Stage philosophy cannot be refuted. As observed by O'Donnell:

It is also worthy to note that during the last century many of Montessori's principles and materials have been integrated into mainstream early childhood education often without acknowledgement. (2013: 167)

There has been a keen interest in early years education over the past twenty years, with the most recent guidelines for practitioners being published in 2021. This revised *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (Department for Education [DfE], 2021) builds on the original 2008 document following the Tickell Review (DfE, 2011), which was subsequently revised in 2012 and then again in 2017. The statutory document 'sets out the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that all children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe' (DfE, 2021: 5). The document emphasises the importance of the 'unique child', stating that 'every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured' (DfE, 2021: 6). It would be difficult not to see the parallels with Montessori's recognition and celebration of the unique individuality of every child, and this is reflected in the documentation which suggest that practitioners should stimulate children's own interests and respond to each child's emerging needs, following Montessori's observation that children are increasingly motivated if allowed to have control of their own learning.

However, the holistic needs of the child are a central feature of early education with the statutory framework setting out personal, social and emotional development as one of the three prime areas of the curriculum (2021: 12). Within this, *Managing Self* is identified as an Early Learning Goal (ELG), which includes managing basic hygiene and personal needs alongside showing independence, resilience and

perseverance in the face of challenge. This concurs with Montessori's own view that children should learn about personal hygiene, such as washing hands and washing themselves (O'Donnell, 2013). Furthermore, Montessori observed the natural tendencies of the child which if nurtured resulted in them learning to care for their own needs and the environment, and eventually becoming independent of the adult.

A further parallel which deserves mention is the value placed on the environment as a key factor in a child's learning and development. Montessori stressed the importance of the '**prepared environment**', which she developed from her observations of the children in the *Casa dei Bambini* and which was designed to allow children to take control of their own learning through centrally resourced materials that were accessible to children at all times. The aforementioned EYFS documentation states that 'children learn and develop well in enabling environments' (DfE, 2021: 6) and advocates strong partnerships between parents and teachers who are responsible for responding to individual needs and help to build learning over time (DfE, 2021). EYFS classrooms today are, then, designed to encourage child agency, and while they may not have the same calm atmosphere as Montessori originally intended (believing children should not be overstimulated by busy classrooms), current practice does indeed encourage the importance of a well-planned and organised learning environment with appropriate resources which children can freely access.

Montessori had clear ideas on the role of the teacher as educator and moved away from the didactic form of teaching which was common at the time. This perhaps is an area of tension between Montessori's theory and current classroom practice, since while teachers might well define their role as a facilitator who makes formative observations of the children in their care, the current education climate, which relies heavily on assessments and targets, creates a challenge for teachers simply standing back as mere observers. While the current drive is for well-qualified staff who are capable of providing the best possible conditions for children, the reality is perhaps more of a challenge in terms of meeting the expectations of all stakeholders, who may well have conflicting expectations of the role of the practitioner.

Although there has been little opportunity to focus on the subject of parents as partners, it should not go unnoticed that Montessori was ahead of her time in terms of involving parents in the education, as well as the care, of their children. A main feature of Montessori education was 'the union of the family and school' (Montessori, 2008 [1964]: 63), and this too is a key feature of current practice where parents as partners are fundamental to provision.

It can be seen, then, that features of Montessori's theory and philosophy are prevalent throughout early years education today, most significantly in terms of how the child is perceived and the approach to ensuring that each child's needs are met. An integrated curriculum which is developmentally appropriate for the children for whom it is designed, and a focus on active learning, show clear parallels with the Montessori approach, and while some areas are less well represented, it cannot be denied that Montessori's legacy is alive and well in early years settings today.

OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION: MONTESSORI'S IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

The key principles of the Montessori Method include independence, observation, following the child, correcting the child, prepared environment and the absorbent mind. Following are some suggestions as to how the Montessori principles can be applied in the classroom.

Independence

- Provide children with opportunities to be independent through allowing them to move freely around the classroom, to dress themselves, to attend to their own hygiene needs.
- Allow children to help adults, for example in classroom maintenance, tidying the classroom, watering plants, setting the table for lunch.
- Ensure all materials are accessible at child height.
- Encourage peer support through vertical groups.

Observation

- Observe without expectation, for the sheer enjoyment of watching the child learn.
- Use observations to plan individual experiences for the child.
- Learn about the child from your observations.

Follow the child

- Allow the child to show you what they need to develop, let them take the lead, and facilitate further opportunities.
- Be non-directive - do not tell the child what they need to do all of the time.
- Freedom to choose.

Correct the child

- Do not tell them what they have done wrong - show them how to put it right.
- Do not blatantly point out mistakes - help them to realise it for themselves.

Prepared environment

- 'Child-sized' rooms.
- Activities designed for success, allowing freedom of movement and choice.
- A safe environment for the child to freely explore.
- An environment that is beautiful and ready for the child to work in.

(Continued)

Absorbent mind

- Provide experiences to allow the child to absorb learning within the environment.
- Create the environment you want the child to absorb as they will naturally absorb what is around them - good or bad.
- Use the language we want children to use - even though communication skills may be limited in the early years, children can still understand what is going on around them.

SUMMARY

It cannot be denied that at the heart of Montessori's work was the child, and while critics may have questioned her methods, her belief in the child as an individual and a desire to move away from the teacher-centred approach of the time certainly constituted a catalyst in encouraging people to question how they viewed children. Montessori's work must be seen as a key driver for the **child-centred** approach to education that we see today, as were her views of the teacher as observer, preparing and adapting materials to meet the specific needs of the child.

Montessori was one of the first people to acknowledge the child as a unique individual; she championed the rights of children and gave them a responsibility which others would have repudiated, allowing them to take control of their own learning in an environment designed to suit them. In return, the children demonstrated to Montessori that they could indeed take responsibility for themselves: their learning, their care and their environment. It was her conviction in their abilities that made her work the success it was and ensured that it has prevailed for over a century.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS**Absorbent mind**

The period from birth to six years, which Montessori believed to be the most important in terms of mind growth and development. She believed that children learned more in this period than any other and advised that the adult was essential in ensuring that the child's natural impulse to learn was initiated during this phase.

Abstract thinking

Abstract thinking occurs when the individual no longer needs the physical presence of an object to think about it. Instead inferences can be drawn, and concepts and generalisations formed, without the need for a concrete object to be present.

The materials developed by Montessori allowed children to work through and internalise exercises through the use of concrete materials which were designed to ease the way to abstract thinking.

Child-centred

An approach to learning which allows the child to take control of their environment and develop their own learning; the role of the teacher is to facilitate this by creating a learning environment that promotes independence in the child. Montessori advocated this method of learning, in which adults were encouraged to follow the child's lead.

Conscious mind

Montessori suggested that this was when a child could make conscious decisions based on the information which they had gleaned from the environment.

Directress

This is the name which Montessori gave to teachers in her settings; she saw this role as that of a guide or facilitator, whose responsibility was to support the child in their self-development. In Montessori schools today the directress has a teaching qualification, alongside a specific Montessori teacher educator diploma.

Prepared environment

For Montessori, the prepared environment was calm and well ordered, in which everything the child encountered was designed to maximise their learning potential. Children had the right to choose activities, which they worked on at their own pace. The prepared environment was designed to encourage freedom and self-discipline in the children.

Sensitive periods

Periods in a child's life when they have a propensity to learn a certain knowledge or skill, commonly referred to today as a developmental milestone. For Montessori, this was a window of opportunity for the directress to support the child in the mastery of that skill since the child would repeatedly work on the skill with passion and conviction, until mastery had occurred. Montessori also believed that the sensitivity only lasted for a certain period, after which it would not reoccur.

Spiritual embryo

The second, and most significant, stage in a child's development. Montessori believed that at this stage the child was most vulnerable to their environment, and it was during this period that personality, intelligence and emotional make up would be developed. Montessori reinforced the important role of the supportive adult at this stage of development.

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