1

The Montessori Story

Chapter Objectives

- To retell the story of Dr Maria Montessori's life.
- To give a first impression of the educational programmes Maria Montessori designed for young children.
- To propose that at the heart of the Montessori approach to early childhood education is the high value placed on children's independence and independent learning.

To be independent is to be able to do things for yourself, to be able to make your own choices and to be able to manage the consequences of those choices on your own. It literally means to 'not hang from' another person or thing. Over her long lifetime Dr Maria Montessori observed young children striving to become independent. She believed the drive urging young children towards independence is the same drive that powers their development. For this reason, Montessori classrooms are prepared so children are able to choose their activities independently. Through these activities, children not only learn educational knowledge, but also how to care for their own needs and for their environment all by themselves. They also learn how to build relationships with others. A Montessori classroom, often called the 'environment' by Montessori educators, is especially designed so a community of children can act, and interact, as independently as possible.

A long and eventful life

The story of Maria Montessori's life is told to English-speaking audiences in

two biographies. The first, written by E. M. Standing, was published in 1957, five years after Dr Montessori died. It is a glowing tribute to Dr Montessori and her work by a close friend and collaborator, and provides detail, often unavailable in other published sources, about the genesis of the techniques and traditions of the Montessori approach.

In recent decades the most cited biography is the one written by Rita Kramer, which first appeared in 1976 and presents a more critical stance. It provides a broader historical context for the genesis of Montessori's ideas and a more exhaustive, though not uncontested, account of her nomadic and often dislocated life. The following outline of Dr Montessori's life is derived from both biographies.

An independent young girl

In 1870 Italy became a nation in its own right. Many Italians held great hopes for their future as part of a united and independent country. This was the year Maria Montessori was born in Chiaravelle in the Marches region of central Italy, the only child of a well-educated family. She was, according to both her biographers (Kramer, 1976/1978; Standing, 1957/1962), a strong-minded, vivacious and determined child, displaying the kind of independence so highly valued in Montessori schools to this day.

When Maria was about five years old, the family moved to Rome, where she went to school. Maria did well at school because she loved reading and learning. Her love of learning and her independent worldview, perceived as unusual for young girls at the time, is often credited to encouragement from her very well-read mother, Renilde Montessori. However, Maria Montessori did not enjoy school. In Italy, at that time, school learning comprised mostly drilling and memorization. As a child Maria Montessori is said to have declared that she would never be a teacher, nor would she ever become famous, because she did not want children of the future to have yet another biography to memorize.

When Maria was about 10 years old, she contracted a life-threatening illness, but, so the story goes, she told her parents not to worry. She informed them that she could not die because she had too much to do.

Maria excelled at mathematics. In order to pursue her studies in this field, and extraordinarily for a girl at that time, she attended a boys' technical school. She planned first to be an engineer, but eventually decided to become a doctor. She completed her undergraduate science degree in 1892

to a standard that made her eligible to enter the Medical College of Rome, but, as it was unprecedented for a young woman in Italy to study medicine, this seemed impossible. Nevertheless, Maria Montessori persevered against the many obstacles placed in her way, finally achieving her goal, it is said, by appealing to the Pope.

A pioneering medical student

Eventually, Maria Montessori began her medical studies, but there were more challenges to overcome. These included the opposition of her father, who chaperoned her, as propriety required, to and from university, all the while barely speaking to her. When she attended lectures, she could not enter the hall until after the male students had taken their seats. These same male students ridiculed her, and, because a respectable woman could not look at a naked body in the presence of men, she was forced to undertake her anatomy studies alone, working with cadavers in the evening by candlelight.

Despite these, and other, hurdles, according to contemporary reports, Maria Montessori always remained charming and gracious. She graduated as a doctor in 1896, the first woman in Italy to do so, winning academic prizes along the way and establishing contacts with royalty and other people of influence.

A committed young doctor

After graduating, Dr Montessori worked as a clinician in the field of family medicine, especially among socially disadvantaged women and children. Many people in Italy at that time, despite the promise of unification, continued to live in desperate poverty; social dislocation and unrest were everywhere. Housing in poor areas was substandard; malnutrition and diseases such as tuberculosis were rife. Stories are told of young Dr Montessori, not only treating her patients, but also preparing their food, doing housework, and nursing them back to health.

On the basis of her early clinical experience Maria Montessori became an advocate for social reform, particularly as it related to the well-being of women and children. She began to argue that enhancing the quality of the environment in which all children were raised was the key to overcoming the ills of human society, including poverty, inequality, mental illness, criminality and even war. This argument became the foundation of her life's work.

Dr Montessori treated women exhausted by menial work in appalling conditions. In order to feed starving children, these women slaved to earn wages the fraction of a man's, while their children were left without a carer. Dr Montessori argued for the emancipation and education of women and children, for equal pay for equal work, for quality antenatal and post-natal care, for improved standards in housing, childcare, nutrition and education. She was also a passionate opponent of child labour, particularly the use at that time of children as labourers in mines and heavy industry.

The logic behind Maria Montessori's advocacy for women and children seems self-evident to those of us who work in the fields of child health, welfare and education today, but at the close of the nineteenth century these were ground-breaking ideas. Even a hundred years on, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Dr Montessori's vision has yet to be realized for countless numbers of women and children around the world.

Dr Montessori developed her ideas by using the skills of observation and reasoning she gained during her training as a scientist. Her thinking, nevertheless, was at odds with much of the received wisdom of the day. While influential academics of her era claimed, for example, that criminals and other social 'misfits' were throwbacks to an earlier stage of human evolution, Dr Montessori, in contrast, argued that these people were a product of poor social circumstances at birth and during childhood. Ameliorate these circumstances and the social problems they cause would also be ameliorated.

Young Dr Montessori eloquently presented her ideas at women's congresses and at gatherings of academics, social and political leaders and royalty across Europe. Those who heard her speak say she was a wonderful orator; she continued to give inspiring lectures and talks throughout her life.

An admired academic

Specializing in paediatrics and psychiatry, Dr Montessori developed a keen interest in children who were diagnosed as retarded and disturbed. She believed, contrary to prevailing attitudes, that solutions to the problems faced by these children were to be found through education, rather than through medical intervention. It was through her work with such children that Maria Montessori was drawn to the field of education.

Dr Montessori's work with 'deficient' children, as they were called at the time, led her to attend courses in anthropology and pedagogy at the

University of Rome. Through her anthropological studies Maria Montessori refined her skills in observation and measurement. She also read widely, becoming familiar with the ideas of the educational reformers who preceded her, including Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart and Froebel. She was especially influenced, however, by the ideas of two little-known French doctors, Jean Itard and Edouard Séguin.

When Dr Montessori was appointed co-director of an institute for 'deficient' children, she implemented programmes which combined scientific observation and measurement with pedagogical innovations from her own and earlier eras. As a result of Dr Montessori's unorthodox methods, her 'deficient' children not only gained increasing levels of personal and social independence, but also began to succeed in state examinations at the same level as 'normal' children. Montessori soon became recognized across Europe as an authority in her field.

During this period, some time between 1898 and 1901, Dr Montessori's son, Mario, was born. Dr Montessori and the child's father, a medical colleague at the institute, never married, so the child's existence was kept secret until he came to live with Dr Montessori as an adolescent. Mario Montessori eventually became his mother's closest collaborator, contributing significantly to the development of the Montessori curriculum, and becoming a leading figure in the Montessori movement.

In 1901 Dr Montessori left the institute and returned to the University of Rome to further her research in psychology and anthropology, both very new disciplines at the time. Eventually, the university appointed her Professor of Pedagogical Anthropology. During these years she travelled, published and lectured, becoming a well-respected academic.

A famous school

In 1907, Dr Montessori was asked by the directors of an urban renewal scheme to open a school for slum children left unattended while their parents worked as day labourers. Dr Montessori saw this as her opportunity to discover whether the method she used so successfully with 'deficient' children could be applied to 'normal' children. The school was called the Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House. It became the prototype for Montessori early childhood education. The experimental work carried out at that school is recorded by Montessori in her most well-known published work, *The Montessori Method*.

The Casa dei Bambini was an environment in which these most unlikely of children from the slums of Rome advanced rapidly in learning, and became sociable, polite and self-reliant. This had been achieved without using rewards and punishments and by giving the children complete liberty. It was as if the children were educating themselves.

If people of that time had not seen the results of Dr Montessori's experiment with their own eyes, they would never have believed they were possible. Dr Montessori's school, and the publication in which she recorded her experiments in pedagogy, became international sensations. People flocked from around the world to visit the school and to learn how to apply Montessori's principles in schools of their own.

Against the advice of many, Dr Montessori abandoned her medical and academic careers and devoted the rest of her life to developing and promoting her educational method. While surprising at one level, this decision is a reflection of just how fundamental Dr Montessori had come to believe educational reform to be for social progress and the building of a functional, healthy and peaceful society.

From the opening of the first Casa dei Bambini in 1907 to the outbreak of World War I, Maria Montessori became world famous, to a degree which was extraordinary at the time. Montessori teacher training programmes were established and Montessori schools appeared throughout the world.

A new educational movement

In the United Kingdom the popularity and success of Montessori classrooms led, in 1915, to the founding of the New Education Fellowship (NEF). The NEF eventually grew into an influential international organization of educators devoted to social reform, individual freedom and world peace.

At the height of her fame, in 1914 and again in 1915, Montessori travelled to the USA where she gave public lectures, published articles, ran training courses and opened demonstration classes. In the United States her work was supported by President Wilson and his daughter, as well as other influential figures, including Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell and Helen Keller. Professor John Dewey introduced her when she spoke at Carnegie Hall.

After World War I, interest in Montessori schools quickly waned in the

United States, but Montessori schools continued to be popular in the United Kingdom and continental Europe into the 1930s, despite many reversals of fortune. Dr Montessori was based for much of that time in Barcelona, but she travelled constantly to give lectures and train teachers throughout Europe. As Europe descended again into war, many of her lectures were on the theme of education and peace. During this time Dr Montessori also travelled to South America. Montessori education continues to flourish to this day in both Central and South America.

In Vienna, Montessori schools were part of a wider social reform movement which so optimistically flourished there from the early 1920s until the 1930s. The first Montessori school in Vienna was established for the children of the poor by a workers' collective of young women. More schools were later opened for children at all levels of Viennese society. Supporters of the Montessori schools in Vienna included members of Sigmund Freud's circle. One of the Viennese Montessori schools was custom-built by a Bauhaus architect.

In the 1920s and 1930s Montessori schools and training centres were established in Spain and France. They continued to flourish in Italy until, in the late 1930s, Dr Montessori refused to allow the children in her schools to be part of the fascist youth movement. By the end of the 1930s Dr Montessori and her family, which now included four grandchildren, had retreated, ahead of the expansion of fascism in Europe, and the burning of her books in Berlin, to the Netherlands, where her method had institutional, as well as popular, support.

The years in India

In 1939, Dr Montessori and her son Mario were invited to India. Influential figures in India, including the poet, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandi felt that the Montessori method could be used to help address the needs of the huge illiterate and impoverished rural population in their country.

The Montessoris were in India at the outbreak of World War II. Because they were Italian, they were interned by the British authorities there. By the time they were released, the occupation of the Netherlands by Germany made it impossible for them to return home to Mario's children until the end of the war.

During the war years in India, Montessori continued developing her

method, again with the support of influential figures, including Gandhi and Nehru. Montessori schools and training centres operate throughout the Indian sub-continent to this day.

While they were in India, Maria and Mario Montessori developed a curriculum for older children from 6 to 12 years of age. Dr Montessori called this curriculum Cosmic Education because it was designed to nourish the limitless curiosity and imagination of older children and to fulfil their desire to explore and understand the universe beyond their immediate home and family. Much of this curriculum is aligned to the interest the children in the Indian schools displayed for the animals and plants of the natural world, as well as for the Earth as a whole and its place in the universe.

While in India Dr Montessori also began applying her method to the well-being of newborn babies and toddlers. Her ideas for this age group were elaborated after her death into a programme called Assistants to Infancy.

The later years

After the war Montessori schools began to reopen across Europe and Dr Montessori continued her work, developing her pedagogy, visiting Montessori schools, lecturing and acting as an advocate for children the world over, including at the first post-war meetings of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was established to rebuild a culture of peace through education following the war.

In 1948 Dr Montessori was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. She continued working and travelling until her death, aged 81, in 1952. After her death Dr Montessori's son, colleagues and supporters continued her work. The late 1950s saw renewed interest in Montessori education in North America, generating another wave of interest worldwide.

The popularity of Montessori schools continues to grow steadily around the world, a century after Dr Montessori first opened her pioneering school in Rome in 1907. Today many Montessori schools serve children of comparatively affluent families. Through Educateurs sans Frontières (Educators without Borders) the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) applies Montessori ideas to 'champion the cause' of all children in the world no matter where they live or what their circumstances might be.

Activities 

Your own childhood

From a Montessori perspective the child's work in the transition from birth to adulthood is to build independence in the physiological, physical, social, intellectual, economic and ethical domains of life. In the Montessori tradition, independence in each of these domains is seen as the foundation of true freedom. You can reflect on the ontogenesis of independence by reviewing your own transition from infancy to adulthood.

1. At what stage of your life did you become physiologically independent from another? In other words, at what point did the respiratory, digestive, circulatory and other physiological systems of your body begin to function independently? When did your senses – of touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight – begin taking in and distinguishing impressions independently? Over what stage of your life did you become physically independent of your caregivers? For example, when did you learn to walk, to feed yourself and to dress yourself?
2. Describe the process of learning to communicate with others by yourself. Describe the process of becoming socially independent, of learning to build your own relationships and community contacts.
3. Describe the process of becoming intellectually independent, of learning about the world and learning how to learn and think for yourself. At what stage of your life did economic independence become important to you? How have you achieved economic independence? Have you completed the process yet?
4. At what age did you become conscious there was a difference between right and wrong behaviour? Have you completed the process of being able to make ethical judgements independently?
5. What impact did your cultural and socio-economic context have on the way you developed, and continue to develop, independence in each domain of life? How did experiences in early childhood set you up to develop independence at later stages of your life? Did you face any obstacles on your path towards independence in any domain of life? Describe the consequences.

Help me to do it by myself!

From the time a child learns to walk, Montessori educators claim, the child is saying to any adult who cares to listen, 'Help me to do it by myself!' (Montessori, 1949/1982: 136). All Montessori educators keep this in mind as they prepare learning environments and learning materials.

Montessori learning environments are prepared to allow children to be socially and intellectually independent. Montessori learning materials are designed to capture children's interest and attention and to encourage independent use. When children work with the Montessori materials, they refine their perception and their movements, especially manual dexterity, all by themselves. They are also preparing themselves for learning educational knowledge.

In this book you will be introduced to some of the objects and exercises Maria Montessori designed to help children do and learn things by themselves. You will discover how this independence is based on the remarkable developmental achievements of children aged from birth to the age of three, achievements that are refined and extended between the ages of three and six. You will also learn how the independence children gain during the first six years of life becomes the foundation for the rich and extensive curriculum offered in Montessori schools to children aged from six to nine years, and beyond.

Case studies

Learning independence

The morning work cycle in a Montessori Children's House lasts for about three hours. The children's morning snack is laid out on a special table and, during the morning, the children help themselves whenever they wish.

A Montessori teacher observed a small child of two and a half, new to the Children's House, sitting at the snack table. The child had selected a whole banana from the fruit basket and had placed it on a plate. The child sat for about ten minutes looking at the banana on the plate.

Because there were bananas in the fruit basket on that day, the Montessori teacher had arranged the following on the snack table:

– a cutting board and a knife children can use successfully
– a container of toothpicks (so children can eat with increased independence or share with others)
– paper napkins
– a bin for food scraps.

After carefully washing her hands in the child's view, the Montessori teacher sat beside the small child and offered to show him what to do. First, the teacher indicated and named the equipment on the table. Then, without talking, the teacher slowly and deliberately took hold of the banana and began to peel it,

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one step at a time, pausing to highlight moments in the process critical to success. Next the teacher slowly and deliberately put the peel in the scrap bin and one step at a time, pausing to highlight moments in the process critical to success. Next the teacher slowly and deliberately put the peel in the scrap bin and placed the banana on the board. She carefully took hold of the knife so the child could see her handgrip and began to cut the banana into bite-size pieces. Finally, the teacher showed the child how to arrange the pieces on a napkin on the plate, how to push a toothpick into each piece and how to hold the toothpick to take the piece of banana to his mouth. At key points in this procedure the child took over from the teacher and eventually completed the task successfully on his own. When the child had eaten as much as he wanted, the teacher demonstrated how to clean up and how to leave the snack table 'ready for the next person'.

Reflection Point

The Montessori teacher saw the child rendered helpless by the unpeeled banana as an opportunity to teach a 'how-to' lesson, a lesson in independence. In the subsequent discussion with the child's mother the teacher learned that the child had never fed himself because the mother could not tolerate the mess he made with food. The mother was amazed when told that the child had eaten the banana on his own without making a mess. The teacher explained that a mess is inevitable when a small child tries to hold, peel and eat a whole banana without knowing how to do it. She described that day's lesson so the mother could follow it up at home.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you respond to a child unable to peel a banana?
2. Think about non-Montessori early childhood settings with which you are familiar. In what ways might teachers in these settings respond to a child in this situation?
3. How much more time does it take the teacher to give the 'how-to' lesson rather than peeling and cutting up the banana and feeding the child herself? Is this a worthwhile use of the teacher's time? Why?/Why not?
4. In what ways has the child gained in independence as a consequence of this 'how-to' lesson? How often do you think the teacher would need to repeat the lesson, and how much practice would the child need, before the child could complete this activity independently?

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to Maria Montessori's long and fascinating life. It has suggested that the influence of both the historical context and the events of Dr Montessori's personal and professional life led her to place great significance on the development of independence in young children. This chapter has also provided a first insight into how this emphasis on independence shapes the Montessori approach to early childhood education.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The Montessori emphasis on children's independence was considered an innovation in the field of early childhood education at the beginning of the twentieth century. What do you think have been the consequences of this innovation for the practice of early childhood education today?
2. How independent, in each domain of life, are young children encouraged and enabled to be in contemporary societies? Consider these variables:
   – the age and gender of the child
   – the immediate setting
   – the cultural and socio-economic context.
3. Identify in your own teaching repertoire strategies you use to give children opportunities to become more independent in specific domains of life