5 Maria Montessori 1870–1952

Maria Montessori was a remarkable woman. In 1896, she became the first woman in Italy to receive a degree in medicine. Her subsequent hospital work led to her interest in children with intellectual impairment. This in turn led her to study the work of Edouard Seguin. By the age of 30, Maria Montessori had already been teaching medicine and education, been given an award for her outstanding work in hospitals and led a school of ‘mentally deficient’ children in Rome. After visiting elementary schools she decided that their methods of teaching were inferior to those she used, and that she herself achieved better results with what were regarded as much less able children. Applying these methods to ‘normal’ children would, she believed, set their personalities free (Montessori 1919).

Her first mainstream school the Casa dei Bambini (Children’s House) for 3 to 6-year-olds, opened in Rome in 1907. Bradley et al. (2011) suggest that her aim of keeping the children of working mothers off the streets and reducing vandalism is paralleled by the cooperation between Rudolf Steiner and the Waldorf Factory owners. A second Casa dei Bambini was opened in Milan in the following year, 1908. The first in the United States of America opened in 1911 and interest was already developing in England. In 1916, the London Borough of Acton decided that all its provision for young children should be based on Montessori principles and practice. This influence on mainstream provision was to continue for many years, right up to the Second World War – with Montessori advising the London County Council on its provision in nursery and infant schools (Curtis 1963).

Montessori’s theories

Montessori was amongst the first early childhood theorists to claim a scientific basis for her theories. She identified sensitive periods, suggesting a small window of opportunity when particular things could be learned most effectively (see also Part 6 of this book). These particular things for which critical periods existed, she suggested, were coordination of senses, language, awareness of order and small detail, refinement of the senses and socialisation (Bradley et al. 2011). She believed strongly in freedom of choice
and independence for children. That freedom stemmed from the adults’ willingness to
observe and plan from their observations. Failure to do this limited children’s freedom
(MacNaughton 2003).

Her view of freedom has much in common with Steiner’s theory. For her it must
be limited only by respect for others and for the environment. This she believed would
support the development of self-discipline which in turn would lead to self-motivation,
and bring about enhanced concentration and perseverance.

Just as Steiner identified specific stages of development, Montessori suggested that
there were four main developmental stages. The first lasts from conception to the age of
6. The second, from 6 to 12 years of age is regarded as a period when the child is hungry
to find things out. From 12 to 18 is thought of as a creative period while the stage from
18 to 24 was identified as a period of ‘calm expansion’ (Bradley et al. 2011). The first
stage, up to the age of 6 which is the focus of this book is characterised as being focused
around an absorbent mind, sensory experience and self-creation ‘when the child begins
to develop their own view of the world within their culture’ (Bradley et al. 2011).

Montessori’s careful observation of children led her to believe that young children
had a number of characteristics which should be nurtured in order to support their
development and independence. She believed that they:

- were capable of extended periods of concentration;
- enjoyed repetition;
- ‘revelled in freedom of movement’;
- preferred work to play;
- were self-motivated and self-disciplined;
- enjoyed silence and harmony; and
- were capable of learning to read and write.

(based on Isaacs 2007: 6)

**Linking theory and practice**

These perceived characteristics hold a number of implications for practice. The notion
that children can concentrate for long periods of time is linked to practice by ensuring
that children have extended periods of time in which to concentrate. Sessions are
not, for example, broken by snack times and story times since these are seen as an
unwarranted intrusion into the child’s ‘work curve’. Montessori (1948: 95–6) suggests
that:

children need a cycle of work for which they have been mentally prepared;
such intelligent work with interest is not fatiguing and they should not be
arbitrarily cut off from it by a call to play. Interest is not immediately born,
and if when it has been created, the work is withdrawn, it is like depriving a
whetted appetite of the food that will satisfy it.
The environment, indoors and out, is carefully arranged so that children can choose from an appropriate range of structured learning materials. Order and an absence of clutter are thought to minimise distractions. Children select structured apparatus from a range provided and are given the opportunity to repeat the same experience time after time. Montessori observed that children used a particular activity or exercise, then repeating it several times, rather than moving to a new one. It was work for its own sake, not for reward. The curriculum focuses on:

- daily living;
- sensory education;
- language development;
- mathematics; and
- an exploration of the world which is designed to integrate ‘mathematical, linguistic, sensory and daily living activities’ (Pound 2005: 31).

Daily living is reflected in a range of activities such as cooking, gardening, dressing and cleaning. Sensory experience is seen as important and a wide range of structured materials are used to heighten olfactory, oral, visual and kinaesthetic awareness and discrimination (for examples see www.absorbentminds.co.uk). Language development is focused on all four aspects – talking, listening, reading and writing. A widely recognised feature of Montessori practice is the use of sandpaper letters – reflecting the focus on sensory and phonic learning.

A critique of Montessori’s theories

Montessorian approaches are sometimes criticised for being overly prescriptive and rigid. This means that practice, rather than being dynamic and open to change can become ossified, or over-rigid. This is understandable when it is remembered that Montessori was catering for a group of children whose slum conditions often made their lives chaotic and disordered. What is interesting about this however is that while Montessori education is very much a product of the working-class movement for early childhood education, in the latter part of the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first century it has become very much a middle-class movement. Princess Diana, for example, chose a Montessori pre-school for her son William.

Montessori’s views about work and play perhaps also have their roots in similar concerns about the challenging home lives of the children with whom she was working. She believed that the children with whom she worked needed to learn about meaningful tasks and ought not to be distracted by fanciful ideas. However, for many early childhood practitioners, Montessori’s apparent rejection of play and imagination poses difficulties. Modern analyses (see for example Montessori St Nicholas 2008) suggest that the apparent conflict of ideas arises from historical interpretations and that today ‘freedom of choice, the exercise of will and deep engagement, which leads to concentration’ (Montessori St Nicholas 2008: 21) are seen as common to both work and play.
A third area of criticism concerns the focus on phonics. Montessori’s contemporary, Susan Isaacs, was highly critical of both Montessori’s views on play and imagination (Smith 1985) and on phonics. Isaacs suggested that:

it is the paucity of other games in the Montessori schools which makes the children take to this new occupation. In the Froebel kindergartens, with their incomparably greater variety of occupations to exercise the child’s powers of intuition and imagination, his interest and independence, as a general rule, scarcely any instances of liking for reading and writing exercise are to be observed.

(Smith 1985: 255, citing Isaacs)

This is an interesting area since as Bradley et al. (in press) point out an early introduction to phonics and print is entirely in line with many policies, including the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (QCA 2007). However, as Steiner Waldorf theory and practice highlight, this is not without controversy. It might also be relevant to consider that Italian, the language in which Montessori developed her ideas, is entirely phonetic while written English is not at all regular.

The legacy of Montessori’s theories

Montessori education, like Steiner Waldorf education, has stood the test of time. Conroy et al. (2008) praise Montessori education as they do Steiner Waldorf education for the alternative and principled approach which both bring to mainstream thinking. Like Steiner Waldorf it remains very popular. However, unlike Steiner Waldorf which continues to cater for children up to the age of 19, it remains much less active in the later years of schooling – although there are examples both in the United States and in this country. Unlike Steiner Waldorf education its approaches are clear and direct for practitioners to follow. The equipment that Montessori devised is widely used in other forms of pre-school provision. The resources are generally made of wood and are aesthetically pleasing as well as offering a range of sensory experience. As indicated in the next chapter Susan Isaacs initially used Montessori materials.

The effectiveness of Montessori teaching methods has most recently been demonstrated by the results of a study published in the US journal, Science (Lillard and Else-Quest 2006). Along with Steiner Waldorf education it was also highlighted by Conroy et al. (2008) as offering particular benefits from which mainstream practitioners might learn. In a study which looked at children at 5 and at 12, Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) conclude that when compared with a control group from the mainstream Montessori education gives children:

- an advantage in reading and in mathematics;
- improved behavioural and academic skills; and
- an enhanced sense of justice and fairness.
The authors conclude that ‘when strictly implemented, Montessori education fosters social and academic skills that are equal or superior to those fostered by a pool of other types of schools’ (Lillard and Else-Quest 2006: 1894). In addition, many parents report that it gives children the ability to behave quietly and purposefully as they go about their self-chosen activities.

**Reflective questions**

1. What aspects of Montessori’s approach do you think makes children successful in learning mathematics?
2. What are the drawbacks in trying to use an approach to education devised for children with learning difficulties in mainstream groups?
3. Do you think an approach to reading that is based entirely on phonics can work with children learning to read English?
4. What are the overlapping characteristics of work and play?

**Further reading**
