



Media Briefing

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A History of Montessori Education in Britain

In the early part of the 19th century, 45% of children under 5 in England were attending school. The infant schools (as they were called back then), consisted of fixed desks (at which children sat two by two, silent and immobile), a fixed time table, and a teacher fixed at the front of the classroom with the job of “chalk and talk”. Children of 5 or 6 were expected to read, and the school’s main function was to teach the three R’s, a goal it accomplished by the use of drill methods and the imposition of strict discipline. Legislation supported this practice, and it was only in the late 19th century that this policy became more flexible, allowing teachers to use more of their own ideas in developing their syllabus and method of teaching. While many teachers simply continued in the traditional practice, some were keen to try more progressive methods, and explored the two methods that dominated educational reform at that time, trying out techniques of either Froebel or Herbart.

While the kindergarten philosophy of Froebel began to develop a higher profile, English education proved to contain much resistance to it. It appealed to people in its advocacy of the more humane treatment of infants, but its emphasis on play lacked important components of English infant education – the development of character and discipline, and perhaps most significantly, the teaching of the three R’s to children under 6. The Herbartian pedagogy, on the other hand, represented the opposite end of the spectrum; appealing to the English in its inclusion of the three R’s in its method, but in its emphasis on formal instruction coming short of the new ideals of liberty in progressive education.

Suddenly, at the end of the 1st decade of the 20th century, news began to filter through to England of astonishing achievements made by children in a single classroom in a slum quarter of Rome. The Board of Education responds to the building enthusiasm and sends a chief inspector, Edmond G.A. Holmes, to Rome to investigate. With a long career behind him as an H.M.I, Holmes had come to realise the error of traditional education’s preoccupation with examination results, as well as the inadequacy of both the current reform methods. He found something he described as both “revolutionary” and a “challenge to all our preconceived notions”, but also “strikingly successful”. He detailed his findings in a report published by the Board in 1912, one that proved so popular it was sold out in a few days, snapped up by the hungry public. In it, he describes the spontaneous discipline that arises within the freedom of the classroom, Montessori’s ground-breaking discovery of the desire and capability of the young child for self-construction and the teacher’s responsibility in supporting it, and the joy with

which the children acquired the skills of reading and writing. While he recommended that the Board set up experimental schools consisting of the prepared environment and Montessori apparatus that enabled this natural child development to take place, he also cautioned that in order for teachers to implement the method successfully, training through both attendance at Montessori's lectures and experience in Children's House was needed in order to gain true understanding of the principle of self-education. He had visited a school in which the teacher had a limited understanding of the principle and method produced results that were "comically bad"¹. Later, in response to a writer who questioned this restriction on teachers, he reiterates "A caricature of the Montessori system (even with the "psychological method" as its cardinal feature) would give us the worst type of infant school that could possibly be imagined."²

Following his own advice, Holmes and a friend, Mr Bertram Hawker, open a Montessori school by converting the drawing room of Hawker's own house in East Runton. Through the cooperation of the Norfolk educational authorities, children from the elementary school in the area began classes with the only teacher in country trained by Montessori, a Miss Lydbetter. Holmes later gives another official report in the Times Educational Supplement of the good results of the "Experimental School in Norfolk" and recommends that a number of students to be sent to Italy to train with Dr. Montessori³.

While the Montessori method gained such devotees as Norman MacMunn, ("Go to a Montessori school and watch.. In five minutes ... you will have seen a miracle... you will see concentration such as you have never seen in infancy before; you will see new and wonderful types of children, sweet-voiced, gentle, graceful, full of a passion for order."⁴) and Edward Culverwell, Professor of Education at the University of Dublin, whose book appraising Montessori's principles and practices did much to kindle a following in Ireland. But there were critics. An especially passionate critic was the Froebelian Charlotte Mason, who wrote that the children's achievements in reading and writing were due to the Montessori method's inducement of a hypnotic state.⁵ Much of the criticism involved an understanding of only parts of the method, resulting in such diverse critiques as that (1) the work the children engaged in sensorially grading tints of colored silk spools and buttoning flaps would result in mental and physical strain or (2) that Montessori had removed all experience of pain and disagreeable effort from education, and this would result in the failure to produce even passable human beings. Perhaps for this reason,

¹ TES, Tuesday, December 3, 1912

² TES, February 4, 1913 "I did say that for young teachers who wished to work on Montessori lines study, experience and a firm grasp of the principles of self-education were needed. . . I say without hesitation that to transform oneself from a class teacher –the ruler and dogmatic director of a compact group of children who are all doing the same thing at the same time – into the friend, helper, adviser, and guide of the same number of children, working singly or in small groups, and doing a dozen different things at the same time, is a difficult feat which is not to be done at a moment's notice, and which demands either special gifts or a long apprenticeship on the part of the teacher if it is to be done well. If Mr Holman had seen the travesty of the Montessori system which I saw in a certain school in Rome he would, I feel sure, have praised rather than blamed me for having advised teachers to study the Montessori system carefully, both in theory and practice, before they attempted to work by it."

³TES Nov 5, 1912

⁴ Norman MacMunn, *A Path to Freedom in the School*, (London, G.Bell and Sons 1914), 7, 19-20, as quoted in *The Montessori Movement in England*, Sol Cohen, *History of Education* vol 3, no 1, p55

⁵The Times December 3, 1912

Montessori continued to choose not to respond to such criticisms, and she is quoted as saying “If I am climbing a ladder and a dog begins to bite at my ankles, I can do one of two things – I can either turn round and kick the dog, or simply go on up the ladder. *I prefer to go up the ladder.*”⁶ In any case, such criticism effected enough active refutation from the Montessori advocates in England that in early 1913, a London school official reported that the method was being discussed everywhere – at meetings of teachers, parents, educational officials, and that newspapers and magazines were full of conflicts of opinions.⁷ Culverwell and Hawker were both active in lecturing, and audiences of up to a thousand teachers gathered in Dublin and in various English cities.

In the spring of 1913, a dozen English teachers left to take the training course with Montessori in Rome and returned to set up experimental classes in as diverse locations as Manchester, Whitechapel, Birmingham and the Hampstead Garden Suburb. An article in the TES described it as “a time of experiment”, that saw the establishment of small, independent Montessori classes – so eager were the newly trained teachers that they set up wherever they could find room, in a library, even giving up space in their own home.⁸ Among that dozen was one sent by the London County Council, Lily Hutchinson, and in the beginning of 1914, she submitted her report to them. Though she had left for Rome quite prejudiced against the Montessori system, she had been impressed by what she had seen, and reported that there was much in the Montessori approach that would benefit the English educational system. The Council decided to let her continue the experiment, and Ms Hutchinson set up the first Montessori classroom in London, acquiring the materials at her own expense.

The movement continued to gain strength in England. Holders of the Montessori diploma in London established a study circle for the purpose of giving lectures, holding discussions, and arranging visits to Montessori classes. The group grew in attendance, and in 1915, at the Annual Conference of Educational Associations, Dr C.W. Kimmins, chief inspector of the London County Council elementary schools, reports to a substantial assemblage of Montessorians that “the Montessori movement has passed through its 1st experimental phase in this country and now claims consideration from serious educational thinkers.”⁹ His report is read in early 1916, and notes the results of experiments conducted in a Montessori council school in Leeds that show that the reading of 6 year old children in the Montessori class was twice as good as children of the same age. The children showed an impressive ability to write essays using “great freedom of expression” and a “use of complex sentences” that was “quite uncanny”.¹⁰

Such positive results set off an even louder cry for trained teachers, but though a visit from Dr Montessori and training course in England had been planned for late 1914, the onset of the First World War caused it to be postponed.

⁶ Margaret Homfray: *The Spirit of Montessori* by Delta Newby

⁷ TES Jan 7 1913

⁸ TES Monday, January 26, 1914

⁹As quoted in Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori, A Biography*, 1976, Basil Blackwell& Mott Limited

¹⁰The Times Jan 6 1916

The First World War had some impact on the Montessori movement in that it prevented the conducting of a training course in England, and the wartime restrictions on wood and timber made it impossible to continue production of the materials. However, through the years of the war, the Montessori method continued to be hotly debated in society, especially in the columns of the Times Educational Supplement.

Montessori was eager for feedback and criticism of her method (she was far more annoyed by the indiscriminate swallowing of her method as doctrine), but she asked first that her method first be tried in a school, and then, there could be constructive dialogue on the actual results of experiments taking place in different settings around the world.¹¹ And though such philosophical debates flew back and forth between camps in the pages of the Times, the kind of feedback she was asking for quietly continued in the several experimental schools around the UK.

The wider extension of the method into the upper levels of English schools becomes possible in 1917, when Montessori publishes *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Translated into English, it demonstrates how the Montessori method extends past the infant into the elementary school, to children up to 12 years of age.

At the end of the war, in 1919, Dr Montessori finally arrives to hold a long-awaited training course, taking place over the next 4 months, one that now includes instruction on the use of the advanced materials. She is welcomed by a public still fascinated by her method, and the news of the first Montessori training course in London brought 2000 applications from all over (250 were accepted). While Dr Montessori was overwhelmed by the tide of admiration, she was apprehensive about the task that lay ahead of her, as always concerned the understanding of her method would be an incomplete and distorted one.

“Only think for a minute,” she said to me “of the state of mind of a minister of the Christian religion who had to explain *everything* in half an hour to a congregation who knew nothing about it – theology, the Christian doctrine, the evolution of religion, the rise of Christianity, the history of the Church. He would say ‘No, I will take one point and explain that, the rest must be inferred.’ But if I do the same in explaining this system of child psychology – which is new and implies a totally new orientation of the adult mind – people coming to the one lecture expecting to be enlightened will take the one point I have dealt with for the whole of what I have to say. “Good gracious,’ they will say, ‘is that all there is in the Montessori method?’”¹²

In an earlier interview in Barcelona, she admitted that she was both aware of and in agreement that these short courses failed to fully prepare teachers to use her method, but that she was hopeful that if she gave a short course, support might build around the

¹¹ “Either they accept what I say and ask for more, or else they waste previous time in criticising. What I want now is a body of colleagues, research workers, who will examine what I have already done, apply my principles as far as I have gone, not in a spirit of opposition or conviction, but as a matter of pure experiment. Then they can help me with constructive criticism, after, not before, the event. “ (As quoted in Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori, A Biography*, 1976, Basil Blackwell & Mott Limited)

¹² TES October 23, 1919

establishment of a more permanent training centre. She believed that the teachers needed to continue on from the short courses in their own personal study of the method, through the books and observation in Montessori classrooms. She confided her concerns to Shiela Radice, an editor of the TES who wrote a series of articles over the time of her stay that were later compiled into a book entitled *The New Children: Talks with Maria Montessori*, relating stories of mothers and teachers who in their limited comprehension of the method, believe it ended with liberty, without going on to understand the responsibility and boundaries that made such liberty possible and constructive.

“Mothers come to her asking in all good faith whether they are to allow their children liberty to the extent of putting their feet on the table at meals. ‘*Per carita!* Get up at once!’ she has exclaimed to a conscientious teacher found disheveled on the ground with a class of little Bolsheviks sitting on top of her.”¹³

Though Dr Montessori knew that the lectures she gave were insufficient in giving her listeners a total understanding of her method, one thing is sure – that they were sufficient in convincing listeners of its virtues. Her personality had a power and a passion that brought the method alive. As she embarked on a tour of English cities – Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Northampton – societies and schools were set up and grew, as if she had passed along England sowing their seeds.

Over the next 2 decades, Dr Montessori was a continued presence in England, returning every other year to hold training courses that drew students from all over the world. Her topics at the lectures widened in scope, and mothers in attendance began to hear in greater detail about how the principles could be applied in the home.

In some ways, the presence of the Montessori method in England took a different form from that of the previous decade, when it dominated British media. The press had moved on to cover progressive education’s latest poster child, and there was a buzz around the advent of the Dalton Plan. A plan for secondary education, it was based on the same principles that Dr Montessori first published, but employed a dissimilar method.

Despite the dip in media attention, Montessori schools, however, were quietly thriving: in the London Borough of Acton the Officer for Education, Dr. Ewart Smart, had successfully converted all the schools under his guidance into Montessori classrooms, fully equipped with materials and trained Montessori teachers. They were frequently visited, and observed in by Dr. Montessori.

Bertrand Russell sent his 3 year old child to a Montessori school, and was impressed by the method. He had previously thought that the method disposed of discipline, and was surprised to find his boy instead became more disciplined, “cheerfully acquiescing in the rules of the school with no feeling whatever of external compulsion, rather as a means of enjoyment”.¹⁴

Dr. Montessori remained firm in her belief that no compromise is to be made on the method, even though it may seem detrimental to the spread of the Montessori

¹³ Radice, *New Children*, p33-34

¹⁴ As quoted in *The Montessori Movement in England*, Sol Cohen, *History of Education* vol 3, no 1, p59

movement. Others, took exactly the opposite view, feeling that it was more important that more and more people come to use the method, even in a greatly diluted form. Quantity versus quality was a constant point of debate, in all areas of the movement: teacher training, material production, establishing of schools. For example, while Montessori insisted that production of her materials by her official firm adhere to the highest standards – even though this meant a rise in costs that discouraged schools from purchasing the equipment – others began production and sales of cheaper Montessori materials, convinced that this was the way to grow the movement.

In 1939 at the onset of World War II, Montessori moved to India, putting an end to teacher training courses for the duration of the conflict. She returned to England in 1946 for the last training course she is to give in London before her death. Her years in India, and the study of Eastern philosophy she made during the years of war have left her with a deeper conviction of the role and power of constructive education in bringing about true peace, and respect for life.

She returned to the UK periodically over the next few years to sign diplomas for the Montessori training centres that were established in London. The training continued to be directed by her, but the courses were entrusted to a staff of former pupils.

The Montessori movement has had a massive effect on the British educational system, in the principles that Montessori put forth on the child's deep love for independence and meaningful, developmental work. As Rita Kramer summed up in her biography of Maria Montessori, "Forty years after the opening of the first Casa dei Bambini there was hardly a school for young children anywhere that had not been influenced to some degree by the ideas of the Montessori movement, even without knowledge or use of the Montessori method."

Maria Montessori died in 1952. Reporting on her death, the London Times said, "The final judgment on the system may well be based not so much on the degree to which it has won integral acceptance in the schools as on the measure wherein its principles have been assimilated into the general consciousness of the race."

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