

## MONTESSORI SCHOOLS

## Where learning is child's play

The Montessori ethos transformed one tough primary - and many more - are following suit.

By **Andy Sharran**

Montessori has come full circle. The education philosophy, developed by Maria Montessori 101 years ago to teach poor children in Rome, has been common in the past in well-keeled parts of London. Now, it's back in the hands of the people.

The method, which emphasises learning through play, teaching through observing and the use of wooden equipment and neutral colours, has been adopted for three- to seven-year-olds at three state primary schools. Another, Spitalgate Primary in Grantham,

has just secured £10,000 of funding from the St Nicholas Montessori charity, and at least one more school is being lined up. The plan is for 12 new Montessori state schools to be running within three to four years.

Indeed, Montessori has entered the Government's circle of trusted friends. The Department for Children, Schools and Families is paying for a booklet describing how Montessori fits in with the early-years foundation stage; apparently, this was the Government's idea. And in December, 15 teachers from the maintained sector graduated with the Montessori diploma - the first cohort to qualify.

So how did this come to pass? All these things we've been doing for years are starting to be used in state schools. And now they're saying, "Blimey, this is Montessori!" says Philip Bujak, chief executive of the Montessori St Nicholas charity and the Montessori Schools Association.



Inner-city success: Gorton Mount

The "blimey" factor is what hit Gorton Mount, the inner-city school in Manchester that first took Montessori into the state sector in 2005. After a brush with special measures, head teacher Carol Powell knew that she needed something radical. She introduced her own brand of "emotional literacy and development", which soon developed into Montessori for the youngest members of the school.

Since then, the school has charted constant progress. From special measures in 2004, the school now sits above the Manchester average for the foundation stage, although it remains below the national average. "That's joyous, because we've never been there before," says Powell. The most recent Ofsted inspection, in November, put the school at grade 2 (good) in all areas. Powell attributes this to

the Montessori ethos. "The children are much more confident, more able to concentrate because they're motivated, and playground behaviour has improved immensely. They're just more comfortable in themselves." Other state schools have written to Bujak, expressing an interest in the philosophy. The charity then sends a specialist teacher to get an indication of the school's needs, after which the school is able to bid for funding for Montessori equipping for Montessori training and teacher training.

But has Montessori, which once seemed so alien to conventional methods of education in Britain, had to meet the Government halfway in order to gain acceptance? "I think the Government is accepting our principles," says Bujak. "These schools have adjusted to us. We don't compromise on the core principles." And what about testing? Montessori is a philosophy that tries to prevent all

failure, while the Department for Children, Schools and Families is testing our children more than ever. Surely this is an issue over which Montessori and the Government should be at loggerheads? Apparently not. "We observe all the time, but it's not formal testing," says Bujak. "It's individual - we don't line them up against each other." Bujak says that the children take exams and are sent home with reports. The apparent contradictions have been smoothed over by the relaxation of Key Stage 1 regulations. The emphasis is now on putting young children in for testing when they're ready. The Gorton Mount experiment proved that Montessori could survive in a tough inner-city school. But not all of these state primaries are in special measures. Stebbing Primary School, for instance, is in an affluent village in rural Essex.

Kate Atherton, 35, has a

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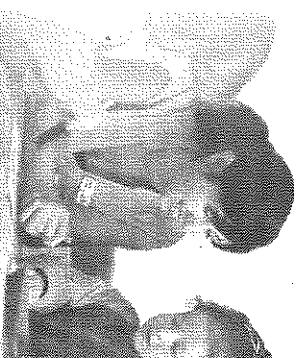
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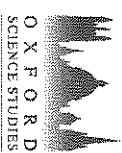
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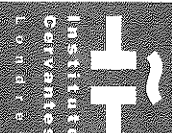
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# Profile

## A conversation with Barbara Isaacs

Barbara Isaacs is Chief Executive of the Montessori Centre International in London. Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the opening of the first Montessori school when Dr Maria Montessori started her project in the slums of Rome and began what soon became a global education movement. There are now more than 22,000 Montessori schools, with around 750 in the UK teaching 30,000 children. How relevant is Montessori education for children - and teachers - today?



### Personal Factfile:

**Born:** 1949  
**Married:** for 34 years to Tony  
**Children:** Adele, 23 Daniel, 21  
**Schools and University Attended**  
 Secondary education in the Czech republic, Montessori Nursery and Primary Diploma, awarded by Montessori St. Nicholas Bachelors Degree in Adult Education and Management achieved when I was 40, awarded by University of Greenwich Masters in Early Years Education with Care, under the guidance of Professor Tina Bruce, awarded by North London University  
**First job in England:** I was a nanny to a two year old girl, her family introduced me to Montessori education.  
**First management job:** 1973-82 manager, administrator and researcher, Omeil Gallery London  
**First job in education:** 1984 - class teacher, 3-5 year olds in St. Nicholas Preparatory school, followed by the first lecturing post in 1985 at St. Nicholas College  
**Appointed to current job:** 1998  
**Favourite piece of music:** All chamber music, but recently I saw the film "Once" with our children and the soundtrack made me feel I was 17 again.  
**Favourite food:** All that comes from the sea and well cooked vegetables  
**Favourite drink:** Kloja  
**Favourite holiday destination:** Damascus  
**Favourite leisure pastime:** Sewing, reading novels and gardening - but I have much to learn about plants and gardening in general  
**Favourite TV or radio programmes/series:** Desert Island Discs  
**Suggested epitaph:** "Follow the child".  
 My husband says it should be "She never stopped"



## Telephone invention for speech impaired

Nottingham High School pupil, Matthew Lokes, age 18, has invented an award-winning telephone for the speech impaired, as part of his Design & Technology A5 level coursework.

Using a miniature version of a computer keyboard, text is entered and changed into audible speech, which is then fed down an integrated cordless telephone to the person at the other end. This portable and easy to use product also includes a speaker, thus allowing the user to communicate in group situations.

Matthew has so far ranked in three awards for his invention, the Sir William Siemens Medal for the most innovative Design Technology project, a Crest Gold Award and the Young Engineer for Britain, East Midlands Region award for the integration and Application of Electronics.

He said: "I wanted to build something to help people, as technology can be used to aid people with all sorts of disabilities. The telephone seemed like a good idea because I learn a lot about telephone systems during a past project with Siemens Telecommunications."

"The Young Engineers for Britain competition had been the driving force from the beginning of this project so I was delighted to win the award. It made the work even more worthwhile."

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**Q**

The Montessori early-years curriculum system is based on six core areas - practical life; sensory development; languages, mathematics, cultural subjects and being creative. Indeed Montessori schools have often been before their time - they were the first to get into phonics-based teaching of reading and writing for example. Can you summarise in what ways the Montessori system and approach differs from what one might call the 'usual' approach of education?

**A**

Montessori was one of the pioneers of early years education alongside Froebel and Steiner. She recognized the enormous learning potential of young children and was the first to voice the view that early years experiences influence the child's whole development and later learning. Her pedagogy was based on 'learning by doing' in a sensorially rich environment under the guidance of a trained adult who used observation as the main assessment tool. She believed in children's need to be free in order to follow their natural development. This freedom has limits within the collective interest of the group.

**Q**

Montessori is best known for its early years programmes. Is it relevant to older children - and up to what age?

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**A**

Montessori is best known in this country for her approach to nursery education, but in countries such as Sweden, United States, Holland and Austria, the pedagogy is well established in nurseries and schools, from birth to eighteen, with the main focus being on three to twelve year olds.

**Q**

Is the case that Dr. Montessori felt that because of the rapid growth, the increased need for sleep, and hormonal changes, it is useless to try to force teenagers to concentrate on intellectual work? At one time she was rather 'new age' - recommending an Erdkinder, or Earth school, where children would live close to nature, eat fresh farm products, and carry on practical work related to the economics of supplying food, shelter, transportation, and so forth. Intellectual work is still done, following the child's interests, but without pressure.

**A**

Yes, she saw the teenager to be as unpredictable as the toddler. Her vision for secondary education was certainly unique, and we have very few schools following her complete vision of the Erdkinder.

**Q**

How many Montessori schools in the UK cater for older children?

**A**

To my knowledge there is only one school in the UK which offers opportunities for Montessori education beyond 12. This school works within the ethos of following the child's interests but these children have very few Erdkinder opportunities. David Kahn in the United States has created 21st century curriculum with opportunities to come close to nature. I believe there is an Erdkinder community in the South African countryside between Cape Town and Durban. Some schools in Sweden offer Montessori education beyond the age of 12.

**Q**

It is estimated that less than 1% of UK schoolchildren are taught using Montessori principles. After 100 years - why aren't more people convinced?

**A**

This is a global challenge for the Montessori community - how can we bring the Montessori approach to more children. Montessori herself certainly hoped that

all children in the world would benefit from her approach. The characteristics of children who have benefited from Montessori education are strong sense of self, confidence, initiative, resilience as well as good social skills. These children grow into strong individuals. It is significant that the 2020 Government vision for education includes all these qualities to be fostered in our learners. The Montessori community will need to work harder in demonstrating to the Government that we offer shelter, transportation, and so forth. Intellectual work is still done, following the child's interests, but without pressure.

The developments we have seen in the early years during the past ten years have certainly made more practitioners as well as experts aware of what Montessori has to offer children. It has opened doors for dialogue with government departments. Recently the Montessori Schools Association was invited to prepare a Guide to the Early Years Foundation Stage in Montessori Settings as a published in April 2008, and launched at a National Conference.

In recent years there have been some rather tentative moves to include some Montessori principles into the state sector. How have these gone?

During the past three years several main stream Primary Schools introduced the Montessori approach to their foundation stage classrooms. The first school was Gorton Mount Primary in Manchester where the children benefit from Montessori prepared environments. They learn from mainstream teachers who also completed Montessori training as part of the CPD. The head Carol Powell, recognized the enormous value Montessori education gives children in developing strong sense of self, community and emphasis on respectful behaviour, as a firm foundation for all future learning. Gorton now has 120 children in the

Parents who visit Montessori early-years establishments are often struck by the calm, ordered atmosphere. How do you manage it?

If you give children freedom to engage in interesting activities and if they are supported by empathetic, well educated adults, they will focus, concentrate and enjoy what they do. This is how the atmosphere of calm, harmony and industry is achieved.

Montessori education programme. They also have a scheme which encourages access to Montessori training and they are exploring ways for introducing the Montessori approach in year one and two. The statistics from last years Foundation Stage Profiles indicated real progress in many areas of learning but most significant progress, well above the Manchester averages, in the area of Personal Social and Emotional development.

Recent research in the US has indicated that Montessori children show greater social skills and similar academic development by the time they reach teenage years. In an age when manners and etiquette seem to be in short supply, these social skills must be more needed than ever. How do you manage to instil these disciplines?

By being respectful and trusting in the children's ability to learn from the favourable environment prepared specifically to meet their developmental needs and by positive role modelling both by peers and the adults.

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A conversation with  
Barbara Isaacs

continued from overleaf

Do you think Montessori children are similarly behaved when they get home?

**A** Yes, the training is expensive because training colleges do not receive any government funding. Like any other independent school or college we are self-financing. We offer not only full time but also part time and distance learning courses, which benefit greatly when family and nursery usually, but much depends on the family parenting style. Children share the same values and ethos.

How do Montessori children fare compared to others in the independent sector when they move on to secondary education and beyond? Isn't the hubbub of the outside world rather a shock?

**A** Children who benefit from Montessori primary education will approach secondary school with confidence, a positive attitude to learning, an ability to manage their own learning with responsibility and a sense of joy and adventure. How would you answer critics who say Montessori is too 'free and easy', 'unstructured', 'last century' even. "Come and see for yourself." There are so many misconceptions about Montessori education, but good Montessori nurseries and schools cannot be described by any of these phrases.

Your College offers Montessori training for teachers through full-time, part-time, or distance learning courses. Prices range from nearly £7,000 full time to £700 or so for a basic distance learning course. Most Montessori schools charge fees. Does this all mean that Montessori in the UK is the exclusive preserve of those on middle and upper incomes - a far cry perhaps from the slums of Rome which spawned the movement?

**A** One to two percent of our students want to set up and manage their own nursery. They usually come to us because they body are mainstream trained teachers. We also get many nursery nurses and BTEc, NVQ qualified early years practitioners who are looking for CPD. The majority of our students won the solo instrument (woodwind) Open Class. Philip Tate and Natalie Carroll

What proportion of your students are mainstream-trained teachers seeking to 'convert' to Montessori or add it to their skills?

**A** We see this as a wonderful opportunity to be part of the independent schools community. Many nursery schools are small businesses which will benefit from being members of this professional body. I do not see any reason why we should water down our ethos and approach. We have a strong educational approach which benefits children. It may be that some independent schools will want to know more about our work. I believe that we are as committed to delivering high quality education to children as any of the schools within the ICS.

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What are the downsides to Montessori?

**Q** None, however, it is disappointing that more children do not benefit from this excellent approach to education, which celebrates children's achievements and gives them opportunities to grow in autonomy, initiative, and embrace challenges.

Montessori is hoping to join the Independent Schools Council, and have schools independently inspected. This may make Montessori a more integral part of the wider independent schools sector - but might it not water down the differentials which set Montessori apart?

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the Montessori Approach and each one of them also makes a personal journey as they learn about themselves. It is a rigorous course of study and inevitably there will be some failures. But all students have the opportunity to retake the examination if they fail and we do have a well established revision programme for them.

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## Talented duo

Two pupils at Durham School won music awards in recognition of their outstanding performances on the corner and flute, each receiving a festival cup at the Ryton Music Festival. Pupils Philip Tate and Natalie Carroll (woodwind) Open Class. won the solo instrument 16 years and under and Natalie

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Norwich and Blyth. "Academies are turning round low performing schools in Northumberland, was approved last month (February) by the government. Plans are also underway for three new academies in Oldham and one in Bolton and three more are at the exploratory stage - at Camden, Watford and Enfield.

Set-up costs will be reduced from £4.15M to £3.5M. Universities are now able to sponsor academics without needing to provide the usual £2M sponsorship. local businessman, Graham Dacre in partnership with City College Norwich. The sponsors have made clear that the new Academy will not be a faith school, and will serve the whole community. The Academy will offer 750 places for 11 to 16 year olds and a 200 capacity sixth form.

At present there are 83 academies. Heartsease, whilst improving a 200 capacity sixth form. The Academy will offer 750 places for 11 to 16 year olds and a 200 capacity sixth form. Heartsease, whilst improving

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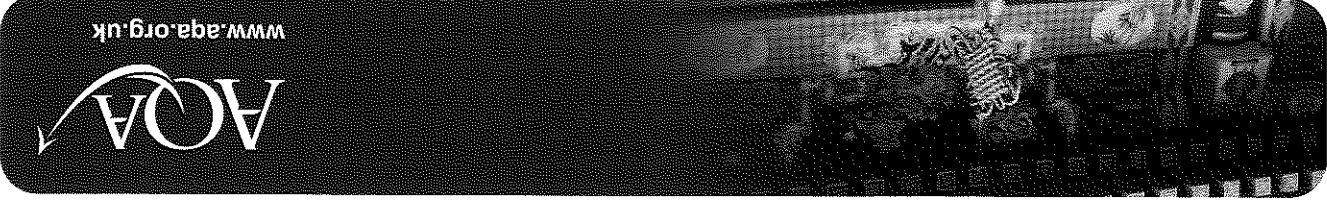
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## Kings' joins Cognita

Kings' School and Nursery, a co-educational primary school in Plymouth is to join Cognita. Founded in 1989, King's School and Nursery has over 200 pupils aged up to 11. Head is Miss Jane Lee (pictured).

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