

Blanchardstown Talk

Maria Montessori and her influence on education in Ireland

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Madame Montessori (August 31, 1870 – May 6, 1952) is rightly regarded as a great icon of the women's liberation movement. Her life was full of prominent firsts in that crucial history. From enrolling, as the only girl, at an all-boys technical school in the hope of becoming an engineer, to eventually graduating with honours, as a lone woman, at the University of Rome's medical school in 1896, against opposition from her father, and resentment from teachers and fellow students. She championed the rights of women, representing Italy at the International Women's Congress in Berlin in 1896. She refused to get married as this would have ended her professional career; she had to foster out her son, born out of wedlock, until eventually officially and legally adopting him.

She found her true vocation when she fashioned an educational philosophy and methodology out of her own empirical studies in medicine, her studies in anthropology and pedagogy, and her involvement with teaching children who had developmental disabilities. She was one of the first to recognize that children should learn through their own experience and at their own pace. She then became, even more importantly, the most influential pioneer of the Children's Liberation Movement, which, even now, is still in its infancy.

To understand the significance of her educational influence, and her own single-minded strength of character, a brief glance at the historical context of her pedagogical innovations is important.

Montessori was born 10 years after Italy became a united country as we know it today. This fairly recent unification of the geographical peninsula into the kingdom of Italy brought with it overtones of ancient Rome and the glories of the Renaissance. Such historical comparisons inspired a popular fantasy

which included imperial pretensions and ambitions. By 1922 Benito Mussolini established a Fascist regime in Rome and in 1923 he appointed Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) as minister for education. Gentile was the self-styled philosopher of Italian fascism who ghost-wrote part of Mussolini's *The Doctrine of Fascism* published in 1932.

Both Gentile and Queen Margherita, who had become Queen of Italy when her husband, Umberto of Savoy, was crowned king in 1868, were Montessori fans. They wanted to promote the Montessori Method throughout the country, which became possible with Gentile's appointment as Minister for Education. Gentile arranged a meeting between Montessori and Mussolini in 1924. Her methodology was encouraged in both schools and teacher training colleges throughout Italy. A custom-built Montessori teacher training centre, with a model Montessori school attached, was built in Rome with direct collaboration between Montessori herself and the architects involved.

The years 1929-1930 marked the highpoint of Montessori's educational influence in Italy. And, of course, Montessori was pleased to see the spread of her educational ideas in her own country. However, 1929 was also the year when the first International Montessori Congress was held, not in Italy but in Denmark, and it was followed by the foundation of the International Montessori Association, the AMI, with its headquarters in Berlin. As history unfolded these headquarters were moved to Amsterdam in 1935, because by 1934 the Nazi government in Germany had completely disowned both Montessori and her educational methods. All Montessori schools were closed as incompatible with Nazi Germany's educational ideals.

This also meant that there had to come a time when Montessori and Italian Fascism would part company. Mussolini wanted to use Montessori's international movement to showcase modern Italian education under fascism.

Montessori, however, never espoused the fascist ideology and she viewed her role in the world as an international educator rather than an Italian liberator. She held that a child's nature and stages of development were universal and not determined by any national, racial or ethnic provenance (Gutek, 2011, p. 400). This refusal to cooperate with the fascist government of Mussolini, ended their favoured relationship. As a result, her schools in Italy were closed and the Montessori movement was suppressed. According to Rita Kramer, Montessori's biographer, 'all Montessori schools in Italy ceased to exist ... in a single day.'

This was why, in 1936, The Netherlands, where over 200 Montessori schools were flourishing, became the movement's new home. A training centre with a model school was set up in Laren, near Amsterdam, and AMI moved its headquarters there.

Already, as early 1919, Maria had begun to expand her international outreach. She personally organized training sessions for teachers in London, introducing her revolutionary ideas for education to the English-speaking world. She used the format which would become standard: fifty hours of lectures, fifty hours of teaching using standard materials, fifty hours observation of Montessori classes. These courses were repeated for over a decade in London up to and including 1927 when Maria was received at court and presented to Queen Victoria.

And this is where the Irish connection begins. Two people from Waterford, here in Ireland, attended the first seminar in 1919. Eleanora Gibbon and Gertrude Allman, a Sister of Mercy from Waterford. The first of these, Eleanora Gibbon, is an unsung heroine of Montessori schools in this country.¹ She wrote a book called *Ireland, Freedom and the Child* and being a friend of

¹ Eleanora Gibbon, *Ireland, Freedom and the Child*, published in Waterford. I have seen quotations from this work and undated references to it, but have not been able to find a copy.

Mother de Sales Lowry, the visionary superior of the Convent of Mercy in Waterford, persuaded her to establish, in 1920, the first full Montessori programme in the Junior Section of St Otteran's School, Philip Street in Waterford. This, at that time, the only Montessori School in Ireland, was founded under the Department of Education and, quite unusually, made available free of charge to children of the vicinity. Around the same time, the Montessori system was introduced to the Friends school in Newtown, also in County Waterford, and in 1925 a further Montessori school was introduced at the Ursuline Convent in Waterford.

St Otteran's became something of a flagship for the movement, and the school was visited by Madame Montessori herself on two occasions, in 1927 and again in 1937. On the second occasion, accompanied by her son, Mario, Montessori expressed her appreciation of the progress made in the Mercy School: 'After 10 years I see that the works which remain with you are still alive and can never turn back. I carry with me the comfort of this visit.' This comfort would have been genuine since it came after all her schools had been closed in Germany and Italy.

Sr Gertrude Allman [who had attended the London Training Course with Eleanora Gibbon in 1919] was director of the Mercy School in Waterford. She was the first Montessori teacher to adapt the material to the teaching of Irish, which was a compulsory subject under the Department of Education's rules. It is also of interest to note that her average class size was 110 pupils from 4 to 7 years, all studying in a room called An Rioghacht,² measuring 55 by 22 feet.³

In 1924 the Montessori System was discussed at the Annual Congress of the Irish National Teachers Organisation. Eleanora Gibbon and Edward P.

² The word means 'Royalty' in Irish and was taken from a movement inspired by the Jesuit Fr Edward Cahill in the 1920s in Ireland to promote a Christian state in Ireland based upon papal social teachings of the time.

³ Extract from 'Waterford's Mercy Schools 1900-2000: A Centenary Record' by Eugene Broderick, 2000.

Culverwell, Professor of Education at Trinity College Dublin addressed the Congress. The professor urged the teachers present to make their voices heard and to persuade the Government to adopt the system if they found it so exceptional. The Department of Education, however, did not see fit to make any such innovation in early infant Education in Irish primary schools at that period in the new state's history. This was understandable as we, in this country, were only beginning to find our feet at the time.

Enter William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939), one of the great poets of the Twentieth Century, not just here in Ireland but all over the world. He took a great interest in the Montessori method of education. He had founded the Abbey Theatre with Lady Gregory in 1904 and had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. A year before that, in 1922, he was one of three senators appointed to advise the government on matters concerning education, literature, and the arts. He served two triennial terms as Senator until he retired in 1928. His brief in the Senate was to advise the government on educational matters. He made an official visit to the Montessori school at St Otteran's, Waterford, in February 1926. Following that visit, he intervened on three occasions in the Senate during March and late April of 1926, and he wrote one of his most famous poems 'Among School Children' in the first verse of which he describes that visit.

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way—the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

Although it is unlikely that Yeats read Montessori's book about her method, although it had been translated into English by Anne E. George as early as 1921,⁴ it is clear from Joseph Hone's biography that Yeats had great admiration for the Italian Minister for Education, Gentile, whom he referred to as 'the most profound disciple of our own Berkeley.'⁵ The book he was most interested in reading during his stay in Italy in 1924 was Gentile's *Reformation of Education*, which, as we have seen, was much influenced by Maria Montessori. That was the very year Gentile had introduced Maria to Mussolini.

Yeats asks, in one of his Senate speeches, that the government in Ireland consider the Italian system,⁶ which at the time included the Montessori ideal:

'I have seen a school lately in a South of Ireland town managed by the Sisters of Mercy, and it should be a model to all schools.'⁷

And again, he makes this pertinent observation: 'I would like to suggest another principle, that the child itself must be the end in education. It is a curious thing how many times the education of Europe has drifted into error. For two or three centuries people thought that their various religious systems were more important than the child. In the modern world the tendency is to think of the nation; that it is more important than the child . . . We are bound to go through the same passion ourselves. There is a tendency to subordinate the child to the idea of the nation. I suggest that whether we teach either Irish history, Anglo-

⁴ *The Montessori Method*, translated by Anne E. George, London, 1912.

⁵ From his speech made to the Irish Literary Society on November 30, 1925, included in *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce, London: Prendeville Publishing Limited, 2001, p.161.

⁶ I should like to draw the attention of the Government to one nation which has reformed its educational system in the most suggestive and profound way; that is Italy . . . This system has been tried in Ireland. There are some schools carrying it out. There is one large primary school managed by nuns in the South of Ireland which has adopted practically the entire Italian system and which is carrying it out with great effect, and has found that it is applicable, and that its teachers do not need special training to carry it out. The Italian Minister who adopted that policy was warned by everyone that it would not be possible to get this elaborate system carried out by partly educated people. It has been proved possible and of great benefit to the children.' *Ibid*, p.100-101.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.98.

Irish literature or [101] Gaelic, we should always see that the child is the object and not any of our special purposes [102].’

Yeats wrote in his introduction to Lady Gregory’s *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) ‘Children at play, at being great and wonderful people’ are the true reality of what we are and what we should become. ‘Mankind as a whole had a like dream once; everybody and nobody built up the dream bit by bit and the story-tellers are there to make us remember.’ But the children of the twentieth century had put away these ambitions ‘for one reason or another before they grew into ordinary men and women.’

Education should be child centred. Again we hear this cliché mouthed everywhere and we read it in every education document ever written and plastered on the walls in every vision statement ever elucidated. But as it is, in Ireland at any rate, the child is the very last item in the pecking order. We are overloaded with bureaucracy: Government ministers, departments of Education, Teachers Trade Unions, fill up three quarters of the picture. The amount of negativity around this narrative is numbing. Trade Unions seem to be there to get early retirement at 50 for overworked, embattled and disillusioned teachers who lead ‘a dog’s life.’ When the adults have finished quarrelling and negotiating we turn to the topic of what they are meant to be there for in the first place. In the meantime the children grow up, one year at a time, for every year the ‘authorities’ spend shoring up a model that is out of date, and producing finished products unable to cope with the complexities of the world they have inherited, out of touch with the reality of who they are in themselves.

What should we do? Somehow we have to ambush the freight train and take back the education system to ourselves and for our children.

Both Madame Montessori and W.B. Yeats refused to accept that our children should be sacrificed to the ideologies of their parents, their

governments or their nations. Children should be free to grow up and become the reality of who they really are. Nothing less should be the goal of our educational systems. And how far we are from that splendid ideal, for which Madame Montessori sowed brilliant seeds not more than a hundred years ago.

And let us not fool ourselves. We are now into an international and humanitarian battle for the next generation of young people. There is a ‘silent crisis’ the world over says Martha C. Nussbaum, author of *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2010/2012. She doesn’t mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008, which caused world leaders to work and find solutions because, at least, everyone knew it was a crisis. No, this crisis goes largely unnoticed, it is ‘a world-wide crisis in education.’ Education leaders are being short-sighted in their efforts to stay economically competitive. ‘Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance [2].’

Instead of making our educational system fit the targets of some economic plan in terms of market needs and jobs on offer, we should be listening to the voices of the children. These are the prophetic voices of the future. Let them find their own voices so that they can tell us how to cope with a future we are quite incapable of negotiating.

From the age of four our children are treated to a bookish, commercial education. Recent meetings of the United Nations seem determined to inflict

this myopia on all children of the world in the name of equality of opportunity. Signing up for the Lisbon agreement in December 2007 committed us to the EU's explicitly stated strategy, and I quote, ' . . . to become the most competitive, and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.' This goal was formulated in March 2000 by the European Council of Heads of State or Government.⁸

The kind of education which has built itself up over the last 200 years since the concept of compulsory schooling for all children took root, is capitalistic overdrive towards competitive, individualist and isolated achievement.

There has to be a massive shift in culture. Deeper learning and learning together. Not one person, who claims to be an expert, teaching us the way things should be done; but every single one of us together learning every day for the rest of our lives how to be a human being. Education must cease to be either the filtering of facts into dull or bright receptacles, or the anarchical exacerbation of any and every unbridled instinct. It must spark the knowing humanity of every child, so that each can grow in whatever direction is necessary to allow full flourishing of their unique personhood.

To say that something can be known, or must be known, is not to say that anyone can know it. A child has certain experiences which allow it to know certain things and which make it capable of knowing. But we are capable only of such knowledge as the stream of our previous experience warrants. Anything above and beyond this taste and this tempo is unintelligible. This we have learnt from Madame Montessori, a lesson that should never be forgotten. A child can only learn at its own tempo and to its own capacity.

⁸ (Council, 2000a, p. 3).

But let's not get too fixated on the Montessori method as such. Montessori herself was essentially a pragmatist. She used every possible source to fine-tune her way of promoting optimal flourishing of children in school. Between 1897 and 1898 she took courses in pedagogy at the University of Rome during which she read all the major works in educational philosophy over the previous 200 years. Pestalozzi and Froebel are obvious influences on her work, and there is nothing sacrosanct about classroom strategy from the first half of the twentieth century. We have entered a new world in the twenty-first century with its own genius and techniques.

Let us take our cue from Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) that most famous Seventeenth Century poet of the Edo Period in Japan, and the great master of Haiku, who says: 'We do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise; we seek what they sought'.

At this European Montessori Congress we should not be trying to imitate the curriculum, the content, or the design of a Montessori classroom from a hundred years ago; we should be searching for the dynamic equivalent of the Montessori spirit which can best incarnate itself in our times and circumstances.

How should we do this?

The worst possible way is to pretend that the world of tomorrow will be the same as the world of today; and that the skills, the virtues and the values which we used to cope with the world that emerged in front of us, will be appropriate or sufficient to allow our children to survive and to thrive in the strange world which is rising up to meet them.

Certainly memory will not be enough; imagination and creativity will be their most important helpmates. Teaching them what we learned, in the way we

learnt it, will be as useful to them as sword play and musketry in a world of nuclear warfare.

Let us enter the brave new world of the twenty-first century, the world of text, twitter and tweet. Twenty years from now the Dutch, always intrepid travellers, one of whom spotted Australia for the first time in 1606, plan to land on Mars. It's a one-way ticket. It will take nine months of travel in a spaceship but the chosen few who land on the red planet will, presumably, have an experience similar to those who landed in Australia, after six months on board a ship, when that continent was first discovered by Europeans.

We have to ask ourselves whether we are imposing on our 21st century children methodologies that are out of date and no longer fit for purpose.

Could it not be that our children have completely different brain-sets to our own. If, as we have learned, our brains are in partly co-created by ourselves, and are adaptable to whatever intentionality we may choose to impose on them, surely it must follow that the world our children are born into cause their brains to assume a quite different physiognomy to the one we constructed for ourselves.

The so-called 'dyslexic' child, for instance, is becoming the norm. No longer the exception, children with so-called 'special needs' are becoming preponderant. And such children are often gifted with exceptional ability, if only they are allowed to discover the world and express themselves in ways which are consonant with and aligned to their particular sensibilities. They may have a processing problem when it comes to the verbal codes which dominate, to the point of monopoly, our heavily linguistic school system. They have to work at double speed and with cunning intelligence to conceal their difficulties with reading, for instance. Whereas, if their alternative intelligence had been detected and developed from the beginning, they might be better able to cope.

We must know by now that the future, even ten years down the line, may be so different from the world we now experience that our parents would find themselves quite disoriented. We all are familiar with the child of four on the phone to his grandmother, shouting in exasperation, ‘For goodness sake, Nana, can you not even press the button at the bottom of your screen!’ We may find that we have trained our children in the wrong direction. We should have been preparing them for a world different from anything we had ever dreamed possible.

I was teaching a course in literature at Boston University some years ago. A student doing a Ph.D. in music was taking my course as an elective. I wanted the class to have the experience of actually writing with pen or pencil on paper so I asked them to write one paragraph there and then in front of me by hand. They said they had never once been asked to do such a thing during their whole time at the university. I discovered that the music student was not able to write. I didn’t make a fuss during the class so as not to embarrass him, but afterwards I gently suggested to him that he would not be able to get a Ph. D. if he wasn’t able to write a paragraph by hand. I told him that there were ways he could very quickly and painlessly get over this deficiency and gave him indications about where to go and what to do. Well, he said to me, what kind of a medieval scriptorium did you come out of, with goose-quilled pens, cow parchment and arsenic filled ink! Nobody has to know how to write these days: we all do our papers on computer and my Ph.D. will be awarded for proficiency at music.

That was the first time I began to question myself about precepts that up to then I had taken for granted as sacrosanct.

We have learned from Howard Gardner in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, that there are several different ways of processing information, and these ways are relatively independent of one another. Since 1999, Gardner has identified at least eight kinds of intelligences.

Athletes, musicians, dancers have a recognizable and specific kind of intelligence, hardly measurable in terms of an IQ test.

We blame the children for getting distracted because we are probably boring them to tears. They come from a world of direct and imperious contact with myriad stimuli, the most intensely stimulating era ever experienced: computers, iphones, multiple TV channels. We flick channels 100 times to find one that holds their attention. We send children to school and expect them to squeeze themselves into a system of one-dimensional verbal coding.

‘You sit down there and listen to me for forty minutes or I’ll report you for negligence or insubordination’.

Could it be, as Ken Wilbur suggests, that we have latched onto and magnified the very real disability called ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, turning it into an epidemic so we can feed our classes with Ritalin to make them amenable to our dreary doses of dullsville? There is no doubt, and records are there to show, that thousands of children are being medicated to supposedly get them focused and attentive. Of course, I am not saying that such a condition as ADHD does not exist, I am not competent to make such a judgment. What I am questioning is the ease with which we identify and prescribe, and the hysteria which would claim that a whole generation is so afflicted. Why should they all sit in serried rows for hours at a time listening to us? Might this not be a misguided attempt to foist 19th Century tedium on a new generation, bored out of their minds by our ‘preachy’ indoctrination. In America I have heard of cases where teachers are brought to court for boring a child to tears when they were supposed to be releasing their potential.

Here is another Ken Robinson anecdote: Lynne had been underperforming at school, so her mother took her to the doctor and explained about her never being able to sit down in the classroom for one moment in one place. She was

always fidgeting and suffered from lack of focus. After hearing everything her mother said, the doctor told Lynne that he needed to talk to her mother privately for a moment. He turned on the radio and walked out of the room. He then encouraged her mother to look through the window at Lynne, who was dancing to the radio. ‘There’s nothing wrong with your daughter, the doctor said, except that she’s a dancer and no one has encouraged her.’ Gillian Barbara Lynne [born 20 February 1926] became a famous choreographer noted for *Cats* and the longest running musical on Broadway *Phantom of the Opera*.

Let us end where we began with Yeats’s poem ‘Among School Children:’

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

My hopes for the Montessori spirit and the wisdom of this congress can also be expressed in moving words from another talk given by William Butler Yeats in 1925:

One never knows where one’s words carry, and I, in speaking, though I speak to you all, am thinking perhaps of some one young man or some one young woman who may hear my words and bear them in mind years hence. Even he and she may do nothing with my thought, but they may carry it, or some other amongst you may carry it, as a bird will carry a seed clinging to its claws. I am thinking of an Egyptian poem, where there are birds flying from Arabia with spice in their claws. I do not think any of you are millionaires, and yet permit me to dream that my words may reach one that is. If the government were to do all that I suggest . . . money may be sent to us to . . . make the school buildings pleasanter to a child’s eyes, or in some way to prepare for an Ireland that will be healthy, vigorous, orderly, and above all, happy.⁹

⁹ From his speech made to the Irish Literary Society on November 30, 1925, included in *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce, London: Prendeville Publishing Limited, 2001, p.162.