

## Preface

# Reflections on Montessori Education – Opportunities and Challenges

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I am a researcher, a developmental cognitive neuroscientist, not a Montessorian, but I offer my reflections here in the spirit of someone who has a deep respect for Montessori principles and Montessorians.

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\* Adele is the Canada Research Chair Professor of Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. A leader in two fields, psychology and neuroscience, Adele co-founded the interdisciplinary field of “developmental cognitive neuroscience.” Her specialty is “executive functions” (e.g., self-control, creative problem-solving, mentally playing with ideas, and focused concentration) especially in children. Her discoveries have thrice changed international medical guidelines for the treatment of diseases and have had a significant impact on educational practices worldwide, improving millions of children’s lives. She received her BA from Swarthmore (Phi Beta Kappa), her PhD from Harvard, and was a postdoctoral fellow at Yale Medical School. Adele is a member of the Royal Society of Canada, was named one of the “2000 Outstanding Women of the 20th Century” and was listed as one of the 15 most influential neuroscientists alive today. Her other awards include an Award for Lifetime Contributions to Developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and Society.

## **How is it that Montessori education is so similar worldwide and yet is responsive to the local culture wherever it finds itself?**

Good Montessori classrooms are remarkably similar all around the world and yet also remarkably responsive to local cultures. How is that possible?

I think one key is “practical life” activities, which can easily be adapted to local activities of daily living, and are completely congruent with what local, indigenous cultures would be teaching their children. These activities help to improve motor skills and focused concentration, but even more importantly, they provide children with a great sense of pride (pride in being able to do chores adults do, in being able to contribute to the family) and foster children’s ability to be able to do for themselves rather than being dependent on others to tie their shoes or pour their drink.

Another key, I think, is teaching largely through demonstration and observation, rather than verbal instruction. That is how traditional, indigenous cultures have always taught children. Children in traditional cultures watch adults and older children and then they start to do it themselves. Children in Montessori classrooms watch presentations by their teacher (who says very little while presenting so as not to distract children from observing what she is doing) and they watch what older children are doing (three age groups being combined into one classroom).

Children all over the world respond well to Montessori education because they feel respected, valued, and deeply cared about. They are allowed to follow what interests them and they get to decide what they will do each day. They don’t have to stay seated all day and are free to move around. The teacher’s role is not passive, however; it is up to him or her to find creative ways to motivate each child to want to learn all the different subjects through the hook of what most interests each child. This requires a deep appreciation on the part of the teacher of how everything is related to everything else. Also, it is up to the teacher to carefully observe each child: Does one need more help? Is one ready to move on to a new challenge? Does one not seem his- or herself?

Children, and teachers, respond so well to Montessori throughout the world because of the joy everyone feels in seeing the children

curious and eager to learn and because of the emphasis on “grace and courtesy” in Montessori classrooms that reduces stress and promotes the feeling of being in a supportive community. Children are encouraged to help one another, be kind to one another, and an atmosphere of kindness and good feeling quickly pervades a Montessori class.

### **Future opportunities for Montessori education**

In looking to the future, Montessori education has some key strengths to offer. For example, one huge problem in developing countries is very large classes. Montessori can help with that; it is particularly well suited to large class sizes. In contrast, for a teacher trying to hold the attention of all 50 or 60 students, that can feel exhausting and impossible. Montessori teachers do very little whole-group instruction; children work individually, in pairs, or small groups. Older children help teach younger children, and research shows children learn more and faster from peer instruction than adult instruction (Hall & Stegila, 2003).

An important advance that helps to make Montessori accessible to millions of additional children was the loosening of AMI's requirement that Montessori materials must be purchased from professional suppliers. Now that local communities are able to make their own Montessori materials from locally available items, communities and schools that previously could not afford Montessori materials now can, and they feel more pride and ownership of them, having made them themselves.

Another important advance is Montessori for the care of elders with serious cognitive decline or dementia, spearheaded by Anne Kelly. I hope this takes off worldwide and creates a sea change in how people with dementia and other disabilities are treated. They, too, need to feel respected, valued, and loved. They, too, need to be able to do for themselves.

A final major development is the emergence of Educateurs sans Frontières, an inspiring group of Montessori educators bringing quality education and hope to the poorest children in some of the poorest regions of the world. What a wonderful network this is! The creativity, inventiveness, dedication, and commitment of all those involved is a joy to behold.

### **Creating opportunities to partner with El Sistema music programmes and Non-Directive play therapy**

I would like to see more in-depth arts programmes as part of Montessori education, and El Sistema music training would seem to be an excellent fit with Montessori principles. El Sistema, started by José Antonio Abreu in 1975 as Venezuela's national system of Youth and Children's Orchestras, is now in over 40 countries across five continents. Abreu envisioned classical music training as a social intervention that could transform the lives of impoverished children (Booth & Tunstall, 2016). Just as Maria Montessori admonished teachers to never embarrass a child ("The child in the Montessori classroom can never fail; she can only be a work in progress" - Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of the Austin Montessori School in Texas, USA, and Director of it for 34 years), so, too, children in El Sistema are never made to feel ashamed because of a mistake ("Going wrong is just something you do on the way to going right" - Marshall Marcus, Head and Founder of Sistema Europe, Founder of Sistema Africa, Director and Trustee of Sistema England). That is important because an environment where it is safe to take risks encourages creativity and critical thinking (Isen et al., 1987). Just as children help teach other children in Montessori classrooms, children help to teach other children in El Sistema programmes ("The person who knows three notes is the teacher to the person who knows two notes" - José Antonio Abreu). A fundamental goal of both Montessori education and El Sistema music training is for children to be good human beings, caring and considerate of one another, able to get along well with others. "The primary skill you learn in El Sistema is not your instrument; the primary skill is working together. It's using the orchestra as a metaphor for how we work together as a society - to become fantastic at working together" - Marshall Marcus. El Sistema programmes emphasize the joy of playing music together more than technical proficiency: children play together from the start, rather than practising alone until they reach a certain skill level. The joy of learning and improving is palpable in both Montessori and El Sistema programmes.

Just as a fundamental premise of Montessori education is that children have within themselves both the ability and the motivation to learn, master skills, and become more competent, so too, a fundamental premise of non-directive play therapy is that the "child is capable of solving his own problems, making

his own choices, taking responsibility for himself in many more ways than he is usually permitted to do" (Axline, 1964). In non-directive play therapy, "[the child] is in command of the situation and of himself, no one tells him what to do, no one criticizes what he does, no one nags, or suggests, or goads him on, or pries into his private world.... The therapist respects the child..., does not patronize the child,... hurry [the child], or, in impatience, quickly do things for him - that would imply a lack of confidence in his ability to take care of himself." (Axline, 1964); the same can be said of Montessori education. Maria Montessori's admonition that "we cannot see the inner workings and processes, nor can we hurry it along. We must be willing to wait.... The child has his own laws of development, and if we want to help him grow, it is a question of following these, not imposing ourselves upon him," is echoed by Virginia Axline's admonition that "it is not always easy to let the child lead the way when he seems to be very close to the heart of his problem and yet seems to be skirting around it. However, experience warns that therapy cannot be hurried.... When a child is ready to express his feelings in the presence of the therapist, he will do so. He cannot be hurried into it." I would love to see more non-directive play therapy programmes partner with Montessori programmes, as one sees in the Lumin Community Schools in Dallas, Texas, USA.

### **Challenges facing Montessori education going forward**

Montessori education faces many challenges, including the cost and length of training and the cost of private Montessori schooling. Another problem is that a superb teacher trained only by AMI, not in connection with a University, lacks the necessary credentials to be hired by most public school systems. That is one reason why all too often Montessori education is available only, or primarily, to the privileged who can afford private school tuition. Having more Montessori training for undergraduate and graduate university credit leading to a university degree addresses, at least in part, the problem of cost and length of training and also directly addresses the problem of credentialing. It might also help to address the shortage of AMI-trained Montessori teachers and trainers and the stark shortage of AMI-trained teachers who are BIPOC (black, indigenous, or people of colour).

There are currently very few University programmes that offer a Bachelor or Master's degree in Montessori Education. Many more are needed.

Loyola University in Maryland, USA, has offered a M.Ed. in Montessori Education since 1999. Students receive college credits for AMI diploma classes given by AMI trainers at the Washington Montessori Institute, and then complete additional credits through Loyola University School of Education to complete the M.Ed. in Montessori Education.

The University of Vic in Catalonia, Spain, also offers a M.Ed. in Montessori Education and has since 2010. This is the only official European Master's degree in Montessori Teaching for children 0-6 years that is recognized and validated worldwide. This programme was headed by Silvia C. Dubovoy from its inception until she retired in 2021.

The University of Hartford in Connecticut, USA, is the only institution I know of where one can earn a Bachelor or Master's degree in Montessori Education. Hartford offers a BSc in Education, Montessori Concentration, a BA in University Studies, Montessori Concentration, a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education, and a M.Ed. in Elementary Education. These programmes work in partnership with the Montessori Training Center Northeast, an AMI-teacher training centre. In addition, the University of Hartford has a Center for Montessori Studies co-founded in 2017 by researchers and practitioners of Montessori education.

Finally, the Montessori Institute of San Diego (MISD), California, USA, has had a partnership since 2016 with the University of San Diego School of Professional and Continuing Education that allows students to earn early childhood education (ECE) credits necessary for employment in California via coursework completed at MISD as part of either the 0-3 or 3-6 AMI Teacher Training Program.

Another challenge facing Montessori education going forward, besides the cost and length of training, cost of Montessori schooling when it is private, lack of a credential recognized by most school systems, lack of exposure (much less training) of most teachers to Montessori educational principles and practices, and shortage of AMI-trained teachers and trainers (especially with BIPOC backgrounds), is how to train teachers to embody Montessori principles in their heart, in the very fibre of their being. It is easier to teach Montessori practices, like how to carry out a presentation, than it is to train someone to embody Montessori, yet the practices fall flat without that personal embodiment. Montessori education is a not a cookbook; it's not

a set of techniques; it's a way of being with children. I do not have a good answer regarding how one teaches this, but it strikes me that it takes years of training, and that trying to address the shortage of trainers by reducing the prerequisites for becoming a trainer risks reducing the quality of Montessori education, which would be a great shame. To be a good Montessori teacher one must be an astute scientist - testing hypotheses about what each child needs or why a child is having a problem. To be a good Montessori teacher one should also be a good Rogerian therapist - a compassionate, perceptive observer and listener, able to follow the child's lead and able to love each child unconditionally without one's triggers, prejudices, or unresolved issues getting in the way.

AMI has a terrific Executive Director in Lynne Lawrence. With Lynne at the helm, I have only optimism about what AMI can accomplish.

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# *Perspectives on Montessori*

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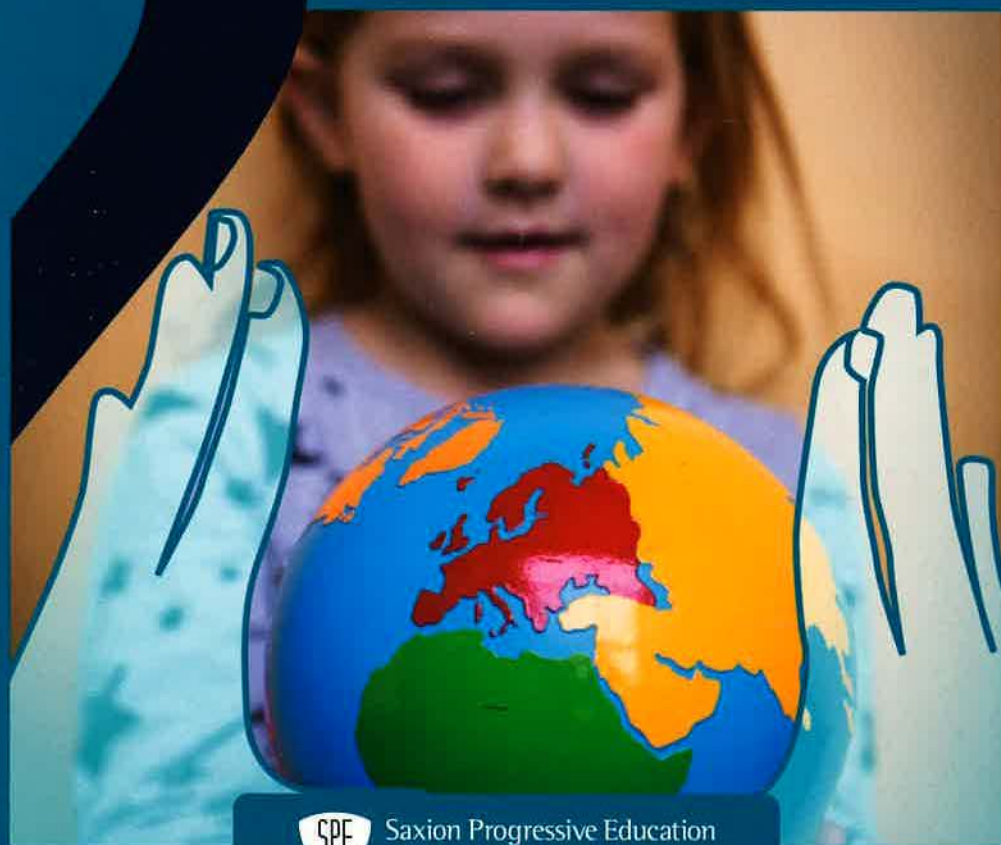
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