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Who cares about Maria Montessori?

Montessorians do, for good reasons. But do we make too much of her?



BY **DAVID AYER**

Who is Maria Montessori to the Montessori movement, and what does that mean for Montessori as a movement in the 21st century?

Three articles in this issue of *MontessoriPublic*, and some conversations I've been in lately with non-Montessori observers, take on aspects of Maria Montessori herself, her life, her achievements and influence, and her written works.

In "Go to the archives," (see page 16) Paula Preschlack urges Montessorians to go to Montessori's written work for inspiration and advocacy. She points to the "rich library of work to dive into and derive information from," and she's right, that's an incredible resource.

In a conversation with education reformer and NCMPS Board membe Jared Joiner (coming to print this fall), he pointed out that Montessori's 100-year body of proven practices and materials are a strength in a world of untried innovations.

And in "Global (Re) Entry..." (see page 8), Sarah Stephens takes personal inspiration from Doctor Montessori's life story, her vision of children and their potential, and her work with marginalized children in her early years.

"Maria Montessori and the Nobel Peace Prize" (see page 15) takes on one of the oft-cited details of Montessori's life: Her three nominations for the prestigious award. (Although the story may not go quite the way you expect.)

And it's understandable to draw inspiration from Montessori's words, her work, and her spirit. It's fair to rank her as a genius in the field of education and human development: she saw something that had never been seen before in the nature of childhood, and acted to bring her ideas into the world.

But let's face it: Montessori fans can at times get a little overheated about her personal story and her writings, treating them with a reverence that people we might call "non-Montessorians" can find a little suspect or even off-putting.

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But there's a third problem that may be even more critical when we're talking to the rest of the world: No-one cares about Maria Montessori! And why should they?

For Montessorians, it's great to be inspired and refreshed by the depth of Montessori's work. It's deep and inspiring! And it's fine to share that depth and inspiration with others as they come to know and understand the method.

But to the education world, the fact that this is a 100+ year old pedagogy with deep coherence based on the scientific observations of a trailblazing early 20th century feminist, physician, and educator—is not the most important thing about Montessori, or the first thing they need to know.

This has been a hard lesson for me to learn. I've been speaking and writing about Montessori for decades, mostly in private schools, and the way I've talked about the woman and her work has changed a lot over time.

Here's where I was when I joined the public sector in 2016:

Montessori education is named after its founder, Maria Montessori, an Italian scientist, medical doctor, and educator. First developed with low-income

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Montessori wasn't actually the first female doctor in Italy

When we're outside of the "Montessori world," speaking to people who don't know much about the method, there are several problems with this approach.

First, some of the received lore isn't necessarily true. Montessori wasn't actually the first female M.D. in Italy, although she was among the first. And as for the Peace Prize, well, see page 15.

Second, some of the things she said and wrote haven't aged that well, scientifically or in terms of how we relate to our fellow humans. You don't have to dig too deep to find some squishy science or outright offensive worldviews and language. Knowledge has expanded; Montessori was a person of her time and place, and times have changed.

This doesn't mean anyone should reject the core of her work, or the concrete results we see as it is practiced with hundreds of thousands of children

and special needs children in 1907, Montessori is practiced in public and private schools all over the world, serving children from birth to age eighteen.

There's a lot of what we love about Montessori in here. But does it maybe make it sound a little...old-fashioned?

Here's a recent revision:

A theory of human development, a pedagogy, and a curriculum, Montessori is a holistic approach based on scientific observations of human development. First developed in 1907 with low-income children...

This is better, and gets a lot of philosophy into one sentence. But is the philosophy—so important to us—the first thing people want to know?

Here's a recent paragraph, specifically aimed at public school leaders without a lot of time or patience for theory and philosophy:

Montessori is a time-tested curriculum and pedagogy used in more than 560 US public schools and around the world. Research shows that Montessori supports academic and developmental outcomes and can elevate and equalize outcomes for low-income children and children of color. School districts in Washington DC, Houston, Denver, Milwaukee, and many more offer Montessori programs to the families they serve.

I'm hoping that's a paragraph that catches their attention and makes them want to learn more—just like a Montessori elementary story! Then I can tell them how we do it—the spooning, the great lessons, the three-hour work period. Freedom and responsibility. The development of the will. Cosmic education! (But don't get carried away.)

It's fine—it's more than fine, it's critical—for us to study deeply and draw inspiration from Montessori's work, following Preschlack and Stephens. Her discoveries and experiments are profound, multi-layered, and richly interconnected, always showing us something new, and I'll never stop re-reading and observing and learning.

But as Montessori herself *may or may not* have said, "*I keep pointing at the child; they keep staring at my finger.*"

Let's show the rest of the world what Montessori means for children. That's what matters, and that's what will open their eyes.

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