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BRINGING MONTESSORI INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION IN PRINT AND ONLINE • EXCERPTED FROM: **SPRING 2023 (VOL. 7, #2)**

Montessori gets a new Handbook

A massive new scholarly publication brings Montessori firmly into the academic world



DAVID **AYER**
WITH ANGELA **MURRAY**

In 1914, "Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook was published in English to coincide with her visit to the United States," as a brief introduction to her method for American readers. This year (2023) sees the publication of the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education*, a massive, comprehensive, globally sourced, academic introduction to and overview of Montessori education, the history and scope of the Montessori movement, as well as current issues in Montessori and directions for future research.

It's a little daunting to convey how important this work is for the development and furtherance of Montessori education, especially in the publicly funded realm. For decades, partly due to the movement's own actions, and with notable, heroic exceptions especially in more recent years, Montessori has stood apart from the academic and research world, content to practice and grow its worldwide reach without much interaction with the world of studies, research programs, publications, and the like.

So how did something like this finally happen and what does it mean? Angela Murray, director of University of Kansas Achievement & Assessment Institute's Center for Montessori Research (CMR), and co-editor of the Handbook (with Eva-Maria Tebano Ahlquist from Stockholm University, Maria McKenna from the University of Notre Dame, and Mira Debs from Yale University), shared some of the story with *MontessoriPublic*.

It all goes back to the formation of a Montessori Special Interest Group, or SIG, as part of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). AERA is a gigantic (25,000 member) professional organization founded in 1916, representing education researchers in the United States and around the world. 150 SIGS within AERA "provide a forum within AERA for the involvement of individuals drawn together by a common interest in a field of study, teaching, or research when the existing divisional structure may not directly facilitate such activity," from Adolescence and Youth Development to Writing and Literacies. Up to 2019, however, Montessori had no official representation—a measure of how removed the model has been from the mainstream.

That all changed in 2019 with the formation of a Montessori SIG as a result of work by an informal Montessori research working group. At the 2019 AERA annual meeting, "the world's largest gathering of education researchers and a showcase for groundbreaking, innovative studies in an array of areas," the Montessori SIG was able to represent at a booth in the exhibit hall, crammed with software companies, publishers, and universities, at an event attended by 15-20,000 people.

"So you can imagine, when we brought in a booth full of Montessori materials, we attracted a lot of attention," Murray told me. "We would have people come by and say, 'Oh, I went to Montessori' or 'My child, or my granddaughter, is in a Montessori school,' or some even said, 'You know, I was a Montessori teacher before I got into academia.' But then they would follow that with, 'And we're really surprised you're here—I thought this was just this sort of fringe private school thing that didn't really participate in kind of the academic world, but here you are and—wait there's a journal? How come I've never heard of this?'"

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But one of the people who came by the booth was an acquisitions editor from Bloomsbury Academic Publishing. Bloomsbury is a leading publishing house perhaps best known as the U.K. publisher of the Harry Potter books, but their interest in Montessori arose from their Bloomsbury Handbook academic series. "Bloomsbury Handbooks is a series of single-volume reference works which map the parameters of a discipline or sub-discipline and present the 'state-of-the-art' in terms of research," according to their website,

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and the titles run the gamut from *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry* to *The Bloomsbury Handbook of World Theory*, with stops along the way for Handbooks on Hip Hop Pedagogy, Japanese Religions, and Socrates.

Bloomsbury Handbooks are academic reference works, intended for use in colleges and universities, which give a scholarly orientation and treatment to the broad outlines of a subject, identifying key issues and suggesting the landscape for future research. This is the kind of thing that has been missing from the Montessori research world. Bloomsbury, of course, doesn't bother publishing books they don't think will sell (and the book is not inexpensive, at $157.50 for the hardback), so this yet another sign that Montessori is being taken seriously.

Bloomsbury expressed strong interest in a Montessori Handbook, soliciting a proposal, and Murray jumped at the chance. At a fall 2019 retreat, the research working group put together a table of contents and a structure to propose. Several considerations were prominent in the discussion. First, it was important that the work be scholarly and critical, not just celebratory, in order to be taken seriously. That meant seeking out experts in various areas and not shying away from challenges or limitations in Montessori.

It was also important, from Bloomsbury's perspective as an international publisher, and from a Montessori perspective, that the work be global in scope, so the group reached out to writers and editors from around the world, especially the vibrant world of European Montessori scholarship, but also from everywhere Montessori is practiced. Although the work largely steers clear of the Montessori partisanship prominent in U.S. circles, representatives from both AMI and AMS, as well as other Montessori organizations, were closely involved.



The Montessori Handbook in good company

The proposal wasn't a formality Murray told me. "They didn't just say, 'OK, yes please, go write it'—we had to put together a pretty extensive proposal where we had abstracts written for all of the chapters we were proposing and that was unanimously approved by Bloomsbury. They were really enthusiastic about it so that was really pretty exciting." Then the team got to work, writing, editing, and assembling what became a 600+ page book with 62 chapters in six main sections. The book launched at the AMS Event in March, and is available for sale now.

So what's in the book?

The first section, "Foundations and Evolution of Montessori Education," comprises four chapters introducing Montessori's life and work, going "beyond Montessori as an educator toward a broader history of Montessori honoring her contributions as a philosopher, feminist, and political agent," and featuring contributions from Swedish, Italian, and American scholars. Montessorians familiar with E.M. Standing's and Rita Kramer's more widely known biographies may find new perspectives here on the intersection of early 20th century political and social movements and Montessori's work.

Part II, Key Writings of Maria Montessori, does what few treatments of her work have done before: place them in chronological and thematic context and provide background for when, where, how, and why they were composed and published. Seven chapters sort her works into Origins of the Pedagogy, School Years, What is Childhood, Math and Grammar, Peace Education, Philosophical Writings, and Societal Responsibility and the Child. Again, readers familiar with her work are likely to find new insights and areas of inquiry. And again, contributions from scholars outside the U.S. provide depth and specificity.

Part III, Montessori Pedagogy Across the Lifespan, walks us through the planes of development. While the

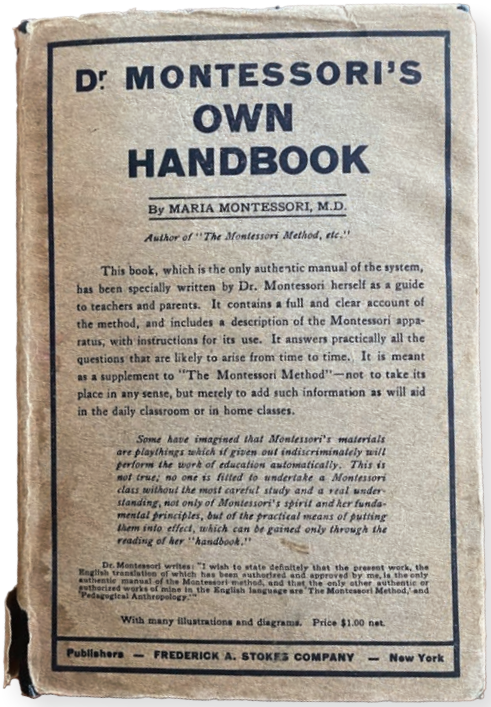
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contributions from Montessori trainers at various levels and from diverse branches of Montessori are of course instructive, it's again the perspectives of scholars from "outside Montessori" that were most illuminating. After all, people encountering Montessori for the first time aren't Montessorians! To read an analysis of the pedagogy from a scholar who studies and analyzes multiple pedagogies is to understand our work through the eyes of a well-educated outsider, and helps us immediately see the strengths and weaknesses others will see in the approach.

Part IV concerns The Science of Montessori Education, and this is where the work may generate some serious interest and activity in the education world. The first three sections do an admirable job of representing Montessori and her work as a substantial subject worthy of scholarly inquiry, rather than a niche approach or an historical curiosity. The editors are explicit: "We intend for the works here to lead readers to additional researchers and source material in the field. Most importantly, we hope these contributions spark readers' interest in continuing to develop, conduct, and participate in high-quality research related to Montessori education."

Ten chapters cover neuroscience, research methods, fidelity, efficacy, assessment, error monitoring, cognitive science, executive functions, motivation, and flow. The past decades of often lonely work by individuals and teams of researchers have brought us to the point where these chapters could be written, and the attention of a publisher such as Bloomsbury could be attracted.

Part V extends the relevance and scope of Montessori education with a survey of Global Montessori Education, with 23 chapters replete with images from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America, as well as chapters on Educateurs Sans Frontières and Future Directions for Global Montessori Research.


Dr MONTESSORI'S OWN HANDBOOK

By MARIA MONTESSORI, M.D.

Author of "The Montessori Method, etc."

This book, which is the only authentic manual of the system, has been specially written by Dr. Montessori herself as a guide to teachers and parents. It contains a full and clear account of the method, and includes a description of the Montessori apparatus, with instructions for its use. It answers practically all the questions that are likely to arise from time to time. It is meant as a supplement to "The Montessori Method"—not to take its place in any sense, but merely to add such information as will aid in the daily classroom or in home classes.

Some have imagined that Montessori's materials are playthings which if given out indiscriminately will perform the work of education automatically. This is not true; no one is fitted to undertake a Montessori class without the most careful study and a real understanding, not only of Montessori's spirit and her fundamental principles, but of the practical means of putting them into effect, which can be gained only through the reading of her "handbook."

Dr. Montessori writes: "I wish to state definitely that the present work, the English translation of which has been authorized and approved by me, is the only authentic manual of the Montessori method, and that the only other authentic or authorized works of mine in the English language are The Montessori Method, and Pedagogical Anthropology."

With many illustrations and diagrams. Price $1.00 net.

Publishers — FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY — New York

The Montessori Handbook, 1913 edition

Part VI closes the book with Contemporary Considerations Regarding Montessori Education, with chapters on the Digital Age, Teacher Education, Gender, Inclusion, Multilingualism, Plurilingualism, Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Montessori, Dementia, and Ecoliteracy. Here too readers may find aspects of Montessori they may not have previously considered or seen articulated at this level of discourse, and researchers will surely find new topics and directions for exploration and study.

So how can people get their hands on the book? As mentioned above, the book is on sale now at $157.50 for hardback, $126 for an e-book, which may be a lot to spend if you are not a university library. This is an institutional resource, and institutions will need to make the purchase and help make it available to individuals. School leaders, public and private, should buy this book—and lend it out to families and staff. Training centers should buy this book—and assign chapters as reading for prospective teachers. Colleges and universities should buy this book—and place it in their libraries, and use it in coursework. And anyone with a serious interest in Montessori education should really consider adding it to their library. It's that good, that comprehensive, and that important.

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