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Maria Montessori: Education for Peace

Barbara Thayer-Bacon

Introduction

The year I earned my elementary Montessori teaching license is the same year I became a single mother with three children, ages 2-7, living in a home I could no longer afford on my meager income.¹ I could only afford to stay in my large Victorian home if I rented out a bedroom or two, so I advertised in the local paper and had a college athlete inquire about renting a room, for at \$100/month including utilities, two blocks from campus; it was a steal! This American soccer (football) player was excited about the possibility of living in our home as we interviewed each other, however, he returned the next day to inform me his coach had forbidden him from renting a room from me. “Really?” I responded, incredulously. “Why?” “Because you are a Montessori teacher,” he informed me, sheepishly. I was dumbfounded! Most Americans associate Montessori schools with pre-school age children, or maybe children with special needs, and neither association causes concerns. I asked, “Who is your coach?” The soccer player informed me he was an elderly man from Germany. I searched my memory for what I had recently learned about Dr. Montessori’s history in my training program and asked: “Was he worried about me being a *liberal* or a *Fascist*?” The answer was, “Fascist.” I thanked him for coming by and at least letting me know the reason I’d lost a renter.

The German college soccer coach’s strong response to my being a Montessori teacher was such a surprise at the time. I didn’t consider what I was doing to be very dangerous. However, clearly he did! It’s that danger I want to explore in this paper. I plan to describe the history of the Montessori education movement, in the context of the political times within which she worked. They are extraordinary times as Montessori became the first licensed female

medical doctor in 1896, she opened the first Casa dei Bambini in 1907, and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize the last three years of her life, before she passed away in 1952. During her lifetime of work, she proceeded to try to establish schools and train teachers throughout the world with the aim of helping children reach their full potentials and learn how to live together in harmony and peace, while war was raging all around her [World War I (1914-18), the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), World War II (1939-45)]. Montessori considered her schools to be like extensions of home, and she thought she could separate education (in the home and in the school) from the politics of governments. She sought to not take a political stand or get involved in the political issues of her times, but suffered continually the affects of that declared neutrality. It was her belief in separation of children's education from politics that caused her to spend most of her adult life moving from place to place, and to find herself having to be rescued from a Civil War in Spain by a British cruiser in 1936, working for Mussolini's ministers of education between World War I and II, and interned in India in 1940 throughout the rest of WW II as an enemy alien when India entered the war while she was there to conduct teacher training courses. She lived out the end of her life with Holland (today's Netherlands) as her home base while she continued to offer training programs and attend conferences in various locations.

I seek to further develop a concept of democracy-always-in-the-making that underscores the transactional relationship that exists between the public and private, and between the political and the educational worlds in which we live. Sharing Montessori's story will help me demonstrate the impossibility of her position, that put her in a situation where the Germans associate her with Mussolini and fascism, yet one of the first things the Nazis did as WWII broke out was close down the Montessori schools in Germany and Austria for they were perceived as a national threat; they taught children to be independent, self-assured, self-directed, caring, critically thinking, democratic citizens. The soccer coach was right, I was a potential dangerous influence to his athlete, but not for the reasons he held, that I might be a Fascist, instead because being around me might have encouraged his student to think for himself.²

Maria Montessori and La Casa dei Bambini

Maria Montessori's (1870 - 1952) public story of becoming the first female in Italy to graduate from the University of Rome's medical school in 1896 and become a licensed medical doctor is well known (Kramer 1976, Standing 1957/1998). Upon graduation from medical school, Dr. Montessori replaced a surgical assistant at Santo Spirito, where the previous year she had worked as a medical assistant. She also continued doing research at the University of Rome, started a private practice, and during this time (1896-1906) occupied the Chair of Hygiene at one of two women's colleges in Italy (*Magistero Femminile*, in Rome), and served as a permanent external examiner in the Faculty of Pedagogy there. In 1897 Dr. Montessori joined the staff at the University of Rome as a voluntary assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic (because she was a woman she was only allowed to be in a voluntary role). Part of Dr. Montessori's duty at the Psychiatric Clinic was to visit Rome's asylums for the insane in order to select subjects that were suitable for the clinic. Her interest in "idiot children" was triggered by her exposure to the conditions with which they lived, for they were housed with the adults in the asylums and no effort was made to care for them, beyond keeping them alive.³ Montessori offered medical care for the "feebleminded children," based on a strong interest in children's diseases that had

developed for her while in medical school. However, the more she came in contact with the children and had the chance to observe them, the more she began to view their problem of mental deficiency as a pedagogical problem rather than a medical one.

During the 1897-1900 time frame Dr. Montessori searched for information concerning efforts by other doctors to try to educate “feebleminded children.” It is important to note that she approached this search for educational advice through the field of medicine, not through the field of education. Montessori was a scientist first and foremost, and only came into the field of education through the back door of science. Throughout her career she approaches the education of the child as a scientist, observing children intently and making intuitive hypotheses about their behavior that she proceeds to test out in the classroom, treating the classroom like a laboratory. Her insights about special education and early childhood education are often credited to the fact that she was not encumbered by preexisting educational assumptions that she avoided because she was not trained as a teacher, but instead as a doctor. She discovered work in France by two doctors, Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1775-1838) and Edouard Seguin (1812-1880), Itard’s student, who wrote about their efforts to educate deaf children. Itard, as a young medical student at the National Institute of the Deaf in France, worked with a very famous student, Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, and he published reports about his efforts to civilize Victor and teach him language. Montessori translated their work into Italian by hand, so that she could absorb their lessons.

Dr. Montessori worked with another assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic, Dr. Giuseppe Montesano, who also shared her interest in “deprived children,” and they published some reports together about the lack of adequate care for “retarded and disturbed” children. Montessori was invited to give a series of lectures in Rome on the education of the feebleminded, as a result of her publications, and she used these lectures as a chance to urge for special courses for teachers in pedagogical methods designed for “the retarded.” The success of these lectures earned her invitations to give more lectures on similar topics in Turin, Milan, Padua, Venice, and Genoa, and even in London. During the time period 1898-1900 Dr. Montessori was writing articles and giving lectures to help raise awareness of the need for better care for the children in the asylums, as well as maintaining a private practice, Dr. Montesano became chief physician of the Rome mental asylum.

In 1900 Drs. Montessori and Montesano were appointed co-directors of a new school, the Orthophrenic School, where children from the asylums were placed. The two doctors worked closely together developing a teacher-training program for the education of “feebleminded children” that became highly successful. The school was set up like a teaching hospital. Montessori began designing materials similar to what Itard and Seguin described that she would test out to see if the children in the school were drawn to them or not, and at what age. The materials were designed to be attractive, self-correcting, and sequential, with basic concepts isolated for ease of understanding. The basic concepts such as rough/smooth, long/short, were taught through materials that relied on the children’s senses, such as sight, taste, smell, and especially touch. To everyone’s surprise, the education program Montessori developed worked so well that several of the “defective children” learned how to read and write and were able to

pass the state examinations with above-average scores. Montessori became famous for this educational feat.

For Dr. Montessori, her successes with educating “idiot children” caused her to wonder about the education system “normal children” were experiencing in Italy. She knew her children who scored so well on the state exams were mentally challenged, and so she wondered, what was wrong with the normal children’s education system that they were not doing better? This became the problem that absorbed her. For Dr. Montessori, this was a scientific question, which became a hypothesis she sought to test out: will my teaching methods that I have used with “defective” children help “normal” children learn more as well? Montessori resigned her position at the Orthophrenic School of Rome in 1901 and returned to school to study the mind instead of the body, and to educate herself about normal children. She enrolled in anthropology, where the new field of psychology was housed. She also studied educational philosophy, all that she thought would help her understand the reasons why schools were failing normal children. In 1904 she was offered a job teaching as a professor of anthropology at the University of Rome.

A building society in Rome that was backed by the principal banks in Italy built a housing project for low- income level families in the San Lorenzo slum district and discovered they had a problem. While most of the parents were away during the day working, their younger children not yet in school were not being supervised. They were free to roam the buildings and they were defacing the property. The authorities that owned the buildings decided to bring all sixty children together in one room and pay someone to supervise them. One of those responsible for the San Lorenzo project recalled reading about Dr. Montessori’s work in a magazine and decided that she would be the best person to direct the supervision of the young children. Montessori accepted the offer as she saw this as an opportunity to work with normal children and test out her pedagogical theory with them. To Montessori (1912, p. 43), “the work seemed to offer tremendous possibilities of development,” however her friends couldn’t understand how she could involve herself in such insignificant work and her medical colleagues were equally disapproving, equating this job to child care, not science (Kramer 1976).

In January, 1907 Montessori opened the first *Casa dei Bambini* which served as an extended home for the children as they spent the entire day there, including for the main, midday meal. She hired a young woman with no training as a teacher to be the teacher in the classroom, wanting someone who would not bring her own preconceptions of what a teacher is suppose to do to the classroom. Montessori charged the “directress,” as she preferred to call her, with the task of observing the children instead of trying to be an authority in charge of the children. The children were free to move around the room at will and choose what they wanted to do. The directress’s task was to note the children’s interests and behavior, what material they were attracted to and how they functioned in the room. Montessori had a friend make child size tables and chairs for the room, instead of using desks, and she introduced the children to the self-correcting didactic materials she had developed for the “feebleminded” children. Several of her patron friends donated toys for the children to play with, but the children chose to work with the didactic materials over playing with the toys. The children were like little explorers, hungry to learn, and they settled right in and began to work in earnest. Montessori began testing out more academic materials that she designed, as well as introducing more practical life activities, such as

teaching the children how to tie their shoes and dress through the manipulation of button, zipper, and snap frames, and prepare and serve their mid-day meal. Much to everyone's surprise, Montessori discovered that preschool age children have a strong desire to learn, and that they can learn on their own, if placed in an environment that allows them the opportunity to do so. Montessori's school became so successful and well known that heads of state and royalty traveled to Italy to see her school where young children were learning to care for their environment, themselves, and each other, as well as learning how to read and write.

By 1908 Dr. Montessori was world famous, "for having discovered the world within the child" (Standing 1957). She resigned her position in anthropology at the University of Rome in 1908 because the demands on her time were becoming so great, and she thought that if she was not under university obligation she would have more freedom to develop her pedagogy as she thought it should be. She began training teachers, opening more schools for low-income children in Italy, and writing books. Her first book, *The Montessori Method*, written in Italian in 1909, appeared in English in 1912 and sold out the first edition of 5,000 copies in four days. By summer it was on its sixth edition and was a best-seller. Her book was translated into Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Polish, Romanian, Russian, and Spanish. In January, 1913 Montessori ran her first international teacher training program with students from all over the world (Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Australia, Africa, India, and England, including 67 students from the U.S.) who went back to their home countries to start Montessori schools. By the end of 1913 there were nearly 100 Montessori schools in America and the system of education was well known enough to be the subject of controversy. From Montessori's perspective, she was deeply concerned about those who wrote about her method of education without understanding of it, those who started Montessori educational associations without her authorization, and those who opened schools with teachers who had not been trained by her in the methodology. The excitement about her work was beyond her ability to control, as much as she tried, in an effort to assure quality schools.

Mr. McClure, a publisher from the U.S., helped to introduce Dr. Montessori to the U.S. public through several essays he commissioned for publication in *McClure's Magazine* during 1911-12 year. In December 1913, Mr. McClure hosted and escorted her for a speaking tour in America. The first woman licensed as a medical doctor began to find herself bombarded by requests from people like McClure who sought to make money from her discoveries. Over and over she was promised support for the establishment of an institute or college, teacher training program, as well as schools, in order for her to continue her research efforts, only to have personal and/or political events get in the way of patrons meeting those promises, or, when the patrons sought to take control over her work, Montessori would withdraw from the agreement. When Montessori left the USA to return to Italy on Christmas Eve from a three-week lecture tour in 1913, it seemed that America would be the first country to experiment with the Montessori system on a large scale, but it was not to be, America's interest in her work was at its height in 1913-14 and "would never again in her lifetime be as great" (Kramer 1976, p. 203).

In 1915 there were over 100 Montessori schools in the USA and many more opened in the rest of the world, however the combination of several political events (WWI started in 1914) as well as a critique of her work published by a disciple of John Dewey's, William Kilpatrick (1914), had a significant impact on America's reception to Montessori schools. Kilpatrick wrote

The Montessori System Examined in 1914, based on an examination of the English translation of Montessori's (1912) *The Montessori Method*, and an observation of a Montessori classroom in Rome.⁴ Kramer (1976) dedicates a chapter of her biography of Montessori to Kilpatrick, due to his negative influence on Montessori's reception in America. She reminds us that Dr. Montessori was a woman, a Catholic, and an Italian, all of which positioned her as an outsider to America. Her strongest followers were all women too, without great influence, whereas "her critics were some of the leading scholars and educators in the country" (p. 227). As a disciple of Dewey's who became a professor at Columbia University's Teacher College as well, Kramer describes Kilpatrick as "the best-known teacher of education in his generation. ... His influence on an entire generation of educators was enormous" (p. 227). One cannot help but note that while John Dewey started one school, the Chicago Lab School, in 1896, which grew to enroll 1400 students by 1990, Maria Montessori started one school, *La Casa dei Bambini*, in 1907 and there are now over 3,000 Montessori schools in over 80 different countries. Let me turn now to a look at the political context of Montessori's work in Europe that influenced her impact there.

Private Background of Montessori and Political Connections

While Dr. Montessori's public life is well known, her private life is not, yet it is necessary to know this in more detail in order to better understand the decisions she made that impacted her career and were influenced by the political events swirling around her. While we can hail Maria Montessori for being the first woman to become a licensed medical doctor in Italy, feminist scholarship warns us never to forget that for women one's private life is political too.⁵

Maria was the only child to Alessandro Montessori, a traditional, military man who served Italy as a soldier and civil servant, and Renilde Stoppani, a well-educated woman eight years his junior (Kramer 1976, Standing 1957/1998). Her mother came from a highly regarded, landed family and her family's wealth, reputation, and the education it afforded her positioned Renilde to be able to broker her daughter's way. Renilde used her empowered position to stand up to her more traditional husband's protests concerning her childrearing practices and she fought for her daughter's right to an education. From today's perspective, Renilde can be described as someone very much ahead of her times, who managed to raise a first wave feminist daughter who was head-strong and determined to use her talents in math and science to improve conditions in the world somehow. Maria graduated from technical school in 1886 (today's technology high school), earning high marks in all of her subjects and a high exam score, thus qualifying her to attend Regio Istituto Techico Leonardo da Vinci from 1886 – 1890. There she studied modern languages and natural sciences, but again her favorite subject was math, to which she excelled. Ironically, as her father was just beginning to concede she might be able to have a career as a teacher, Maria was contemplating becoming an engineer, like the boys in her school. Upon graduation from Regio Istituto Techico (today's college), at the age of twenty Montessori changed her mind and decided she wanted to study the biological sciences and become a medical doctor. In 1896 Montessori presented her thesis to a board of eleven men, who were highly impressed with her work and granted her the degree of doctor of medicine, thus making her the first woman to graduate from medical school in Italy. She was twenty-six years old.

However, Maria fell in love with her lab partner, Dr. Montesano, who worked with her at the Psychiatric Clinic, and she had an illegitimate child with him, Mario, born in 1898, two years after her graduation from medical school. The couple did not marry, and they kept the birth of their child a secret. If Montessori had married, her career would have been over. The social norm at the time was that a married woman's first loyalty must be to her husband and she would have been required to give up her medical career. Abortion would not have been an option for a Catholic woman, and a child born out of wedlock would have ruined her reputation irreparably. That would have ended her career as well. Dr. Montessori was faced with having to give up her child in order to maintain any hopes for her career, and the possibility for her to make a contribution that she had come to believe was the purpose of her life. Her mother also held ambitious dreams for her only daughter and encouraged her not to give up on those dreams. Her family and his protected Dr. Montessori's reputation, the child was born in secrecy, and another family raised Mario, their son. Mario grew up not knowing whom his real mother or father was. The couple promised each other to never marry, or ever reveal the baby's existence, and they continued to work together. Unfortunately for Dr. Montessori, in 1901 Dr. Montesano chose to break his promise to her and he married another woman. This change in their circumstances made it no longer possible for the two of them to work together and be in daily contact. That is why Montessori resigned her position at the Orthophrenic School of Rome in 1901.

Dr. Montessori never lost track of her son, even though she could not publically recognize him as her child. Mario Montesano grew up thinking Dr. Montessori was a strange, beautiful woman who would come to visit him occasionally. Yet in his fantasies, he imagined she was his mother. When he was seven he was sent to boarding school near Florence (1905), where this unusual woman, Maria, still visited him occasionally. Dr. Montessori's mother passed away in 1912, and that seems to have opened up the possibility of Maria being able to embrace Mario as her son, privately, for Mario confronted Dr. Montessori when he was almost fifteen (March, 1913) with the declaration that he knew she was his mother and told her he wanted to go with her, according to his daughter⁶ and Kramer (1976). Montessori made no objection, and Mario got in her vehicle and went to live with her. Dr. Montesano had agreed to give the child his name only on the condition that he was sent away and the facts of his birth were kept secret. When Mario went to live with his mother he assumed her last name instead of his father's, "as though symbolically denying that he belonged to anyone but her" (Kramer 1976, p. 185).

Mario lived at the Montessori home with his grandfather, Alessandro Montessori, and was looked after by old friends when Dr. Montessori traveled to the U.S. in December, 1913. Having just claimed him as hers, privately, she never seriously considered living in the U.S. and accepting Mr. McClure's invitation, for it would have meant leaving her family behind. Mario began to travel with Dr. Montessori soon after, and was presented publically to the world as her distant nephew when she returned to the U.S. in 1915. He eventually became his mother's most valued assistant, her translator and traveling companion, rarely leaving her side. They lived together the rest of her life, with Mario always her devoted son, so that while she was not able to raise her own child, she was able to share his adult life.

Knowing about Mario explains why Dr. Montessori left Italy in 1917 when the Spanish government invited her to open a research institute. Her main concern was to avoid Mario (age 19) being drafted into Italy's army during WW I. Mario married in 1917 and he and his wife joined his mother in Spain. The Catalan government in Barcelona was interested in developing its own language, schools, and government, and saw Montessori as a means to that goal. A little school that began in Barcelona in 1915 with just 5 children "evolved into the Escola Montessori, with infant and primary departments for 3-10 year olds, and the Seminari Laboratori de Pedagogiá, an institute for teaching, research, and training in the Montessori method founded and supported by the Catalan government" (Kramer 1976, p. 249). It is here that Dr. Montessori was able to develop her elementary age curriculum as well as her plan for secondary education, while she waited out the war, and began giving international teacher training courses again, in London in 1919, and in Amsterdam in 1920, in London in 1921, back in Italy by 1922, in Vienna in 1923, etc. Even though Spain withdrew its official support for the institute in 1920, Montessori was able to continue to fund the institute privately and Barcelona remained Montessori's headquarters until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. It had become her home where Mario and his family lived, and for twenty years Montessori had the joy of watching her four grandchildren grow up.

However, Catalonia, and in particular Barcelona, became the main battlefield for postwar economic and social struggle in Spain (Kramer 1976, p. 269). Montessori was expected to join in and publicly declare her support for the independence of the Catalans but she refused to do so. "The reason she gave was not lack of sympathy for the Catalans but an insistence on not involving herself in politics under any circumstances. The only cause to which she subscribed, she told them, was the cause of the child" (Kramer 1976, p. 249). Kramer tells us that during the years leading up to WW II, nowhere were local conditions more volatile than in Spain. In an effort to save the monarchy, a military dictatorship was declared in 1923. In 1924 the government closed Montessori's schools, in an effort to crush the Catalanian threat to its authority. The military was ousted in 1930, the monarchy collapsed in 1931, and Barcelona became the stronghold. Montessori schools were back in business. But this only lasted until the revolution of 1936, when General Franco took over. Kramer tells us: "Friends in England with government connections arranged for Montessori to leave Barcelona on a British battleship, and with only a few hours' notice, leaving behind most of her personal possessions, she quit the country that had been her home for twenty years and the educational laboratory she had dreamed of for so many years before that" (Kramer 1976, p. 333).

Italy came out of WW I a weaker and poorer country than when the war began. The fear of communism and the extreme political left led Italian conservatives and businessmen to turn to the extremists on the right, the Fascists (similar to what is going on today in the USA after Obama was elected President, and the Tea Party gained more strength). In 1922 Mussolini and his Black Shirts marched on Rome and took over the government, at the king's request. The minister of education in 1921 was the philosopher Benedetto Croce, and in 1922 he was replaced by a professor of history, doctor of medicine, and friend of Montessori's, Antonino Anile, who invited Montessori to return to Italy and give a course of lectures in Naples. While in Italy, Anile requested that Montessori inspect the nursery and elementary schools in Rome where her method was being used, and then he extended her inspectorate to the whole of Italy. In 1923

Anile was replaced as minister of education by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile. Mussolini was able to entice many respected intellectuals to his cause, in the beginning, for they all wanted to see Italy recover and rebuild. When Montessori's accomplishments in education were drawn to Mussolini's attention, and the successfully impact she was having in other countries but not her native Italy, he set up a meeting with her and pledged his support for Montessori schools in Italy. By summer 1924 there were official Montessori schools in Italy. In 1926 Montessori began offering 6-month training courses in Italy with her in full charge, first in Milan for Italian teachers, and later in Rome for a wider audience. In 1930 Montessori, sixty years old, was officially welcomed home to Italy. Kramer (1976) tells us: "It would have taken more political acumen than Montessori possessed ... to resist such a homecoming ..." (p. 313).

With the minister of education making "a public statement describing the kinship between Fascism and the Montessori method," it is no wonder a youth from Germany who would eventually become a soccer (football) coach in the USA would associate Dr. Montessori with Fascism (Kramer 1976, p. 302). By 1926 Italy was a police state and the stage was set for Mussolini's eventual partnership with Hitler. Montessori was not alone in being blind to Mussolini's brutality, like many others she was hopeful that her presence and activity might make a difference (p. 303). She truly believed that her system of education properly carried out under her own supervision would accomplish good results for individual children and in the long run for all of society. She declared herself apolitical, not existing to any political party, and did not openly oppose the Fascist regime until it began to interfere with her own activities as a teacher, and those of her teachers. When Mussolini ordered Dr. Montessori to turn the children in her schools into soldiers for Italy, Montessori refused, and Montessori schools were suddenly closed in Italy by the Fascist regime. The last Montessori Congress that was held in Rome before the closing of the Montessori schools took place in 1934.

The Association of Montessori International (AMI) was founded in 1929 and housed in Berlin until 1935, even though Berlin gave Dr. Montessori a lukewarm reception and there was only one Montessori school in Germany as late as 1922, and 34 schools in Germany by 1932. By 1933 all Montessori schools in Germany were forced to close. Dr. Montessori's reception in Holland was very different, and by the mid-1930's there were over 200 Montessori schools there. Consequently, AMI was moved to Amsterdam in 1935, to a much more stable and receptive location, where it remains today. When the Montessori family left Spain in 1936 on the British battleship, they had no plans on where to go next. But, where they ended up settling was in Holland (today's Netherlands). During this timeframe Montessori continued to lecture and write about "a revolutionary freedom for the child" (Kramer 1976, p. 324). She traveled to peace conferences throughout the 1930's, in Geneva, Brussels, Copenhagen, Utrecht, and Paris giving speeches that have been published as *Education and Peace* (1949). In 1939, at the age of sixty-nine, she and Mario left for India to give a training course in Madras, expecting to return to Europe by the summer of 1940 in order to continue her work in Holland.

Mario was traveling with Dr. Montessori in India at her invitation, helping her with her teacher training programs and serving as her secretary, when WW II broke out. Italy entered the war on the side of the Germans in June, 1940 and the British immediately interned all Italians residing in their colonies as enemy aliens, including the Montessori family. When the word got

out that the Montessoris were interned in India, many wrote letters on their behalf. Dr. Montessori was released, but not Mario. Montessori informed the Indian authorities that Mario was her son, and that is how her secret was revealed to the rest of the world. On August 31, 1940, she received a telegram from the Viceroy of India that read: “We have long thought about what to give you for your seventieth birthday. We thought the best present we could give you was to send you back your son” (Kramer 1976, p. 344). Kramer says this is the first public reference to Mario as Dr. Montessori’s son. They were reunited and spent the rest of the war years in India (1939–1947), where Montessori taught more than 1,000 teachers her pedagogy. The Montessoris lived the rest of their lives in the Netherlands, with Dr. Montessori heading up the AMI until her death in 1952, and Mario then heading up AMI until his death in 1982. In her last will and testament, “Montessori bequeathed to Mario not only all her possessions and the legacy of her work, but the unequivocal statement that he was her only son” (Kramer 1976, p. 368). Mario’s eldest son, his namesake, followed in his grandmother’s footsteps and became Dr. Montessori as well, a psychologist. The AMI continues today as well as the AMS (American Montessori Society).

Democracies-Always-in-the-Making

Kramer (1976) thinks that Dr. Montessori should not have resigned her academic position at the University of Rome, as this caused her to have to continually worry about her source of income, which supported not only herself but her extended family as well. Kramer views Montessori’s insistence on control over the teacher training programs as her way of maintaining her main source of income, but at the cost of limiting the spread of her ideas and the growth of Montessori schools across the continents. However, one could argue that it is because of Dr. Montessori’s efforts to maintain the quality of schools that used her method of education that Montessori schools still exist today at the level and standard they do. There is no copyright protection for Montessori schools, anyone can hang up a sign and call themselves a Montessori school. The only protection of quality lies in the school’s hiring of teachers licensed by the AMS and AMI certified teacher training programs and the purchasing of materials designed by her. In America, it is often the case that administrators hired to run Montessori schools have no training as Montessori teachers and have little or no experience in the classroom. It is also not unusual to find schools that are full of Montessori materials that sit on the shelves gathering dust while the students are given workbook assignments to do. It is up to the school owners/boards to hire administrators who are certified teachers with experience, and it is up to the parents enrolling their children and the teachers applying for jobs to investigate and determine the quality of the program being offered there. My experiences have taught me that Dr. Montessori had a valid concern in how to maintain quality programs that use her name. The problem still exists today.

Montessori schools seem to have survived the turbulent times within which Dr. Montessori lived and worked because she insisted on remaining politically neutral, however one can also argue that the growth of the schools suffered do to her efforts to maintain neutrality. Because she left Italy and accepted Spain’s invitation to make Barcelona her home, her schools became associated with the Catalonia uprising and the Spanish Civil War, with both sides of the civil war angry with her for not taking a stand. Because she accepted Mussolini’s invitation to have her schools become Italy’s state-sponsored schools, her schools became associated with

Mussolini's Fascists. And, when Mussolini joined forces with Hitler, her schools became associated with Hitler, even though her schools were closed down by Mussolini and Hitler long before WWII erupted. Again, both sides, the Fascists and Nazi's as well as the citizens opposed who supported the liberation armies, ended up angry at her for not taking a stand. I'm not sure if Italians have forgiven her yet. That Montessori regularly offered training programs all over Europe, in America, in India, and was planning a trip to parts of Africa the year she passed away, that people from all over the world enrolled in her teacher training programs wherever they were offered, that she spoke more and more in her senior years about how her educational method connected to the possibility of world peace, this legacy is what earned her three nominations for a Nobel Peace Prize (1949, 1950, 1951), prior to her death in 1952.

It is a shame that thirty years later a German soccer coach at a small college in the USA would still carry concerns about Montessori schools to the level that he would refuse to let one of his players rent a room in the home of a Montessori teacher. He clearly had never had the opportunity to visit such a school, and have his fears proven wrong. I learned what an inclusive classroom looks like, one that is full of diverse students, multi-aged and with multi-abilities, from varied cultural and religious backgrounds, with their love of learning very much alive, when I became an elementary Montessori teacher. Every year I taught I had an age range of at least three years mixed together (6-9, sometimes 6-10, 9-12, sometimes 8-12), and there were always gifted children as well as children with learning disabilities (sometimes those were the same children), and every ability level in-between. In a Montessori classroom the children work at their own pace, and can choose what they want to work on, where they want to work, as well as with whom they want to work, or if they want to work alone. Thus, they have much opportunity to learn how "to be the master of their own force of will" as well as how to cooperate with others (Montessori, 1949, p. 40). The structure of the classroom (physically as well as in terms of pedagogy) does not support competition against each other. It's a mastery learning approach, where each child works on a task until they have mastered it. There is always someone who probably knows more than a particular child about some subject, but someone else who knows less whom that particular student can help teach. The Montessori directress tries to find something that each child can claim mastery of, so they can experience being teachers for others. This opportunity to share authority with others is affirming to every child in the classroom. Marty struggled with reading and math due to his learning disability, but could fix anything mechanical that broke down in our classroom. He's a firefighter now, rescuing others in need. Damon was our snake expert who regularly brought live snakes into the classroom that he found in his yard. He would identify and study them, and then teach us what he learned, including how to handle and care for snakes. He works in a nature center today teaching people how to live in harmony with their natural environments. Alex learned all the ends and outs of Cleopatra's love life, as part of her research of ancient Egypt, and proceeded to teach the rest of us what she was finding out about women's rights during that time period. She went on to college to earn an art/art history degree with a minor in women's studies.

I learned how a classroom becomes a community when children come back to the same room for three years, and they move from being the youngest to oldest in that classroom in the course of those three years. In a classroom space where the teacher is not the authority, but instead that authority is shared by all in the room who are all viewed as teachers as well as

students, and where the children learn that with the freedom they enjoy in that physical space also comes the responsibility to help care for it as well as for each other, and where we had to learn how to communicate and relate to each other peacefully in order to be able to co-exist and look forward to another year in the same classroom with each other, that's where I learned what a classroom looks like that teaches children the skills they need to become citizens in a democracy-always-in-the-making. We became like an extended family in our classroom, and I am still in touch with the parents and children who were in those classrooms today, as well as in touch with my co-directresses. Many of the students I taught have become parents themselves, and a few of them are Montessori teachers now too.

If that coach had let his student rent a room in my house, he might have found his player would have learned more about shared responsibility and shared identity, both qualities that enhance team sports. However, he would have also learned more about shared authority, something the coach did not care for his athlete to know. Come to think of it, maybe he didn't really fear that I was a Fascist or a liberal, but instead feared that I might be someone seeking to encourage radical democracy in my classroom and my home. If that was his concern, then he would have been right.

Conclusion

We recognize John Dewey's significant contributions to democratic theory but not Maria Montessori's, and it is my hope that I can help to right that wrong, for Montessori's school design, pedagogy, and curriculum strongly support the themes of shared responsibility, authority, and identity that I recommend for a pluralistic, relational democratic theory and educational model (Thayer-Bacon, 2008). Her educational plans serve as an illustration of my democratic theory even though her individual child-centered philosophy of education is more in agreement with Rousseau's (1970) in many ways, someone whom I have argued developed a democratic theory that undermines the possibilities of democracies (Thayer-Bacon, 2006). Teaching in a Montessori school gave me a way to experience a pedagogical approach that recognizes the importance of cultural diversity, while helping children learn how to be active, engaged, critically aware, self-assured, -directed, and -disciplined citizens of democracies-always-in-the-making. I share Montessori's hope that through education we can help more and more children grow up in a world that welcomes them and what they have to offer and helps them learn how to live in peace together.

Notes

1. I attended the elementary training offered at Barrie Day School, Silver Springs, Maryland, in 1981-1982, with Harvey Hallenberg as the director. In 1980 an elementary training program began in the NYC area, before then the elementary training was only offered in Europe and required Americans to spend a year living abroad. There are many Americans who did just that. Nancy M. Rambusch, founder of the American Montessori Society in 1960, is an example of someone who went to London for the training, came back to the U.S. and shared what she learned, helping to revitalize interest in the Montessori method of education in America. Montessori trained Claude Claremont, from England, and later in his life he moved to the Los Angeles area where he trained Harvey Hallenberg, who trained me.

2. I taught in three different Montessori schools, The Growing Concern in Tannersville, PA where I taught 6-10 year olds for 3 years, Montessori Center School in Santa Barbara, CA, where I taught 9-12 year olds for 1 year, and Old Mission Montessori School in Oceanside, CA, where I taught 8-12 year olds for 2 years. Between my teaching and my children attending Montessori schools, I have twenty-seven years of experience with Montessori education. For those interested in knowing more about Montessori schools, contact the American Montessori Society (281 Park Ave., New York, NY 10010) or the Association of Montessori International (1095 Market St., Suite 405, San Francisco, CA 94103).
3. The terms in quotes are scientific terms used at the time of Montessori's work for children who are mentally challenged.
4. I discuss Kilpatrick's critique of Montessori's educational ideas in (in press). "Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William H. Kilpatrick," *Education and Culture*.
5. I discuss Dr. Montessori's gendered story more in "Maria Montessori's Gendered Story," paper submitted for acceptance at the Research on Women and Education fall conference, 2012.
6. Mario's daughter, *Marilena Henny – Montessori*, has written a tribute to her father. (<http://www.montessori-ami.org/montessori/mario.htm>) [accessed June 8, 2010].

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