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Critical engagement in (Montessori) pedagogy – foreword to the issue

This collection of research articles provides a diverse and generous consideration of Montessori's inspiration and legacy, and challenges us to think about Montessori practice in the 21st century. Inspired by André Roberfroid's keynote presentation we see it as our responsibility to introduce Montessori to the wider education community by taking a critical look at what she has to offer to children and their families today. As Roberfroid puts it – it is not how we use the materials – it is in the fostering of freedom, respect, and solidarity that the benefits of Montessori education lie.

André Roberfroid's call to action urges the Montessori community to reflect on our role as educators by championing education based on freedom, respect, and solidarity for all children! The children of today have the power to be the heralds of the New World which Montessori was desperate to create – a world which if it is to evolve rather than self-destruct will have to be very different from the one imagined by, not only Montessori, but also by many of us guiding children in their education today. Roberfroid's deeply held belief is that it is within our power – but we need to be brave, bold, and without fear. We need to engage and share our Montessori Treasure Box, which, if we do, will hold new treasures and possibilities, not only for the children of today, but for humanity and the world.

Christine Quarfood in her paper titled: *The multifaceted Montessori movement and its pioneers* outlines the initial success of Montessori's unique perspective of education and juxtaposes it with views of several of her contemporaries, many of whom were her supporters. It also draws our attention to the strong influence of the AMI organization, which to this day, is seen as the guardian of the Montessori legacy. It offers an important foundation for our understanding of aspects of the aims and aspirations of Montessori education today.

In her article: *The theological language of Montessori education and its effects on educational processes in childhood*, **Judith Neff** provides us with opportunities for personal reflection on the relationship between theology and pedagogy as evident in Montessori's own writing. It also highlights some of the possible tensions which can arise in Montessori's writing between her scientific approach to the understanding of children and her use of theological language which underpins the writing. It further asks the question – what does it mean for Montessori education today – how has it impacted our practice? And the question which leads to further academic investigations – how has it influenced the expansion of Montessori education beyond the Christian context?

Jaroslaw Jendza is the author of the paper titled: *Acting “out-of-the-box” in Montessori teachers’ narratives – research report*. Jendza challenges us to seek some answers to “acting out of the box” in the practical example of the adults “following the child” rather than “guiding the child” in the use of Montessori learning materials. It also gives us an opportunity to reflect on Montessori’s own Amsterdam lecture from 1938 as transcribed by Phoebe Child, and recently shared by Sid Mohandas on “Montessori Collective” Facebook page.

It is unnecessary to reproduce exactly the same phenomena. It would not really be desirable for every new thing arising to be mechanically reproduced by everyone else [...] But we must seek for some practical instruction, a guide to direct us along the new path. You notice that I am really saying “We can only repeat what Maria Montessori has already said,” isn’t that so? For it is quite clear that we must say to ourselves, “Let us then pay attention to what is indicated by the child himself [sic!], because there is, in the psychological nature of man [sic!], that which is able to afford us practical direction and guidance” (S., Mohandas, Montessori Collective, Facebook, 29.12.2023).

Susanne van Niekerk in her investigation into the extent of, and reason for, the disparity between theory and practice in Montessori early childhood settings in South Africa highlights the challenges and tensions between the principles of Montessori pedagogy and their implementation in the classroom. Her research examines the importance of the initial Montessori teacher training and continued professional development, and considers external pressures which contribute to the challenges in daily life in the Montessori classroom. Her suggestion of the important link between Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow and Montessori’s concept of normalization presents us with opportunities for further research and evaluation of the benefits of Montessori pedagogy in the context of today’s education of young children.

Per Gynther and **Eva-Maria Tebano Ahlquist** present a paper titled: *Writing and reading in Montessori preschools in the digital age – A valid approach?* Gynther and Tebano Ahlquist’s article explores one of the key Montessori discoveries that “children write before they read” in context of their sensory-motor preparation and as challenged by today’s use of computers at the time when traditionally children learned to write. This research contributes to our discussions on the benefits of Montessori education at a time when computers provide an opportunity to not only physically write a letter or an article, but AI can construct letters, articles and essays on a particular topic – thus challenging some of the accepted norms and requirements of our educational systems.

Romali Rosales Chavarría shares her research experiences of introducing a second language in Montessori schools in Scotland and in Mexico. In her article titled: *Additional Language Learning in Montessori settings: insights from an implementation process of a Second Language Programme in a Scottish Montessori school* she acknowledges the anecdotal nature of shared knowledge between practitioners and the need for sensitivity to the learning context and school cultures. She highlights the need for further research in this widely established practice of second language teaching. She discusses some of the

challenges of moving from limited-scope approaches to wide-scope approaches of introducing a second language to children – and considers the benefits of the almost tokenistic (once a week lesson in second language) approach and working with the immersive approach which requires not only commitment from the staff and school, but also patience, sensitivity, and flexibility on the part of the educators.

Helen Prochazka's article *Bringing the words: Towards a Montessori system of remedial support for language development from birth to six* addresses the oral language deficit, in two- and three-year-olds, which is a focus of many current UK initiatives introduced to children in a variety of early years provisions. She suggests that Montessori pedagogy offers us effective tools which could address this deficit and could help young children communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. This observation could be an invitation to further research by developing a framework for documenting children's language learning in Montessori settings and demonstrating the value of a prepared environment and sensitive support from adults and peers.

In the article: „*Aid to life*” – *Montessorian pedagogy at the service of the autism spectrum children* **Monika Pawluczuk-Solarz** addresses the opportunities for learning of children with specific needs, which is clearly a situation in which practitioners need to follow the child and thus “act outside the well-known box”. Pawluczuk-Solarz shares her experience of working with these children using the principle and materials of the Montessori approach. She challenges readers to think about the benefits this approach could bring to families and settings, particularly to those who are not able to access Montessori education for their children. We do applaud her commitment to children so as to benefit them from the Montessori legacy and think this is not only a paper, but also an approach that could make Montessori more open and accessible.

In the next article *Designing a system of learning materials to explain climate change to children*, based on her dissertation, **Lucy Blackwell** offers us an opportunity to share in her cyclical process of evaluating the materials designed to help children understand climate change. Her approach and design demonstrate a deep commitment to work within the parameters of Montessori pedagogical principles and to be respectful not only to adult, but also to children's feedback. Her modest and positive approach to her research is a fitting inspiration for all of us who are inspired by Montessori's legacy.

Maria Angelica Paez-Barrameda is the author of the study titled: *The Impact of Successive Montessori Programmes on Cognitive Achievement*. The study critically engages with the Montessori approach by empirically evaluating the cognitive outcomes of successive Montessori education. It also provides robust evidence supporting the efficacy of the Montessori Method, aligning with Montessori's opinion that education should be an integrated continuum. The research underscores the importance of continuity in Montessori education, suggesting that prolonged exposure to Montessori programmes enhances cognitive development and college success. By highlighting significant differences in academic performance among groups with varying Montessori experiences, the study advocates

the implementation of the full Montessori spectrum. The study calls for future research to further validate its findings, indicating a critical engagement with the existing research gaps in Montessori education.

The volume ends with an interview or rather a conversation between **Barbara Isaacs**, The President of Montessori Europe and **Jarosław Jendza**, the guest editor of this issue of the journal. This interview can be read in at least three different ways. Firstly, it is the personal story of a person with enormous professional experience, a person involved in Montessori pedagogy for several decades. Secondly, this interview provides important guidance for those who are at the beginning of their teaching career, pointing out that a critical and distanced approach to Montessori pedagogy is crucial if one really wishes to humbly follow the child. Thirdly, this interview is a true treasure trove of knowledge, not only about Montessori pedagogy itself, but about child-centred education in general.