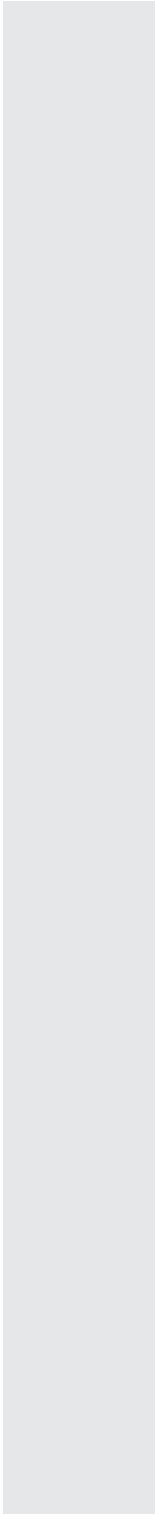

NARRATIONS AND PRACTICES



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***Empowering and cherishing humanity* – Barbara Isaacs, The President of Montessori Europe, in conversation with Jarosław Jendza**

Jarosław Jendza [JJ]: Thank you, Barbara, for your time. I would like to ask you a few questions related first to your Montessori story. So today you are the president of Montessori Europe, but how come that you are where you are today?

Barbara Isaacs [BI]: Well, I always feel it's a little bit by accident. It was never, never by design. I never set myself to do what I actually achieved. But at the same time, I have always found it difficult to say no when people ask me to do something.

And I think those two things kind of fit together, but initially I got introduced to Montessori when I first came to England to look after a two-and-a-half-year-old girl who went to a Montessori school. I never heard about Montessori. I was amazed that she could read by the age of four.

Something that I still struggle with at the age of 75 – is reading aloud to people. So, I was amazed by this approach. Her dad died when she was about 12. He left me a little bit of money and I thought, how should I spend it? He really loved children. And I thought I will go and train as a Montessori teacher. I had a very fancy job at the time running an art gallery in central London and nobody could believe that I wanted to become a nursery school teacher for a pittance, but I felt it was right.

I went for an interview at AMI¹ in London and Ms Patell², who was the principal of AMI at the time, was incredibly kind and generous to me. I also went for an interview to

¹ AMI – The Association Montessori Internationale. Organization founded by Maria Montessori in 1929. The initiative to form AMI was taken at the first International Montessori Congress, which was held as part of the Fifth Congress of the New Education Fellowship held at Kronberg Castle, Denmark. The organization is present in numerous countries all around the world. The main mission of AMI is to “to fulfil the right of children and adults around the world to have access to nurturing, developmentally appropriate, educational environments” (AMI online).

² Hilla Patell (1925–2023) joined AMI in 1974. Her interest in Montessori education was first aroused through the counselling and community work that she was involved in during the 1950's: she looked for

Saint Nicholas³, who were very non-committal, but the atmosphere in the building... the atmosphere for learning felt much better. So, in the end, I decided to go to Saint Nicholas and I absolutely loved the one-year full-time course that I did there. I worked every weekend in a café to be able to afford it. I still think about that year when I studied at St Nicholas as one of the best in my life, because I met new people from around the world, I was learning new things. I didn't agree with everything that I have learned. I questioned... And the questions were not properly answered, because by that time I was 33, I had experienced life and they kind of treated us as if we were teenagers. So... That was a challenge, but the message, the kind of vision that Montessori has for the child, has really resonated with me. And I loved the idea of being in the service of children. And that message has stayed with me throughout my Montessori career.

That's something to do with me as a person, feel it really deeply. And I tried to live with this powerful message – during my training of adults, by setting up a nursery, and now by helping our grandchildren. It's all part and parcel of the same thing and of course, then when our first child was born, a year after I finished my course, I felt so privileged that I had some insight into how to help young children. I felt that I was going to be able to put our daughter on the right path. Of course, that was a very foolish thing to think, because as a parent, you are often wrong, and you could have done things differently but at the time, my Montessori knowledge was a gift to me as a mother.

When St Nicholas asked me to teach the adults it was a great surprise. In the 1980s, in Montessori circles, you got kind of selected to work to teach according to how you behaved

a Montessori school for her children, and on arrival in the UK in 1960 was soon to enroll as a student and then from 1962 as Montessori teacher at the Maria Montessori Training Organisation, London (MMTO), whose training staff she joined. She led MMTO as Co-Director and then Director of Training until her retirement in 1989. Later she remained available for counsel and mentoring and continued to deliver special lectures to the students, continued examining at AMI examinations across the globe. She gave many workshops and study sessions in various countries. Hilla Patell was elected to AMI's Board and Executive Committee in 1982. She was also one of the first members of the Sponsoring Committee (1977), the committee that was tasked with devising AMI's Training of Trainers programme, which she chaired until 2003. She chaired the Executive Committee from 2000–2004, and additionally took on the responsibility of AMI's presidency from 2004–2005. Source: <https://montessori-ami.org/news/memory-hilla-patell>. Hilla Patell was particularly interested in the role of observation in Montessori practice. Readers may find this published conversation with Hilla Patell very inspiring (O'Shaughnessy, Patell 2016: 43–55).

³ Montessori St Nicholas Charity – on 29 March 1954, The St Nicholas Montessori Centre was established as an education trust to represent the continuation of the Training Centre started by Margaret Hompray and Phoebe Child, two former students of Maria Montessori. In 1967, the trustees purchased No. 23 Princes Gate while the co-principals acquired No. 24 and later allowed the trust to purchase it from them. By 1971 the Centre held accredited full-time, part-time and Saturday courses. It also had a Montessori school and facilities for resident students and children. In 1978, the two co-principals retired and moved to America. The leadership of St Nicholas was entrusted to Bridget Birts who served the Montessori community until 1983 and in whose name the Birts Scholarship was founded. In 1998, the London Montessori Centre founded by Lesley Britton and Montessori St Nicholas formed Montessori Centre International, consolidating the work of two Montessori centres (Wikipedia, *Montessori St Nicholas Charity* online).

in the course. It was totally subjective to few people who were running the college. Anyway, I said yes. And that started my training career, teaching one night a week, practical life. And for the first lecture, I prepared and prepared all Christmas holiday and all my notes ran out in half an hour, but always having the materials as a prop is a very useful tool for anybody who wants to be a trainer, who is beginning as a trainer. I see it very differently now. But in those days, it was very valuable to me. The history of St Nicholas college has often been problematic. And so in 1990, I left because there was a lot of tension there. And I was invited to work for Leslie Britton⁴ at London Montessori Centre [located at 18 Balderton Street, London W1]. She was a very complex person. When she hired me, she said: "I would like to employ you, but you have to study more." And that was one of the biggest gifts she could have ever given me, because I had a day in a week to follow a university course. Not that my workload got less, but Lesley gave me the time. I needed to learn about how to work with adults. So, I went to do a degree in teaching adults. And I think that was really very important step in my career. Lesley was also the one person who advocated the importance of teaching child development as an integral part of Montessori teacher training. In those days, nobody else did it in England. And without that child development element, you actually cannot understand the value of Montessori and you cannot really fully appreciate many of her insights and inspiration.

The training needs to open the student's mind to other possibilities about what it means to be an educator of young children. Particularly because the discipline of child development is very much a 20th century phenomenon. And whilst I appreciate that much of the information was not available to Montessori when she was developing her theory, for me teaching adults at the end of 20th century, we absolutely could not, deliver Montessori teacher training without understanding the basic principles of child development. To understand the value of what Montessori's intuitive insights into children's development needed to be and still needs to be underpinned by current research and contemporary studies of children. And I think that's really essential for today's teacher training.

When our own children were a little bit older, I was able to set up a nursery with Helen Prochazka⁵. So, I was able to continue, not only to work with adults, but to also learn from children - that integration of training and working with children is essential in early years, because you need to be constantly reminded of the needs of the young child. And they are not static. They are changing and particularly after COVID. This significant global change highlights the value of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and its impact on children's

⁴ Lesley Britton – Montessori expert, practitioner and author of inspiring publications such as: *Montessori Play & Learn: A Parents' Guide to Purposeful Play from Two to Six* (1996), in which she shows parents how to bring Montessori home.

⁵ Helen Prochazka, PhD – the founder of Montessori Partnership established in 1997. She is a globally known expert in Montessori, with a career in this approach to education spanning 35 years. Having worked at a number of Montessori training institutions, Helen Prochazka set up Montessori Partnership to provide Montessori teaching courses in the UK. Source: Montessori Partnership (online). Helen Prochazka is one of the contributing authors whose studies are presented in this volume.

development⁶. These are some of the important aspects of my Montessori journey, together with studying for my master's in early education under Tina Bruce⁷ and Margy Whalley⁸. And finally, when we celebrated the 150th anniversary of Montessori's birth, and I worked

⁶ Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005) was a Russian-born American psychologist best known for having developed human ecology theory (ecological systems theory), in which individuals are seen as maturing not in isolation, but within the context of relationships, such as those involving families, friends, schools, neighbourhoods, and society. Bronfenbrenner divided the entire ecological system in which human growth occurs into five subsystems that are organized socially: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. [...] When Bronfenbrenner was a child, his father, who was a neuropathologist, often pointed out the interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings. Those concrete examples were expanded into theories about the ecology of human development, and they were further developed during cross-cultural field research, which Bronfenbrenner conducted in places such as Europe, the U.S.S.R., Israel, and China. His work led him to define human development as a lasting change in the way a person perceives and deals with his or her environment. A child is viewed as a growing dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures an environment. The environment in turn exerts an influence on the individual, requiring a process of reciprocity between person and environment. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner realized that the developmental process varies by place and time and that public policy affects the development of humans by influencing the conditions of their lives. With American developmental psychologist Stephen J. Ceci, Bronfenbrenner extended his theory to behaviour genetics. They recommended that explicit measures of the environment in systems terms be incorporated, and they proposed the existence of empirically assessable mechanisms – proximal processes through which genetic potentials for effective psychological functioning are actualized” (Gilstrap, Zierten 2024).

⁷ Tina Bruce, Professor – expert in Froebel approach. Author of numerous publications concentrated on Froebelian pedagogy, play and creativity. Tina Bruce trained as a primary teacher at the Froebel Educational Institute, now part of University of Roehampton. She went on to become a Froebelian educator guided by principles that promote a holistic approach to teaching young children. Tina has played an instrumental role in laying the foundations of early education as co-ordinator of the Early Years Advisory Group to successive government childcare UK ministers for 10 years. In 2008, she was awarded a CBE for services to early years education. Her hugely influential articles and books address key Froebelian themes such as literacy, play, and creativity (Froebel Trust, *Tina Bruce Lecture...* online). Readers may find a conversation between Barbara Isaacs, Tina Bruce, and Jannie Nicols very inspiring. It was recorded in 2019, during a series of seminars arranged and delivered at the V&A's Future Museums: Play and Design Conference on 19 November 2019. This film documents a conversation between the three experts who share some of the commonalities and unique aspects of the three approaches to early childhood education (Froebel Trust, *Froebel, Steiner...* online).

⁸ Margy Whalley – educational expert. She has managed multi-disciplinary early years services in Brazil, Papua New Guinea and England. She was founding Head of the Pen Green Centre for Under 5's and their families and has worked there since 1983. She has an MA in Community Education, completed a PhD which focused on Leadership in Integrated Centres. She was seconded to the Open University where she wrote course materials for parents wanting to increase their knowledge and understanding of child development. Margy was involved in the development of the Early Excellence Centre programme. She was appointed to the advisory board of the National Early Excellence Evaluation programme and the Early Years Advisory Group for the DfE. She has also worked as an adviser to Margaret Hodge as Minister for Children and Families directorate. In 2008 Margy was asked to chair the National Reference Group for Children's Centres. She is Director of the Research, Development and Training Base at the Pen Green Centre as well as the Centre for Children and their Families and is involved in research, training, and consultancy work in the UK and in relation to policy transfer and integrated services in Germany, Italy, Portugal, New Zealand, Australia and Malaysia (LinkedIn online).

with a group of Montessorians from around the world who were not affiliated with specific training organization, but who wanted to celebrate the Montessori legacy in “Montessori Everywhere.”⁹ That was an incredible experience. It endorsed for me the reason why Montessorians need to work together, not be separate. There is a value in sharing our experiences. And what Simone Davies¹⁰ achieved by organizing “Montessori Everywhere” has been phenomenal.

And the fact that, at the time, we were able to fundraise for the Black Montessori Education Fund¹¹ in the United States, was a particular and powerful feature of the initiative. We engaged with over 6,000 educators during the day of celebrations. And it was all done on voluntary basis. It was all done very spontaneously in a very short timescale. And we all worked very hard to make it possible.

In 2020 I accepted the invitation to become the President of Montessori Europe¹² because I couldn’t quite see my Montessori career ending by retiring. And I also felt that

⁹ Montessori Everywhere is an organization or rather (as they prefer to be called) a group of Montessori friends around the world who created it to connect, celebrate, and challenge themselves. In August 2020, they joined forces to make an event to celebrate Dr Montessori’s 150th birthday and raised over US\$20,000 for the Black Montessori Education Fund. From this event ME has become a movement, connecting global Montessori community. Montessori Everywhere is organized by: Andy Lulka of Integrating Montessori, Simone Davies of The Montessori Notebook, Dr Ayize Sabater of the Black Montessori Education Fund, Tammy Oesting of ClassroomMechanics, Barbara Isaacs from Montessori Europe, Gabriel Salomão of Lar Montessori, Ochuko Prudence Daniels from Momahill Montessori School, Nigeria, Sue Pritzker (retired) Head of School at Childpeace Montessori School and supported by: Seemi Abdullah of Trillium Montessori, Wendelien Bellinger from Montessori Musings, D. Ann Williams of Montessori for Social Justice, Miroslava Vlčková of Lead Montessori, and other Montessori friends (Montessori Everywhere online).

¹⁰ Simone Davies – Montessori expert, AMI Montessori teacher with nearly 20 years’ experience, owner of Jacaranda Tree Montessori in Amsterdam where she’s been running her own parent-child classes since 2008, mother of two young adults raised in a Montessori way, author of the book *The Montessori Toddler* and co-author with Junnifa Uzodike of *The Montessori Baby* and *The Montessori Child* (The Montessori Notebook online).

¹¹ Black Montessori Education Fund, founded by Dr. Ayize Sabater I, is a bold initiative launched from the energy of the Washington DC protests in 2020, which highlighted the need for a more equitable educational landscape in the US, and the impetus to use education as a means of liberation for the Black community. The BMEF celebrates Black educators, including past Black Montessori supporters and leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, and promotes Dr. Montessori’s holistic philosophy within the Black community in efforts to increase Black engagement with the transformative Montessori approach. The organization promotes equitable access to Montessori education, which, unfortunately, has become synonymous with privilege and the higher class. Dr Sabate says – this was not what Dr. Montessori had in mind when she developed her revolutionary educational method more than 100 years ago in Italy. Yet, in the modern-day US, Black children make up only 6% of the population in Montessori schools. The fund aims to change that and to bring Montessori back to its roots by removing the financial barrier that contributes to the under-representation of Black educators, children, and families in Montessori programmes. We actively work to provide resources, mentorship, advocacy, and safe spaces for Black educators, educational pioneers, and families in Montessori (Black Montessori Education Fund online).

¹² Montessori Europe – the organization registered in 2003; however it originated with some of the ideals related closely to European unification (EU). The initiation group realized that the main goals of the European Union are connected with peace and Economic Cooperation of European countries. Educational

Montessori Europe needed a new energy. And that's why I committed to helping to bring new ideas to Montessori Europe.

[JJ]: I can see Barbara that you devoted most of your life to Montessori. And it's quite difficult for me to basically accept the fact that this happened by accident. [laugh]

[BI]: Absolutely!

[JJ]: Okey, but I still think that there must be something special in Montessori that actually keeps you doing that?

[BI]: Oh, yes.

[JJ]: So, my question would be: what is so special in Montessori that you have actually decided to devote a large part of your life to it?

[BI]: It is because Montessori cherishes the child. She has got quite a romantic notion of the child. I feel the energy which she dedicated to children. And I absolutely share in that. The idea that we serve the child is, for me, a very powerful message because we have an opportunity to help children become decent human beings. And I believe that as the world evolves and as we have progress into 21st century supported by the speedy development of AI that idea of supporting the development of caring aware human beings is vital.

policy, especially when it comes to non-traditional approaches to education, played only a minor role. Besides that, the development and spreading of Montessori movement in many European countries led to the need for a higher level of self-organization. In the late 80s and 90s the Iron Curtain collapsed, and it was very clear for the European, local and national Montessori organizations that East and West European cooperation was going to be a native issue for Montessori Europe from the very beginning. In the year 2000 people from several European countries thought that, for further development of Montessori pedagogy in Europe it would be good to establish a united European Montessori platform. The initiation informal group consisted of: Gudula Meisterjahn Knebel and Rainer Völkel from Germany, Clare Healy from Norway, Małgorzata Miksza, PhD from Poland, Herbert Haberl from Austria, Kristina Wennerstroem and Britta Bring from Sweden, Aileen O'Brian from Ireland, and Christopher Zanon from Switzerland. They started to discuss this idea, met on several meetings throughout Europe and in 2003 Montessori Europe was registered. The first seat of Montessori Europe was in Switzerland, but in 2005 the registration country was changed to Germany, where it is still today. The main ideas behind the creation of Montessori Europe, which is still a pillar of the organization, include establishing and promoting Montessori pedagogy throughout Europe, supporting sustainability and research in education, and giving voice to children and adolescents. The organization has come a long way since the inception and continues the work, engaging at all levels throughout Europe and beyond. Nowadays the most important aims are oriented at ensuring that Montessori pedagogy engages with the political, social, and educational challenges of our times in order to be able to support the children of today, preparing them for the world of tomorrow. The current board has turned its attention to extending the network function of Montessori Europe, facilitating the connection of Montessorians across Europe and beyond to critically engage with Montessori values and practice in the service of the child. As the mission of ME states: Together, we are stronger, as we work together to face the global challenges that confront us. In this context, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the challenges of our time and provide a blueprint for peace aligned to Montessori's work (Montessori Europe online).

[JJ]: So, Barbara, you mentioned something that I find really intriguing. Because you're talking about decent human being. Could you tell me a little bit more? So, what do you understand by a decent human being?

[BI]: It's really tricky because it's such a general term and for me it means somebody who is aware, who really cares about others and thinks about others and our planet. I don't expect perfection, but I expect that those persons somehow feel for others. Somehow, they can anticipate what situations may be like for other people. I think this is particularly relevant to current climate situation because we are somehow not able to articulate for our children or for the community that what we do in the Western world has got an immediate impact on people around the world. The way how we exploit our resources impacts on what happens to the people in the Pacific, to happens to people in Africa. We have somehow lost the sight of the fact that we are one global community. For me this is an important message which is very closely linked to the Montessori view of cosmic education, I feel very attuned to the idea that we need to care about others, we need to understand the interdependence of all of us. And that we have got responsibility for the planet. Those three things remain the most powerful messages I have taken from my Montessori teacher training. I felt a deep connection with the principles of Cosmic education from the moment I learned about them on my Montessori course in 1983. Today, I understand Cosmic education, not in the context of the elementary curriculum, but as a philosophy of life.

[JJ]: I have to say that the idea of discovering your cosmic task is for me personally very powerful.

[BI]: I think that we often consider that our cosmic task is somehow elevated above our daily lives. For me, it is more fundamental. I think that everybody has got a cosmic task. It sounds a bit fancy, but even the sweeper in the street has got something to contribute to their community. And we are not teaching the children to value what this sweeper has to give us. We had a glimpse of it during COVID when we were entirely dependent on people who were making our lives possible in the challenging times – the cleaners, the carers, the nurses and doctors. But we have very quickly forgotten about that interdependence within the community; that we need to value every contribution, that makes our lives possible today. I think that kind of respect for others, for whatever they do, is totally missed in education. Totally missed. I see it as valuing the potential of each person, not only their academic potential – but their potential as a human being.

[JJ]: Barbara, I would like to ask you about adult preparation. You mentioned a little bit that it is impossible to serve the child without the knowledge of the development of the child. But if you could tell me a little bit more what. What do you find important or even essential in adult preparation to the role of Montessori adult?

[BI]: I think that one of the challenges we have as Montessori teacher-trainers is instilling in our graduates that the Montessori course is only a beginning of their journey of knowing the children, particularly if they come to Montessori quite early on in their lives. I have come across so many people who believe that becoming a Montessori teacher or trainer they have achieved something enormous in their life. They have kind of arrived. But to me that is only the beginning. If I think about how I saw children in 1983 when I trained and soon after, and what I understand about children 40 years on, is a totally different thing. I'm still believing in the Montessori vision of the child as a powerful agent of change. But I think I'm a little bit more humble about what I can potentially achieve and the importance of every child that I meet. And I believe passionately that... we need to share with children our belief that they can achieve, that they are powerful, but that they also need to be respectful of the natural resources that we have because we are the custodians of the Earth.

So, it is a mixture of empowerment and responsibility. And for me that element of responsibility in teacher training is important because it is a huge privilege to be able to share what I know with others. And I need to do it to the best of my ability as a trainer. And the other element is that the majority of people who come to Montessori teacher training are adults. They come to it of their own volition. They don't come to it because they have to. They come because they want to know more. And somehow the traditional Montessori teacher training which I received in 1983 did not recognize the fact that I was an adult who had come to the training college with a range of experiences. That I actually lived something. I was willing to pay money and give my time to learn more. It is quite dogmatic in the way how we train Montessori teachers. We tell them how to do things with the children and somehow, we disempower them in their capacity to be thinking human beings responding to the children in our company. Does it resonate with you?

[JJ]: Absolutely, absolutely. Yes, that's why I do believe that university might be one of the places.

[BI]: Absolutely. And you know, that's why through my teacher training career I worked hard to be able to introduce the first Montessori teacher training course related to a university degree in the UK, and some of the graduates of that degree programme certainly demonstrate the capacity to think out of the box, to be able to embrace other ideas and see how these could be incorporated into Montessori education. They don't see Montessori as exclusive. I think that the whole label of Montessori being exclusive in children's education, in teacher education is really misguided... Because in the beginning or in the middle in the first quarter of the 21st century there are so many other people who think about children in the same way as we do, but we don't really engage with them to cooperate and participate in a dialogue in order to join forces to articulate the needs of humanity for the future.

[JJ]: I would like to come back for a moment to this adult preparation thing because if I understand you well, you suggest that we should not overvalue the answer to the question “how” – but perhaps concentrate a little bit more on “why” and “where to.” Am I right?

[BI]: Absolutely. So, understanding why this person has come to the course, understanding their own story which led them to be there, sitting in the room and also understanding their individual journey – what they bring with them and also what they get out of their Montessori teacher training – it cannot be wrap up very neatly into one parcel.

Different people get different things from the training and they will take it into their lives and may not work with children but it may affect how they relate to other people. Also, they come to the course with different abilities and sometimes for them the journey is much longer. So, for that reason the importance of instilling in them the idea that this is the first step towards being an effective adult guiding child is very, very important... Currently we don't have sufficient infrastructure within Montessori settings to help those people who come to us at different levels of understanding to support them effectively for the future. So, the professional development, the way how the owners and managers of Montessori settings work with adults is vital. Often graduates are expected to be fully fledged – ready to do the job! You know, if I think about my own personal journey, I was so naive to think that I was capable of running the classroom. All my life I continued to learn from children; I listened to what they had to say to me and I was modest enough to think I need to really engage with their ideas.

Let me just share an experience of my very first week of working as a Montessori teacher responsible for 20 children... At lunchtime one child said to me: “But... Barbara there are many different gods.” We used to say grace at the beginning of lunch and her family followed Hindu religion; and she obviously talked to her family about it and they explained to her that the God they worshipped in her family was different but just as important.

To this day I think, how arrogant of me it was to presume that all these children should do what I say without questioning it. This was such an important lesson in my first week in the classroom. I will never forget it. I try not to presume that I know better than the children and I will always want to hear what they have to say. I may be inclined to guide them in a different way. But I will always consider and ponder their ideas. Adults are a powerful influence; the children react to our work in such a spontaneous way and if we are capable of taking in their message, we will empower them to have a voice. This is another important element of Montessori teacher training – we must listen to the children rather than listen to our albums. We all need the guidance and mentoring of more knowledgeable others and this should include children.

[JJ]: As you know Barbara this is very close to my heart as well but I will try to be a little bit more practical, okay?

[BI]: I know, I know. The whole notion of cherishing the child in Montessori context is romantic.

[JJ]: Yes. So, if we agreed that listening to the child is very important in the preparation of the adults then my question would be: how to do it in Montessori training?

[BI]: I think you have to begin by respecting the adult learning to become a teacher. You as a teacher need to receive some of the validation that you are supposed to give to the children and this is where the mismatch is. The training of the teachers is quite doctrinaire. This is how you have to do it. This is how the presentation works. No! How the children received the presentation matters but the adults are not the only teachers. Children come to understand the working of the materials by watching other children or by their own capacity to problem solve and we don't respect that capacity to problem solve, often as adults, we have got no capacity of interpreting what the child is doing. A while ago I observed in a centre for children with special needs in Syria and a Montessori student was working with a two-year-old child who was interested in taking the cylinders out of the block and letting them roll to the ground because each one of the cylinders made a different sound. She was very embarrassed by the fact that the child didn't do the activity as she showed him and when I said to her: "Look at his face! He just loves the sound of the cylinders. He's not doing it as you showed him but he's getting something out of it, and you need to respond to that. He is interested in sounds, so what other activities could you offer that will develop this capacity or this interest in the sounds" and she had no idea how to do it. It's because we focus so narrowly on the use of the materials; the observations we make only focus on how well the child is using the material not in how they are using it and why. Can you see? And this is so frustrating if only we could just look at the children.

[JJ]: You know that at this moment many people would probably say each material in Montessori prepared environment has got its specific objective and therefore should be used in a specific way.

[BI]: Yes, and that's what we teach in the training. As adults need to understand the benefits of the material to be able to interpret what the child may be learning, but Montessori never told us that the children have to use it in the way how we show them. It is in the focus of the training which make the Montessori teacher trainees so dependent on the use of the material rather than on understanding the children and the way why and what they do with the materials. I think – that is the flaw of the Montessori teacher trainers and maybe the fact that once you become a trainer you stop working with children is the key limitation to the training. Because if you continued to work with children or continued to be able to observe with the children, you would see that the children have other ways of how to use the materials. Our 15 months old granddaughter absolutely loves the cylinders. She understands the principles of why certain cylinders only fit in certain holes and she uses the principles of trial and error, she is learning about one-to-one correspondence because she looks for the right hole. She will not be able to do it in a sequential manner, but does it

manner at this stage? The main principle of the cylinder is the one-to-one correspondence, and how the cylinder block guides the child's understanding of this principle.

[JJ]: So, if you had to give some advice on how to construct a curriculum for a teacher training programme, then what would you include there?

[BI]: I think that the key to the teacher training is in the length of it. I think that one year is not enough. You need to give the basic foundation in the one year. And people need to understand how the materials work, but they absolutely need the learning from the child in a subsequent year to be able to begin to think critically about what the children do and what they can learn from it.

For me maybe the most challenging element of the Montessori teacher training is the final examination. The practical examination when you have to demonstrate your capacity to use the materials. I think in an ideal world I would like people to attend the first year and get a temporary certification, and then go and work with children. And then have a conversation about what I have learned during the second year of working with children about the use of the Montessori materials and what it means to children and, about the meaning of honouring the voice of the child. At present there does not seem to be a conversation about what the child has done or what I have learned from the children. And yet without that capacity to learn from the children you cannot have that humility that Montessori talks about. We all need to be able to somehow recognize that we are not the all-powerful element of the learning for the child that the child is the powerful element and you are only in the service of the child's learning. Does that make sense?

[JJ]: Yes, of course. Barbara, I would like to ask you about the challenges that you see in Montessori as theory or as a concept of education but also in the community of Montessorians.

[BI]: I think our challenges are the fact that we operate within the private sector, that all the teacher training is offered privately with some exceptions when it's linked to university degrees. I think that creates a very exclusive idea of success. The financial aspect of running private teacher training is directly linked to number of enrolled students and the number of graduates, their success is also linked with the unique offerings of the college and how these are promoted and marketed. The training colleges are in competition with each other which is very deeply ingrained in the Montessori world... graduates feel deep allegiance to the place where they have trained – these allegiances close doors rather than open them in the spirit of co-operation and learning from each other. It works totally against the idea of being in the service of the child. It works totally against the idea that we need to learn from each other, that we need to cooperate. It works on the premise of competition rather than cooperation and I think that until we begin to really cooperate with each other and honestly recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each institution we will continue to have problems.

In 1989 or in 1990 I was asked to head the Montessori Centre International¹³ which was a collaboration between St. Nicholas and London Montessori Centre and I trained at Saint Nicholas but for many years I worked at London Montessori Centre and because of that experience I was asked to lead the newly formed organization and it meant that I was able to draw on the strengths of the two organizations and it also meant that it was an opportunity to create a new approach to teacher training. This enabled us to work with London Metropolitan University on creating a degree level course with Montessori in its name. We were the first organization to get Montessori teacher training recognized on the framework of national early years qualifications. Um, but it was only possible because we drew on the strengths of the two organizations and we continued to learn and build on the initial learning. The whole idea of collaborative spirit is essential for Montessori to continue, and that collaborative spirit needs to extend beyond the Montessori community. We need to look at what other people are doing. You know, there is history that Montessori herself built on learning from others. When I look at some of the Fröebel gifts¹⁴ I see how much Montessori borrowed from him. And what about the influence and Sequin¹⁵ and Itard¹⁶ on her approach?

¹³ Montessori Centre International (MCI) was established in 1998 through the collaboration of London Montessori Centre, founded by Lesley Britton, and Montessori St. Nicholas Charity, merging the work of two internationally acclaimed Montessori centres. Originally based in Balderton Street, London, MCI later relocated to St John's Wood, offering blended learning Montessori training for educators worldwide. Since 2020, MCI has focused on collaboration with Host and Beacon Centres, to prepare their own delivery models across the UK and overseas. (Montessori Global Education online).

¹⁴ Fröebel created a set of "Gifts" to support children's learning and development in his kindergarten in Germany in the 1840s. These Gifts include six sets of cubes, spheres and cylinders and included one of the first sets of wooden blocks developed specifically for young children to explore, create and play with. The Gifts are central to Froebelian practice (Froebel Trust, *Froebel's Gifts...* online).

¹⁵ Édouard Séguin (1812–1880) – a French physician and educationist born in Clamecy, Nièvre. He is remembered for his work with children having cognitive impairments in France and the United States. He studied at the Collège d'Auxerre and the Lycée Saint-Louisin Paris, and from 1837 studied and worked under Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who was an educator of deaf-mute individuals, that included the celebrated case of Victor of Aveyron, also known as "The Wild Child". It was Itard who persuaded Séguin to dedicate himself to studying the causes, as well as the training of individuals with intellectual disabilities. As a young man, Séguin was also influenced by the ideas of utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon. Maria Montessori was hugely inspired by many of his ideas, and followed his work by including most of the principles related to the construction and use of sensorial material. Around 1840, he established the first private school in Paris dedicated to the education of individuals with intellectual disabilities. In 1846, he published *Traitement Moral, Hygiène, et Education des Idiots* (The Moral Treatment, Hygiene, and Education of Idiots and Other Backward Children). This work is considered to be the earliest systematic textbook dealing with the special needs of children with intellectual disabilities (Wikipedia, *Édouard Séguin* online).

¹⁶ Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1774–1838) – a French physician born in Provence. He is perhaps best known for his work with Victor of Aveyron. Itard, without a university education and working at a bank, was forced to enter the army during the French Revolution, but presented himself as a physician at that time. After successfully working as an assistant physician at a military hospital in Soliers, in 1796, he was appointed deputy surgeon at Val-de-Grâce (Hôpital d'instruction des armées du Val-de-Grâce) military

And there seems more Montessori has borrowed from Fröbel. Standing¹⁷ makes reference to him in context of cosmology and the basis for Cosmic education, his idea of the child being part of the earth and the part child being part of the universe. It hasn't necessarily come from Montessori. She developed it and she created it into something else, we do not develop our ideas and understanding of the world in isolation. We are always evolving our ideas in relation to others. For example, we can learn from Rudolf Steiner¹⁸, and how he saw children and their developmental progression from the earliest, to the elementary, to the adolescent. He had a very good model of understanding what children need. So, drawing

hospital in Paris, and in 1799, physician at the National Institution for Deaf Mutes. Maria Montessori studied his approach and followed many of his suggestions related to education (Wikipedia, *Jean Marc Gaspard Itard* online).

¹⁷ Edwin Mortimer Standing (1887–1967) was a close friend and assistant to Maria Montessori for over thirty years. Born in Madagascar to Quaker missionaries Lucy and Herbert Standing, Standing was educated at Cambridge University. After working as a tutor in India in the early 1920's, Standing converted to Catholicism in 1923 and spent the next three decades directing Montessori teacher training courses in Italy, India, and the United Kingdom. He authored several books, including *The Child in the Church: Essays on the Religious Education of Children and the Training of Character* (co-authored with Montessori; Sands Publishers, 1930), *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (Academy Library Guild/Plume, 1957) and *The Montessori Method: A Revolution in Education* (Academy Library Guild, 1962). In the summer of 1962, Standing came out of retirement from his home in Cork County, Ireland to accept an invitation from William J. Codd, SJ, Professor of Education at Seattle University. Originally, Codd invited Standing to the university to help teach a special four-week summer session on Montessori education. Standing and Codd decided instead to inaugurate a permanent center for Montessori studies at Seattle University. Their goal was to promote the Montessori movement in the Pacific Northwest. After his death in 1967, the bulk of Standing's notes, manuscripts and ephemera became the nucleus for scholarship and research for courses taught through the E.M. Standing Montessori Studies Center (circa 1968–1978) (Archives West online).

¹⁸ Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) was an Austrian-born spiritualist, lecturer, and founder of anthroposophy, a movement based on the notion that there is a spiritual world comprehensible to pure thought, but accessible only to the highest faculties of mental knowledge. Attracted in his youth to the works of Goethe, Steiner edited that poet's scientific works and from 1889 to 1896 worked on the standard edition of his complete works in Weimar. During this period he wrote his *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1894; "The Philosophy of Freedom"), then moved to Berlin to edit the literary journal "Magazin für Literatur" and to lecture. Coming gradually to believe in spiritual perception independent of the senses, he called the result of his research "anthroposophy," centring on "knowledge produced by the higher self in man." In 1912 he founded the Anthroposophical Society. Steiner believed that humans once participated more fully in spiritual processes of the world through a dream like consciousness, but had since become restricted by their attachment to material things. The renewed perception of spiritual things required training the human consciousness to rise above attention to matter. The ability to achieve this goal by an exercise of the intellect is theoretically innate in everyone. In 1913 at Dornach, near Basel, Switzerland, Steiner built his first Goetheanum, which he characterized as a "school of spiritual science." After a fire in 1922, it was replaced by another building. The Waldorf School movement, derived from his experiments with the Goetheanum, by the early 21st century had more than 1,000 schools around the world. Other projects that grew out of Steiner's work include communities for persons with disabilities; a therapeutic clinical centre at Arlesheim, Switzerland; scientific and mathematical research centres; and schools of drama, speech, painting, and sculpture. Among Steiner's varied writings are *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (1894), *Occult Science: An Outline* (1913), and *Story of My Life* (1924) (Britannica 2024).

on the history of education in these three very important spheres enables us build on a solid foundation for the future.

[JJ]: This all sounds really inclusive. Collaboration is always better than competition as I get it.

[BI]: Yeah.

[JJ]: But the question is: Is it in any way possible when the knowledge is treated as commodity, and also Montessori training is a commodity? In other words, is it possible to collaborate in neoliberal world?

[BI]: For me collaboration is the only way forward. Initially you can say you know, you are AMI trained so you are very unique. You are AMS¹⁹, trained you are very unique. You are

¹⁹ The American Montessori Society was founded in 1960, in the early, heady days of a movement aimed at redefining educational options in the United States. Americans had been introduced to Montessori education once before, in the early 1900s, but their initial excitement had long since waned. By the 1950s, however, the cultural climate was changing, including a growing discontent with traditional American education. Among those seeking alternatives was a young, aspiring teacher from New York City, Nancy McCormick Rambusch. A recent recipient of a master's degree in early childhood education, and before that, a student of French literature and Romance philology, she was – like Maria Montessori, the founder of the Montessori Movement – charismatic, well educated, and a tireless advocate for children. In 1953, Rambusch's quest for a better approach to educating American children took her to Paris for the Tenth International Montessori Congress, where she met Mario Montessori, Maria's son and her successor as head of the AMI, an organization she had founded to support the Montessori Movement. Mario urged Rambusch to take coursework in Montessori education and to bring the Montessori Method to the U.S. Rambusch embraced the idea, and within a few years was conducting Montessori classes for her own children, and others, in her New York City apartment. In 1956, the Rambusch family moved to Greenwich, CT. There, Nancy became involved with a group of prominent parents who wanted to be deeply involved with their children's education. In 1958, they founded Whitby School – the first Montessori school to open in the U.S. since the initial flurry of interest in Montessori in the early 20th century. The board selected her as head of school. The following year, Mario Montessori appointed Nancy Rambusch to serve as the U.S. representative of the AMI. Six months later, in 1960, and with the vigorous support of parent-advocates, Nancy Rambusch founded the American Montessori Society. The goals of AMS mirrored those of AMI: to support efforts to create schools, develop teacher education programmes, and publicize the value of Montessori education. In 1961, TIME magazine featured Rambusch, Whitby School, and the American Montessori revival in its May 12 issue. The article galvanized the American public, and parents turned to AMS in large numbers for advice on starting schools and study groups. Additional publicity in the popular media, including Newsweek, the New York Times, and the Saturday Evening Post, as well as the publication in 1962 of Rambusch's book, *Learning How to Learn*, led to dramatic growth in the number of American Montessori schools and students. From the beginning, Rambusch and AMS worked to advance Montessori education into mid-20th century American culture. AMS insisted that all teacher educators have a college degree so that the coursework could, potentially, be recognized by state education departments. AMS also broadened the curriculum for teachers and sought to forge inroads into mainstream education by offering Montessori coursework in traditional teacher preparation programmes. Nancy Rambusch believed there was a need for cultural accommodation. Professor John J. McDermott, a colleague and friend, agreed, arguing that the popular idea of the universality of children displayed a basic naiveté about the interrelationships between a culture and the child's development of consciousness. McDermott also

MCI trained, you are very unique. But when you go to the workplace, we need to be able to see how each one of those approaches has enriched our knowledge and understanding of the children and therefore it would be much, much better for the training organizations to acknowledge that we work independently and we have got our approaches. But the roots of what we try to share are important and we need to preserve the fundamentals in order to thrive as a community because every single time when you begin to talk about the value of Montessori this question: “Oh but this is not a real Montessori therefore it cannot be as good as what I’m doing” totally undermines our work.

Why not to say? “You may not be doing it in the same way, but why is it that you are doing it in this way? What do you think benefits the children”? The question should always be: “What does it give to the children? What can you offer as an educator to the child? What have you learned from those trained by others”? You know, I think what Marlene Barron²⁰ has given to the Montessori community through her writing for AMS is incredibly valuable. I think what AMI offer us for organization of the classroom and some of the ideas about consistency is very, very important.

We need to respect what each other has to offer but also to acknowledge, that the learning journey is different for each individual graduate of the colleges. So, you can have an exceptional AMI teacher. You can have an exceptional AMS teacher. You can have an exceptional St. Nicholas teacher. But what are we doing about the people who are not exceptional? How do we help them to become better and not just say: “Oh well, they are AMI trained, this is why, it is like that.” You know we constantly hide behind the training instead of saying this is your Montessori journey and we are here to help you to be better in the service of children. Is it still very romantic?

[JJ]: It is, yes. And I love it.

[BI]: I’m never going to say anything else.

[JJ]: Me neither [laugh]. How do you see the future of Montessori community Barbara?

[BI]: The main message for me is to work with others. Learn from others. Learn to see what the democratic schools have to offer. See how the home education community works. Lots and lots of people in the world at the moment are drawing on Montessori to educate their children at home and fundamentally I disagree with this idea that children should be

stressed the need to move Montessori into the public sector so that it would be available to all children, regardless of their circumstances – a conviction that remains a vital underpinning of the organization, along with a belief in the need for adaptability (American Montessori Society online).

²⁰ Marlene Barron, PhD (1939–2022) had a distinguished career in Montessori education. She founded the Staten Island Montessori School in 1965 and served as its executive director until 2005. In 1979, she became head of school for West Side Montessori School, a role she held for 28 years. Dr. Barron earned degrees from Barnard College, Wagner College, and NYU, where she founded a Montessori teacher education programme. She worked extensively as a teacher trainer and academic adviser, including roles in China. An influential author, she wrote several educational books and received numerous honours (Montessori Life 2022).

educated at home. I think that children need to have the social aspect of school. For me that social element of school is far more important than the academic achievement because we are preparing them for life within the community, not separate from the community. But we need to work together in order to demonstrate to governments that there are some deep-seated values in helping children and recognizing children as individuals capable of contributing to the future. In recognizing that different children learn in different ways and that it is our responsibility as the educational community to help them develop to their potential, and the potential of each individual child is very different and yet, it needs to be valued. It cannot be undermined because it doesn't fit the formula of the present government.

And also I challenge, this whole idea of how we learn in the western world and that is the formula for all the rest of the world to learn. You know, there are still so many children who don't have access to education and Montessori could be the answer. But as long as we are linked to this idea that we need to have the authentic classroom for children to receive authentic Montessori learning we are not going to help those children. Setting up an authentic classroom is not accessible to the majority of people. But empowering the communities to use their resources to help the children learn is really, really important and there are examples of it. In Mexico the *Escuela Nueva*²¹ offers this idea that children learn from each other as a format to help the teacher to run school of 40 children. In South Africa I have seen teachers making number rods out of loo rolls because they were accessible. You could paint them and you could make them. So, if we help people understand the principles of Montessori learning we could make Montessori education accessible to more children. But we need to be able to think about moving away from the materials and looking at the principles behind the materials in order to be able to offer it to children around the world.

[JJ]: Yes. Oh, this is a beautiful conversation. Thank you, Barbara! Thank you very much for that. I have a very last question that is related to those people who are at the beginning of their adventure, at the start of their Montessori journey. So, could you please offer some message or advice to them?

[BI]: I still think that the message is: BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF THE CHILD and continue to watch and learn from the children. Do not see your Montessori teacher training as the finite step in your education as an adult. See it as the beginning and continue to read Montessori's writing. There is a lot of contradiction but there is a powerful message of the

²¹ Escuela Nueva was founded in the mid-1970s by Vicky Colbert, along with Beryl Levinger and Oscar Mogollón as co-founders. Colbert's family had a strong involvement in education. Her mother had set up teacher training colleges in Colombia and her grandfather had been Colombia's minister of education. The initiative began with just a few schools in three regions in 1976, and by 1989 the project had grown to 17,948, serving around 800,000 students. The readers may find this interview very interesting. It not only shows the involvement of Vicky Colbert in the transformation of rural schooling in Colombia and beyond (huntrED 2023). The context, values, story, as well as the challenges and successes of this initiative, oriented at bringing quality education to the poor in the Colombian Andes as well as the role of Montessori ideas in it, are beautifully described in a conversation between Steve Inskip and Anya Kamentz (nprEd 2016).

child as the agent of change. This powerful message of possibility of changing the world through education for me still remains at the heart of Montessori and it doesn't link to the use of the materials. It links to respecting the child, to trying to understand why children do certain things, to trusting in the child's capacity to learn – particularly in the first six years of life when self-image of the child is established. When you help the child feel that they are all powerful individuals... That is so important, and I would say the materials are interesting, but they are not essential. There are other ways to do it. We need to give children opportunity to show you what their levels of interest are. You know, because there are the children who like to manipulate blocks, there are the children who love to work with home activities, there are the children who like to draw and paint. There are the children who love to read or do mathematics, so let's just go with the children. Don't push your curriculum. This idea that you have to tick every box of the Montessori material being done is detrimental to the development of those children. You need to find a way how to make those children learn through the activities they enjoy.

[JJ]: Thank you very much Barbara for this conversation.

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