

# Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William H. Kilpatrick

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## **Abstract**

This article explores Montessori's story in terms of her initial warm reception by America to her educational research, and her later cooling off, once Dewey's student, Kilpatrick, published *The Montessori System Examined* and declared her work to be based on psychological theory that was fifty years behind the times. I argue that there is a troubling gendered side to Montessori's story that affected her in significant ways and still lingers and limits her contribution to educational theory, and for my purposes, democratic theory. We recognize Dewey's significant contributions to democratic theory but not Montessori's; I hope to help right that wrong.

## **Introduction**

I have pictures of both Maria Montessori and John Dewey in my office; the one motivated me to go into education and gave me a model of education that still stimulates my thinking today (Montessori),<sup>1</sup> and the other supports my theoretical efforts in significant ways and serves as an important philosophical ally (Dewey). Both inspire me and encourage me to keep working hard, and I think they share important contributions to educational research. In fact, I would have anticipated each to find in the other an ally who supported his or her work, for while Dewey was eleven years older than Montessori, both lived long lives and they died within a month of each other in 1952. Their paths crossed in December 1913, when Dewey introduced Montessori at her first lecture at Carnegie Hall to a sold-out crowd.<sup>2</sup> He was a distinguished professor at Columbia University at that time, a philosopher, and president of the National Kindergarten Association, and he was joined on the platform by many other distinguished dignitaries, professors, and deans.

I want to use this opportunity to explore Montessori's story in terms of her initial warm reception in America to her educational research and then the later cooling off, once Dewey's student, William Kilpatrick, published *The Montessori System Examined* in 1914 and declared her work to be based on psychological theory that was fifty years behind the times.<sup>3</sup> I have not come across anything written by Dewey himself that discusses Montessori's work directly, but Kilpatrick makes it clear in his preface that Dewey read his manuscript and gave valuable suggestions, for which he thanks Dewey. He also makes reference to Dewey in comparison to Montessori throughout the text. Kilpatrick's analysis of Montessori's "educational doctrines" is based on the reading of one book by her, *The Montessori Method*, and the observation of a Montessori classroom in Rome made by Kilpatrick and two colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Kilpatrick positions himself as if he is an impartial judge, instead of acknowledging that he is loyal to John Dewey. Montessori may have been perceived as a threat by the two of them, due to her tremendous popularity, although she never tried to present her work as philosophical or as based on current educational theory. Instead, she viewed herself as a scientist doing scientific inquiry, something one would expect Dewey to applaud, as the developer of a model for reflective thinking that resembles the scientific method.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that there is a troubling gendered side to Montessori's story that affected her in significant ways during her lifetime, personally as well as professionally, and still lingers and affects her contribution to educational theory, and for my purposes, democratic theory. 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. We recognize Dewey's significant contributions to democratic theory but not Montessori's, and it is my hope that I can help to right that wrong. 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.<sup>6</sup> Her educational plans serve as an illustration of my democratic theory even though her philosophy of education is in many ways more in agreement with Rousseau's, who I have argued elsewhere developed a democratic theory that undermines democracy.<sup>7</sup> 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, self-directed, and self-disciplined citizens of democracies-always-in-the-making. I share Montessori's hope that through education we can help more children grow up in a world that welcomes them.

### ***Maria Montessori and La Casa dei Bambini***

Maria Montessori became the first woman in Italy to graduate from the University of Rome's medical school, in 1896, and become a licensed medical doctor. She was

twenty-six years old at the time. The very same year, John Dewey opened a school in Chicago that was called the University Elementary School. The school began with 15 students, including Dewey's own children. In 1902 its name was changed to the Chicago Lab School.

After graduation from medical school, 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. Although she was a medical doctor, the positions Montessori occupied at the University were at a women's college, in Hygiene and Pedagogy, acceptable female fields of study. Montessori ran into serious limitations to her work in medicine because she was a woman. She could not easily establish a private practice, as she was not allowed to administer to any man, although her male colleagues could administer to any patient. In 1897, Montessori joined the staff at the University of Rome as a voluntary assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic. She was not allowed to join the University of Rome as a regular, paid assistant doctor, being a woman; she could only be on the staff on a voluntary basis. How was she to secure a living for herself? This problem is one she faced throughout her career. It was uniquely her problem, as a woman living when she did, for she could only have a career if she did not marry and have spousal support.

Part of Montessori's duty at the Psychiatric Clinic was to visit Rome's asylums for the insane in order to select subjects suitable for the clinic. Her interest in "idiot children" was triggered by her exposure to the conditions in which they lived, for they were housed with adults in the asylums and no effort was made to care for them beyond keeping them alive.<sup>8</sup> Montessori offered medical care for the "feble-minded children" based on a strong interest in children's diseases that she developed 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 perceived mental deficiencies as a pedagogical problem rather than a medical one.

During the 1897-1900 time frame, Montessori searched for information concerning efforts by other doctors to try to educate "feble-minded 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 approached the education of the child as a scientist, observing children intently and making intuitive hypotheses about their behavior that she then tested 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 because she was not trained as a teacher but as a doctor.<sup>9</sup> She discovered work in France by two doctors, Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1775-1838) and Edouard

Séguin (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.

In 1900, Montessori became the codirector of the State Orthophrenic School.<sup>10</sup> She was given permission to remove the children from the asylum and place them in a vacated ward of a hospital in Rome. There she was able to work with the children and test out her theories for educating them. She began designing materials, similar to what Itard and Séguin described, that she then tested out to see if the children were drawn to them or not, and at what age, and so on. The materials were designed to be attractive, self-correcting, and sequential, with basic concepts isolated for ease of understanding. 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. The education program worked: several of her "defective" children learned how to read and write and were able to pass the state examinations with above average scores. Montessori became very famous for this educational feat.

However, Montessori's successes educating children with special needs caused her to wonder about the education system "normal children" were experiencing in Italy at the time. She knew that her children who scored well on the state exams were mentally challenged, and so she wondered, what is wrong with the normal children's education system? 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. It was during this timeframe that Montessori translated by hand Séguin's 600-page book from French into Italian so that she could absorb its lessons more completely. She had been looking for his second book (1866) with no success for several years, until a friend found her a copy in a pile of discarded books belonging to the private library of a New York physician. Here Montessori found confirmation from Séguin of what she had begun to suspect: that his method of education would work with normal children, too. This became the problem that absorbed Montessori. Her scientific question, after much observation in the state schools, became a testable hypothesis: will the teaching methods that I have used with "defective" children help "normal" children learn more as well? 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 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 who were not yet in school were not being supervised. They were free to roam the buildings and 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 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. This is how Montessori came to work with young children ages 3-6; no one else thought they were educable and no one was worried about any harm that might occur to “poor” children exposed to Montessori’s methods of educating. To Montessori, “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.<sup>11</sup>

In January, 1907 (just five years after Dewey’s school was renamed the Chicago Lab School) Montessori opened the first “Casa dei Bambini,” which has been translated into English by many to mean The Children’s House, but as Jane Martin points out, should have been translated as The Children’s Home.<sup>12</sup> Montessori’s school served as an extended home for the children, and they spent the entire day there, including the main, midday meal. She hired a young woman with no training to be the children’s teacher, wanting someone who would not bring her own preconceptions of what a teacher is supposed 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. 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 attracted them, 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 “feeble-minded” children. Several of her patron friends donated toys for the children to play with, but to the adults’ surprise, the children chose working with the didactic materials over playing with the toys. The children were like little explorers, hungry to learn, and settled right in and worked in earnest. She began testing more academic materials that she designed, as well as introducing more practical life activities. Much to everyone’s amazement, 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 how to read and write.

By 1908, Montessori was world famous, “for having discovered the world within the child.”<sup>13</sup> She resigned her position in anthropology at the University of Rome in 1908 to work with sixty young children of working families full time. The demands on her time were becoming so great she thought that if she was not under university obligation she would have more freedom to develop her pedagogy as 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.<sup>14</sup> By summer it was in 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. Montessori became close associates with many students from this first class, including Helen Parkhurst, Adelia Pyle, and Claude Claremont.<sup>15</sup>

Anne George, the first Montessori-trained American teacher, started the first Montessori school in America in October 1911 with 12 students in an upper-class family home in New York, overlooking the Hudson. The children settled into a self-established order and discipline and began working their way through the sensory materials and “exploded” into reading and writing. The wife of Alexander Graham Bell, Mabel Hubbard Bell, became intrigued by the Montessori method, for her husband had begun his career as a teacher of the deaf and Mabel was deaf. In the spring of 1912, a Montessori class was set up for two of the Bell grandchildren, joined by other neighborhood children and taught by Roberta Fletcher. By spring 1913 it was clear there was enough interest in Washington, D.C. to establish a private Montessori school. That same year Mrs. Bell formed the Montessori Educational Association, which included on its board Margaret Woodrow Wilson, the President’s daughter. 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 it, those who started Montessori educational associations without her authorization, and those who opened schools with teachers not trained by her in the methodology. The excitement about her work was beyond her ability to control, as much as she tried, in terms of her effort to assure quality schools.

Samuel Sidney McClure, a publisher from the U.S., helped to introduce Montessori to the U.S. public through several essays he commissioned for publication in *McClure’s Magazine* during 1911-12. McClure traveled to Rome to meet Montessori in person and convince her to let him add to the films she was making of the classrooms, and bring the films to America to show those who could not travel to Italy. Montessori 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, or school, in order for her to continue her research efforts, only to have personal or political events prevent patrons from fulfilling those promises. The other common occurrence was that patrons would seek to take control over her work, and Montessori would then withdraw from the agreement. In the McClure example, by 1912 he was in “crushing debt, had lost control of his magazine and had taken to

the lecture platform to earn his living.<sup>216</sup> He hoped that by bringing Montessori to America to lecture and show her 2,000 feet of films of her pupils' work, he would achieve personal gain. He enticed her to come with plans for a joint lecture tour, the establishment of Montessori schools and a teacher-training institute, and arrangements for a company to manufacture and distribute didactic materials. Naively attracted to McClure's vision, and her picture of him as a wealthy, powerful figure devoted to the cause rather than personal gain, Montessori agreed. In December 1913, McClure hosted and escorted Montessori for a three-week speaking tour in America. They traveled by ship, and were greeted by several of her former students upon their arrival, who served as her interpreters and companions.

Rita Kramer reports this lecture tour in great detail, having access to the newspaper reports of Montessori's trip and the interviews she gave to various reporters. McClure used the press, despite their exaggerations and distortions, to stir up interest in Montessori and sell tickets for the lecture halls and showings of her films. Famous people interested in her work, such as the Bells, Thomas Edison, Helen Keller, Margaret Wilson, Jane Addams, and Ella Flagg Young had the opportunity to meet Montessori and host receptions in her honor in New York City, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Chicago. America treated her like royalty. The reporters did not ask her what she thought of methods of education being developed in America, Montessori pointed out, but she had been watching the general trends with great interest and heartily endorsed them—which means she endorsed Dewey's progressive education. When Montessori spoke at Carnegie Hall, with Dewey offering her a few words of welcome, around 1,000 people were turned away. She gave a second lecture the next week, due to the high level of interest in her work, and still many were turned away. When Montessori left to return to Italy on Christmas Eve, it seemed that America would be the first country to experiment with the Montessori system on a large scale, but that 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."<sup>17</sup>

In 1915, Montessori was invited to present her work to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, described as the equivalent of a World's Fair, and she designed a glass-walled demonstration classroom that was occupied by twenty-one pupils ages three to six and one of her trained teachers, Helen Parkhurst. People from all over the world came to observe the classroom of young pupils during its four months of existence and learn about her method of education by observing the children as they worked. It was by far the most popular event at the exposition and the children's classroom won two gold medals. In 1915 there were over 100 Montessori schools in the U.S. and many more opened in the rest of the world.

There is much more to the Montessori story than I can share here: how her work continued to spread at an international level, and how her methodology changed over time as she aged, from a scientific experiment that was flexible and adaptive to a more structured system that presented the educational experiment as completed. The American Montessori Society (AMS), founded by Nancy Ram-

busch in the 1950s, maintains Montessori's youthful, scientific experimentation spirit toward her methodology and the Association of Montessori International (AMI) maintains her more structured, elderly perspective. The two approaches are critical of each other as being less "pure" or "true" to Montessori's ideas, yet children continue to thrive in diverse Montessori schools all over the world. There is no copyright protection on the Montessori method of education: anyone can hang up a sign and call their school a "Montessori school," thus the quality of the schools vary tremendously. Montessori's worries about how to maintain quality control of schools in her name have proved to be justified. I caution people against passing judgment on Montessori schools based on one site for this very reason. Each school is unique, even though there is much commonality there as well. Let us now see how Dewey compares to Montessori, through Kilpatrick's eyes, with my voice added in defense of Montessori.

### **William Heard Kilpatrick**

William Kilpatrick wrote *The Montessori System Examined* in 1914, based on an examination of the English translation of Montessori's *The Montessori Method* and an observation of a Montessori classroom in Rome.<sup>18</sup> Kramer dedicates a chapter of her biography of Montessori to Kilpatrick, due to his negative influence on Montessori's reception in America.<sup>19</sup> She reminds us that Montessori was a woman, a Catholic, and an Italian, all of which positioned her as an outsider in 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."<sup>20</sup> As a disciple of Dewey's who became a professor at Columbia University's Teacher College as well, Kilpatrick is described by Kramer as "the best-known teacher of education in his generation. . . . [whose] influence on an entire generation of educators was enormous."<sup>21</sup> His stated purpose is to examine Montessori's educational ideas—he calls them "doctrines"—in terms of how they relate to each other as well as how they relate to similar doctrines, to determine what contribution she has to offer to American education. He acknowledges that her work has drawn much enthusiasm, but he positions that enthusiasm as coming from laymen, based on faith, not so much from experienced teachers. He tells us his audiences are teachers and superintendents who want details. He positions himself as an impartial, fair judge (instead of acknowledging that his loyalty lies with Dewey, and that he intends to compare Montessori to Dewey, even though Montessori was a medical doctor and scientist and Dewey was a philosopher). Throughout the text, Kilpatrick refers to Dewey as Professor Dewey and he refers to Montessori as Madam Montessori (not Dr. Montessori). I want to make a note at this point that while John Dewey was a strong supporter of women as intellectuals during his career, including Jane Addams, Ella Flagg Young, and his own wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, he also had a tendency to be inspired by their work but only give them credit for their contributions to his ideas in his acknowledgments pages, which have been lost in subsequent publications of



his writings. Dewey's lack of direct engagement in women's educational theories in his writings during his lifetime diminished their contributions to education and theory and has added to the need for feminists to recover their work.<sup>22</sup>

Kilpatrick begins with some history of Montessori's work and how she became interested in "defectives" and learned about the work by Edward Séguin. In this brief description, he gives Montessori no credit for thinking about the idea of trying to educate "the feeble-minded," rather than viewing them only in terms of their medical needs. Kilpatrick then gives a general background of prevalent educational theory at the time, focusing on Pestalozzi and the invitation to organize the infant schools, and again we find that Kilpatrick gives Montessori no credit for thinking about the idea of educating preschoolers. His best praise for her addresses her general wish to apply scientific conceptions to education: that teachers should have a scientific attitude and keep records of their students (anthropometric and psychologic). He recognizes Montessori's scientific attitude in her desire to develop a scientific pedagogy based on the study of the individual, and that in order to do so, observations must be made of children who are free: "Few in the history of education have been capable of breaking so completely with the surrounding school tradition as has this Italian physician. To set aside tradition for science is no common achievement. That the innovator is a woman will seem to some all the more remarkable" (5). While he commends her scientific attitude, he criticizes her science for overgeneralizing based on observations limited to Italian schools. Interestingly, Montessori continued to test out her pedagogical methodology on children in various, diverse cultures throughout her lifetime. She lived in Spain, England, India, and the Netherlands at various times as she continued to study the child, and traveled to other countries to lecture as well as lead teacher-training programs. She was still planning trips during the last year of her life, hoping to travel to Africa. Kilpatrick also critiques Montessori on her biology, using the example that she considered garlic to be a disinfectant (which it turns out, has been proven correct).

Kilpatrick judges Montessori as not up to date on educational theory, suggesting that her idea that "education is a development from within" is an old idea that can be traced back to Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. However, Montessori approached education through medicine, which was a very different path, starting with the Spanish physician, Pereira (1715-1780), who influenced Itard, then his student Séguin. In fact, Kilpatrick accuses Montessori of being fifty years behind in her educational psychology, and being unaware of what Wundt was doing in Germany (someone whose work is no longer cited). What is interesting about this judgment is that Montessori's work on the psychology of the infant and young child was a significant influence on Jean Piaget, whose theory was not yet known at the time of Kilpatrick's critique. Moreover, others such as Anna Freud and Jerome Bruner have written about her work being very much ahead of its time.

Kilpatrick rejects Montessori's interpretation of the doctrine of development as inadequate and misleading, and he is uncomfortable with her doctrine of child

liberty, thinking Rousseau, Froebel, and Dewey should be credited with this general point of view, especially Dewey. However, it is interesting from a Montessorian perspective to note that while Kilpatrick wants these educational philosophers to be credited with the idea of “child liberty,” at the same time he is uncomfortable with the amount of freedom the children have in a Montessori school. He understands Montessori’s deep level of respect for the child and the need to permit the free, natural manifestations of the child, but he does not understand that for Montessori the recommendation to permit the child freedom comes from her study of children, based on what she describes as biological and scientific observations of their behavior. Montessori saw the child as her source of biological information, as the one who was teaching her. She learned to trust that the child would seek to get what she needs from the environment to become the adult she has the potential to be.

Kilpatrick never mentions Montessori’s idea of discipline coming through the children’s work; instead, he describes the discipline as coming from the liberty. This is a misunderstanding of a central Montessorian principle. He points out that no anarchy results from the unusual amount of liberty the children have, but misses the value Montessori placed on order being achieved through the children’s interests in the didactic materials she designed. The discipline for the children’s behavior in a Montessori classroom comes through their work, the activities they choose to participate in based on their interests and the uninterrupted time they have to see their work through to completion. Montessori learned that by allowing children to choose what they are interested in as an activity, the children will take care of their deep-seeded needs for independence and self-control, as well as other needs such as order and silence, and will learn how to monitor their own behavior through what she labeled as their “work.” She called the children’s activities “work” so that adults would take the children’s activities seriously and not consider what the children did as “just play” that could be interrupted whenever adults wanted, based on adult needs instead of the children’s. Montessori learned that children learn self-discipline and self-control through their work. Surprisingly, they can develop a strong ability to concentrate their minds and control their bodies if given the chance to do so. Kilpatrick points out that Montessori gives the students long periods of time for uninterrupted work (two plus hours), whereas kindergartens are shaped in no more than thirty-minute increments. But, again, he misses the point that it is important to Montessori’s pedagogy that the children be allowed to follow their interests to completion, trusting that children will stop an activity when they are ready, when they are saturated, if given a chance to do so.

I have taken many American teacher-education students to observe and intern in Montessori classrooms and have been surprised to hear college students say to me, “The children just play all day. When are they learning anything?” The teacher-education students see the activities the children do as play instead of work, and the didactic materials the classroom is full of as noneducational. Kilpatrick expresses a similar misunderstanding when he misses the point that the child will

learn the necessary knowledge and skills through the materials (although we will also see below that he criticizes the material for being too formal and limiting of children's creative play).<sup>23</sup> Montessori classrooms are full of educational material: there is no "bad choice" available for the students. Kilpatrick thinks "practically all of the Montessori apparatus is available for any child," but again this shows a lack of understanding of the Montessori classroom. In fact, Montessori carefully directed teachers not to overwhelm young children with too many choices, but instead start the school year with a few materials on the shelves for children to choose from, and slowly add more material to the room as the children adjust to the classroom environment. Children are free to choose any material in the classroom they want to work on, as long as they have been shown the material by the teacher or by another child in the role of teacher. This is to insure the child is ready for the material he or she is shown and will have a chance to be successful at learning the key concepts the material teaches. Children who have not mastered basic mathematic concepts through the didactic material are not introduced to more abstract, advanced math materials such as test tube divisions (for long division). Instead, the teacher will direct the child to another material that teaches the basic concepts the child is still trying to master in a different way. Also, there is a general rule of thumb in a Montessori classroom that children are free to choose what to do from what's been introduced to them, or even free to choose not to do anything, as long as they are not disturbing others' work. The children learn to respect the rights of their neighbors and that it is not okay to interrupt others or keep them from their own opportunities to learn. This is a key Montessori principle that Kilpatrick never mentions.

Like many American teacher-education students I have taken to observe and intern in Montessori classrooms, Kilpatrick is not only uncomfortable with the amount of freedom the children have in a Montessori school, but he is also uncomfortable with the role of the teacher. Montessori directresses do not position themselves in the center front of the room, with students' desks all facing toward the teacher's desk. In fact, in all the years I taught I never had a desk; I had a clipboard where I kept my observation notes on each child, and an adult-size plastic chair I would move around the room, or keep in a corner in case I might need it. Kilpatrick wants a teacher who is clearly the center and arbiter of the activity in the room, and the Montessori teacher is at the side, observing the children, and working with a single child or small groups as needed. My students used to ask me, after observing a Montessori classroom, "Where is the teacher and where is the teaching?" Not able to see the material in the classroom as self-correcting (and therefore taking on a role as teacher), or the other children who had mastered certain material as capable of serving as teachers, or the teacher working one-on-one with a child as teaching, they didn't think any teaching was going on in the classroom. I have watched strangers not used to a Montessori classroom walk into my room while I was sitting by a child's side at her desk, or maybe I was on the carpet, next to a child's rug where he was working, and the strangers would search in vain for the teacher. Usually there

was surprise on their faces, because they looked for a teacher's desk, but couldn't find one. Then they looked for the person they expected to be standing in the front of the classroom, but still didn't find anyone. The last place they thought to look was on the floor. I usually got up and went to them, apologizing to the child for the interruption and promising to come right back.

Kilpatrick describes the use of circles and tables for group activities in kindergarten classes, and the Montessori room as having individual tables arranged as the children wanted. I find this description confusing, as every Montessori classroom I have observed or worked in had a variety of tables, some larger some smaller, and desks, some pulled together and some by themselves, to offer the children choices in where they work. Montessori is credited with designing child-sized tables and chairs for children to use that they can move by themselves. All Montessori classrooms also have available small rugs for the children to use on the floor, to mark off their workspace, and these can be used with other children. The children can choose to work with others or alone, yet Kilpatrick makes it sound like the Montessori child works mainly on her own, with someone maybe looking on. I am guessing Kilpatrick was used to seeing kindergarten children who worked together on the same activity, as we still see in American kindergartens today, with teachers determining what will be the activities for the day, preparing the material for these activities, and then setting up "stations" such as three large tables, where the children are divided into three groups and rotate at the teacher's direction from one table to another, working on an activity at one station until the teacher says it is time to move on to the next one. Even rest and snack times in traditional kindergartens are group activities, whereas the Montessori child can serve herself a snack whenever she is hungry (it's a practical life activity available on the shelves at all times with a table reserved just for snacking), and can take a rest in a quiet corner whenever she needs to, with a small couch, futon cushion, or in one of my children's classrooms—an old fashioned claw foot bathtub full of pillows where the children can read or rest.

Kilpatrick offers one more strong criticism of the Montessori method that I would like to address. This is one I have heard many times and it is also based on a lack of understanding of the Montessori method. Kilpatrick criticizes Montessori's "didactic apparatus" for being too formal and offering little variety. He says that the range is too limited and narrow for the normal child (27). He acknowledges the material has a strong attraction, but asserts that it is a "meager diet for normally active children" (28). Kilpatrick finds that Montessori's "curriculum affords very inadequate expression to a large portion of child nature" and says this limitation is "repressive" of happiness and mental growth (30). At one point he claims that America has far superior games to what can be found in Rome in Montessori's classroom, and he acknowledges that her pedagogy may make sense to the poor children in Rome who have "inferior home surroundings" but that it does not make sense for America: "Doubtless if Madam Montessori had herself known more of better educational practice elsewhere, she would have incorporated some, perhaps all, of

the features the absence of which we here regret. . . . From every consideration, the proposed curriculum proves inadequate and unduly restrictive” (30).

I find Kilpatrick’s tone here very condescending toward Montessori, children with special needs, and children whose families are from lower income levels, as well as xenophobic towards Italy. I am embarrassed that this highly regarded scholar, so influential in American education at the time, was able to publish such a biased analysis of the Montessori method and have the impact he apparently had. Why was he not held more accountable for his prejudices? Certainly they are easy to see today. In fact, knowing that Dewey read the manuscript and gave his student critical feedback causes me to think less of Dewey as well. It is ironic that Kilpatrick thought Montessori’s didactic material was appropriate for the poor children in Rome but not the (wealthier) children in America, as it was wealthy children in America who first had access to Montessori schools, when the schools were originally introduced in 1911-15 and then reintroduced in the late 1950s. I often find people assume I worked for wealthy families in elite settings because I taught in America, when in fact the school I helped to start is set in an artistic community in the Pocono Mountains that is not wealthy. One school was elite in Santa Barbara, but the last school I taught in was originally developed for migrant workers’ children and was located at the San Luis Rey Mission, sponsored by the San Diego Diocese. The school paid no rent, several retired nuns taught for no pay, and the tuition was small and was forgiven if a family could not afford to pay it and petitioned the church.

Kilpatrick fails to appreciate the history of the development of Montessori’s method of education in terms of Itard’s and Séguin’s method of isolating concepts and teaching them through the child’s senses. He also fails to acknowledge the testing of material that Montessori practiced, as a scientist, to see what children were drawn to and at what age, and what was not attractive to them and should be discarded. Montessori’s approach to teaching concepts can be seen today in the form of “educational toys” which are found on the shelves of preschool classrooms as well as in many children’s homes. Her development of concrete materials to teach abstract concepts is an idea used in most elementary math classes today. When he asserts that Montessori strictly forbade children to “play” with the material, Kilpatrick ignores the fact that she started *La Casa dei Bambini* with toys in the room and the children neglected them for the didactic materials she kept introducing, so that she eventually removed the toys. This criticism also ignores the distinction Montessori made between work and play I discussed above.

Kilpatrick critiques Montessori’s classrooms for lacking modeling, drawing, painting, stories, and drama, yet every classroom I have observed or taught in had artistic material available for children to use (colored pencils, crayons, paints, chalk, etc.), and easels available for painting (often these are placed outside on patios and in gardens to extend the classroom outside the four walls), as well as looms for weaving (in my classroom the children made their own looms, thus including woodworking

in the classroom). Drama was part of our curriculum in terms of “story starters” and there was a chest full of various props for the children to use for Friday afternoon performances. Games were also available in my room, although I found, just like Montessori, that the children were not drawn to use them over the didactic material available. Stories are also very much a part of the elementary curriculum. In fact Montessori’s recommended approach to teaching history and science is through storytelling. She recommended the use of timelines for history, and for science she recommended teachers start by telling the children various creation myths from around the world and end with the scientific creation myth, The Big Bang Theory. Montessori just did not recommend the use of fairy tales and fantasy stories with preschool age children because of their stage of development. For young children, the whole world is full of wonder and mystery, as well as fears, and Montessori reasoned that it was not necessary to add to the children’s efforts to make sense of what they experience on a daily basis. They are not old enough to be able to judge what is real and what is fantasy and are vulnerable to harm due to their inability to be discerning. Plato made a similar recommendation in his *Republic*.<sup>24</sup>

Both Kramer and Standing write in their biographies of Montessori that she was advised by her admirers to respond to criticisms by scholars such as Kilpatrick. However, Montessori was determined not to put her limited time and energy into that kind of defense, preferring to leave it to others who understood her method to respond on her behalf. With her home base being in Europe, where her family and friends lived and her work was much appreciated, she turned down McClure’s efforts to lure her to America on a permanent basis and maintained her residency in Italy, only moving away to Spain when she feared her son would be drafted during WWI.<sup>25</sup> Montessori’s contribution to American education faded quickly. By 1916, in meetings held by the National Education Association and the International Kindergarten Union, members had turned to other agenda topics and by 1920 her name was seldom in print in the U.S. Kramer sums up her chapter with the suggestion that at the time of Montessori’s introduction to America, her “educational techniques were too much at variance with the prevailing American social philosophy, the late-nineteenth-century progressive movement that saw schools primarily as instruments of social reform as articulated by Dewey and his followers in the early years of the (twentieth) century. In this context Montessori’s ideas did seem to be foreign to the main thrust of American education, and Kilpatrick’s book, widely read by educators at the time, dealt them a telling blow.”<sup>26</sup> Montessori’s ideas were not to be revived until the 1950s, when Nancy Rambusch went to London for Montessori training and came back to America to open the Whitby School in 1958 and start the American Montessori Association in 1960, which sparked the American revival of Montessori.

## **Conclusion**

Maria Montessori is probably one of the most famous women to contribute to contemporary educational theory, yet when I went to graduate school to earn a doctorate

in philosophy in education, I was never assigned anything to read by her or about her. As Martin has pointed out, for a time hers was the only female name found in most anthologies about famous educators, and her work was usually described in only a paragraph or two.<sup>27</sup> Things have improved; as feminist scholarship has gained strength and more women's work has been recovered, Montessori's work has regained attention and she is given more credit for her significant contributions to the field of education. Kramer offers "a random list of ideas, techniques, and objects familiar to everyone in the field of childhood education today, all of which go back to Montessori's work at the start of the century, all of which she either invented or used in a new way" and that includes:

- the concept that children learn through play and the development of "educational" toys
- child-size furniture and equipment (brooms, mops, etc.), cubbies and shelves the children can reach, hooks they can reach to hang up their coats and sweaters
- "open classrooms" and "ungraded classrooms" (multiage classrooms where children remain in the same classroom for 3 years)
- the idea that children should be free to choose their own work and follow their interests and work at their own pace (mastery learning)
- the idea that children should be allowed to work together (peer tutoring) or alone, as they desire
- the idea that the child is not just a smaller version of the adult
- the significance of early stimulation for later learning and the implications of this for children who are impoverished (Head Start Program)
- the importance of the environment for learning
- the idea that children take real pleasure in learning and that real learning involves the ability to do things for oneself
- the idea that children will establish their own order and quiet if given interesting work to do
- the idea that what a child does is work; it's significant, and it should not be interrupted unless absolutely necessary, so that the child is able to finish the work to completion
- the idea that the child's learning material should be interesting, attractive, and self-correcting
- the concept of "sensitive periods" for learning and "reading readiness"
- the idea that the school must be part of the community and parents should be involved for their child's education to be effective (parent education)
- the right of every child to develop to his or her full potential and that schools exist to implement that right.<sup>28</sup>

These are amazingly big ideas that Montessori contributed to the world of childhood education. She was able to observe children and see them with fresh eyes and bring new meaning to their actions that others had overlooked or misinter-

preted. Her background in science taught her the necessary skills of observation, and to not be wedded to a particular result, but to test out various hypotheses to find the best result. However, I don't think we can truly appreciate Montessori's genius without recognizing the context of the times in which she worked and lived, and the limitations placed upon her, because she was a woman living at the beginning of the twentieth century, part of the first wave of feminism in Italy.

Working in a Montessori school was a tremendously rich, creative experience for me, as I experienced schools in a way I had never experienced as a child. Having multi-aged children together in the same room for three years, with the freedom to move around the room and choose what they wanted to work on throughout the day as well as who they wanted to work with, having no grading or testing (except as a practical life activity in the spring, when the school had to give the children the state required test), using materials I helped to design that followed Montessori's principles, was a creative and rewarding experience for the children in my classroom and for me. Even though her focus was on the individual child and her aim was to help each child reach her or his full potential, an aim similar to Rousseau's, her school structure created a place where children could learn how to be self-directed, self-disciplined, self-controlled, and empowered to take active roles as members of a democratic community, teaching them the skills they will need to be citizens in a democracy-always-in-the-making.<sup>29</sup> Montessori gave up much in order to give the world the Montessori method of education for children, a gift she truly believed would help children reach their full potential and one that would allow them in turn to help create a better world, one filled with the possibility of world peace. It is my sincere hope that knowing her story in its complexity within today's context will help draw attention to her work, as she continues to contribute to my own thinking.

### 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 that year 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. I taught in three different Montessori schools, The Growing Concern in Tannersville, PA, where I taught 6- to 10-year-olds for three years, the Montessori Center School in Santa Barbara, CA, where I taught 9- to 12-year-olds for one year, and the Old Mission Montessori School in Oceanside, CA, where I taught 8- to 12-year-olds for two 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. For more on Montessori's philosophy of education, see Maria Montes-



sori, *The Discovery of the Child*, 2nd ed., trans. M. Josephy Costelloe (New York: Ballantine, 1972); and Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 2nd ed., trans. M. Josephy Costelloe (New York: Ballantine, 1977). See also Marsha Familaro Enright and Doris Cox, "Montessori Education," *Montessori Land.com* (August 1997), accessed Sept. 18, 2009, <http://www.montessoriland.com/site/1270021/page/530591>.

2. My biographical sources for Montessori include: Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (New York: Putman, 1976); Edward M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

3. William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Montessori System Examined* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914).

4. Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Random House, 1912).

5. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966) and *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

6. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

7. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, in *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (NY: Harper & Row, 1970). See also Barbara Thayer-Bacon, "Beyond Liberal Democracy: Diverse Educational Relations," *Paideusis* 15, no. 2 (2006): 79-91. Montessori vehemently denied that her method of education was similar to Rousseau's in her lifetime, equating his work as philosophical theory while she viewed her work as scientific, based on empirical observations.

8. The terms in quotes were considered scientific terms that were in use at the time of Montessori's work and were used by her in her writings to represent children who are mentally challenged.

9. Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 29.

10. Maria fell in love with her lab partner, Dr. Montesano, and had an illegitimate child with him, Mario, born in 1898. The couple did not marry, and kept the birth of their child a secret. If she had married, her career would have been over. Her family and his protected Montessori's reputation and another family raised Mario, their son. Mario grew up not knowing who 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. In 1900, Montessori and Montesano were appointed codirectors of a new school, the Orthophrenic School, in recognition of their hard work and developing knowledge of special education (Standing gives the date 1899). Unfortunately for Montessori, in 1901 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. I discuss Montessori's relationship with her son more in "Maria Montessori's Gendered Story," paper submitted for AERA, 2012 with the Research on Women and Education SIG.

11. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*; Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Random House, 1912), 43.

12. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

13. Standing, *Maria Montessori*.

14. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*; Montessori, *The Montessori Method*.

15. The Claremonts, a British couple, hosted Montessori's training programs in England for many years, and eventually moved to California, where they offered training programs in their final years. One of their students, Harvey Hallenberg, led my training program at Barrie Day School in 1981-82.

16. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, 182.

17. *Ibid.*, 203.

18. Kilpatrick, *The Montessori System Examined*.

19. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, chapter 14.

20. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, 227.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming the Conversation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

23. One of my reviewers suggested I should not place Kilpatrick's concerns about the Montessori method on the same level as those of my undergraduate students. However, being a renowned scholar does not make one an expert on Montessori schools. My students spent twenty-five hours observing at a Montessori school, much more time than Kilpatrick spent observing one school in Italy, they read more material written by her, and they had me as their teacher, to help them better understand their observations. I think the comparison is fair.

24. Plato, *Republic*, trans. and ed. Raymond Larson (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979).

25. Montessori never lost track of her son, even though she could not publically recognize him as her child. Montessori's mother passed away in 1912, and that seems to have opened up the possibility of her being able to embrace Mario as her son, privately, for Mario confronted 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 daughter and Kramer (1976). 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, *Maria Montessori*, 185). Soon after he began to travel with her, and he was presented publically to the world as her distant nephew when she returned to the U.S. in 1915.

26. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, 232.

27. Jane Roland Martin, "Excluding Women from the Educational Realm," *Harvard Educational Review*, 52, no. 2 (1982): 133-48.

28. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, 373-74, somewhat modified by me.

29. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

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