

---

## Book Reviews

### **The Child Is the Teacher: A Life of Maria Montessori**

*Christina De Stefano*

New York: Other Press, 2022. Author's note, notes, bibliography, books by Maria Montessori, articles by Maria Montessori. 348 pp. \$28.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781635420845

In *The Child Is the Teacher*, De Stefano tells Dr. Maria Montessori's (1870–1952) story by providing a logical, plausible set of explanations based on data. She seamlessly integrates materials from primary and secondary sources, in multiple languages, into the ongoing narrative. This volume is a stellar example of the appropriate use of primary source documents and archival materials. The inclusion of multiple viewpoints on the issues presented provides an even-handed retrospective. The book is divided into five parts, each with its own set of copious notes.

Part I (1870–1900) covers Montessori's birth, childhood, and primary through higher education. It includes her relationship with Giuseppe Montesano,

the birth of her son Mario, and a brief review of the work of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and Edward Séguin. Montessori's article about the way in which environmental factors influence intelligence, emphasizing the principle of epigenetics, is discussed in this section (p. 77).

Part II (1901–1907) discusses Montessori's return to the university as a student in anthropology, her research and lectures, meeting Anna Maria Maccheroni (who became her lifelong friend and disciple), and her work for feminist causes. Montessori's work in San Lorenzo is the major thrust of this section. De Stefano also defines, presents the origin of, and provides examples of the terms “children's house,” “prepared environment,” “normalization,” and “directress.”

Part III (1908–1913) begins with a discussion of Montessori's benefactors and disciples. It chronicles her abandoning the practice of medicine, and resigning from her positions at the Pedagogy School, the university, and the teachers college to concentrate on the development of the method. The dissemination

of Montessori's ideas internationally starts with her teaching a course at the Montescia summer School of Home Economics and continues with foreign travelers who visit Rome on the Grand Tour and describe the Children's Houses upon their return home.

In this section, De Stefano makes an important point which remains a part of early-education pedagogy today. Montessori insisted that, "The small child doesn't think; he simply does what corresponds to his current state of development. . . . He needs to be left alone, do not disturb him," when a visiting adult queried the child about what she was going to do (pp. 149–50). The section summarizes the complementary points of view from which Maria observes the children: medical, physiological, anthropological, pedagogical, and religious. Reuniting with her son Mario completes this section of the book.

Part IV (1914–1934) records the rise and fall of Montessori's relationship with Samuel McClure and her undertakings in the United States and Spain during World War I. It discusses the development of the elementary-level principles and materials published in *The Advanced Montessori Method*. The idea of a White Cross, an international association to care for the youngest civilian victims of World War I, foreshadowed Montessori's peace education work.

Part V (1934–1952) details Mario's rise to a position of importance and, eventually, the head of the movement. The last phase of Montessori's travels and training courses and the internationalization of the movement dominate this section. The publication of her 1932 lecture, "Education and Peace," during the inter-war years, was

the beginning of her work. The little grey pamphlet, still found in education libraries today, is based on her classroom observations. She speaks of "educating in peace," suggesting that children are "capable of non-violent dynamics" (p. 284). Her belief that "authoritarianism and competition—the ingredients of school as traditionally conceived—create violence" (p. 264) laid the foundation of two of the renown modern Montessori interpreter Aline Wolf's more recent works *Peaceful Children, Peaceful World: The Challenge of Maria Montessori* (1989) (which, by the way, starkly illustrates Montessori's belief that struggles between the strong and the weak and disrespectful demands produce "inefficient" adults good only for conquest and war) and *Our Peaceful Classroom* (1991) (which includes a celebrated study of great peacemakers). She influenced Celia Lascares and Blythe F. Hinitz's *History of Early Childhood Education* (2003) with its notion of a "silence game" that teaches children to make friends with everyone. De Stefano also provides details of Montessori's sojourn in India during World War II (1939–1946), during which she wrote *To Educate the Human Potential, The Absorbent Mind, and The Discovery of the Child*. Although Montessori achieved many honors at the end of her life, her three nominations did not lead to her receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. The section ends with her peaceful demise and burial in Noordwijk aan Zee, Holland.

The bibliography, divided into books and articles about Maria Montessori and those authored by Montessori, contains both breadth and depth. It provides a window into publications by Mario Montessori and Mario Montessori Jr. in the *Times*

*Educational Supplement*, and lesser-known articles by disciples in *McClure's Magazine* and *Good Housekeeping*. It does omit the 1913 *Outlook* article "Maria Montessori: Friend of Children," penned by Margaret Naumburg, a member of the first training class for American and English teachers held in Italy, heralding Montessori's first visit to the United States.

The author's note appears at the end of the book. Prior to reading it, I had concluded that the author made a thorough study of existing books about Montessori and her method and that she had visited numerous archives to search out sources in several languages. The author's note confirms these conclusions, but goes beyond it to make the following points: "Maria Montessori asks adults to give up their position of strength and superiority with respect to children, in which they have placed themselves, consciously or not, since the beginning of time" (p. 321); "she speaks about human relationships" (p. 321); she helps adults look at children differently, stating that "children do not play, they work, often harder than we adults do, but we still do not hesitate to interrupt them" (p. 321); and Montessori asks "why do we touch them without asking permission, even if it is just to caress their hair, while we would never allow ourselves to do that with their parents?" (p. 321).

DeStefano barely mentions Montessori's view of play, except to note that the Dottoressa chides her students and disciples if they stray from established patterns. The author highlights Montessori's belief that children learn from their own spontaneous activity with materials that are appropriate to their level of development from which they get immediate feed-

back. This is as close as the book comes to a definition of play.

In a 1983 article entitled "Montessori Education: Abiding Contributions and Contemporary Challenges," David Elkind writes that Montessori was an adherent of the Anticipatory Theory of play, accepting only those forms of play that had a preparatory function. He disagreed with that view, stating that play "can serve a number of different functions." He said that "when children engage in play, they come to realize their personal abilities in the sense that they transform the world to adapt it to their needs." Elkind pointed out that "play is indeed a preparation for adult life, if adult life is seen as including self-expression and self-realization as well as social adaptation" (pp. 4-7).

Writing this review for a journal of play, at a museum dedicated to play, I come back to a principle I have held throughout my career as a teacher, a teacher educator, and a historian of education. I agree with Montessori that play is children's work. But one can view it from many perspectives, from all parts of the curricular spectrum, beginning with the "free" (or "natural") school of A. S. Neill described in *Summerhill* (1960) through the variety of approaches in the Head Start and Follow Through models to the rigidity of the "academic preschool."

What differentiates one approach from another is the amount of time allotted for "meditation," taking time to contemplate the materials and what they require prior to using them, and the freedom to explore the materials at will. However, one will never find a "strict Montessorian" talking about "children's play."

*The Child is the Teacher* is a welcome

addition to educational-history literature in general and to publications about Montessori and her work in particular.

---

—Blythe Hinitz, *The College of New Jersey, Ewing Township, N.J.*

### **Enhancing Brain Development in Infants and Young Children: Strategies for Caregivers and Educators**

*Doris Bergen, Lena Lee, Cynthia DiCarlo, and Gail Bennett*

New York: Teachers College Press, 2020.

Contents, foreword, introduction, references, index, about the authors. 132 pp.

\$27.95 paper.

ISBN: 978807764442

The authors of this accessible book connect the dynamic process of brain growth with specific activities for children from infancy through the primary-age years. In addition, there are suggestions for adults to modify offerings to adjust to special learning needs. It is noteworthy that the authors also include music and movement activities.

Seven chapters follow an introductory chapter. Each chapter includes vignettes of children with related sample activities. For example, adults could provide preverbal children with picture cards to help communicate a choice or, as needed, provide adaptive spoons. In addition, the authors suggest a daily schedule. Each chapter closes with “Questions for Discussion” and “Suggestions for further Reading/Listening.” The first chapter, “The Brain Building Process,” describes the physical process

of brain development from the prenatal period through kindergarten and primary years. To help build neuronal connections, there are recommendations for exercises and good nutritional care. The authors continuously focus on providing a variety of present-time, direct experiences in a playful environment.

The second chapter, “Fostering Brain Development in the Infant Curriculum,” begins with helpful advice for parents and caretakers that includes mimicking infants’ expressions and sounds as well as describing their activities. The authors emphasize the importance of smiling, vocalizing, talking, and eye contact. They advocate for “human to human” contact instead of extended use of automatic movement devices. Sample music and movement activities provide practice in rhythmic pattern building and “crossing the midline.”

Chapter 3, “Fostering Brain Development in the Toddler Curriculum,” focuses on toddlers’ particularly rapid brain growth. The authors spell out the power of play and the “as-if” significance of pretense in children’s ongoing symbolic development. The authors emphasize the power of choices to support youngsters’ sense of competence. Examples of modified activities include a chalk line instead of a balance beam, or modified game rules.

The fourth chapter, “Fostering Brain Development in the Preschool Curriculum,” includes the suggestion that sample curricular activities can be adapted for either younger or older children. A framework of specific, engaging activities provides a continuum from oral language, three-dimensional objects, and visual representations into print. Children at this age