

Maria Montessori: Pedagogy, Legacy and Actuality

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to show the contributions and foundations of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thought, her place in the History of Education as a woman of great social and educational impact, as well as the relevance of her method. To this end, this article analyses her figure, her pedagogical thought and her legacy, analysing it from three perspectives: historical, pedagogical and social, reflecting on the great educational and social work carried out by Maria Montessori and her Montessorians. A qualitative methodology has been used, using the historical-pedagogical method. The main conclusions of the work show the richness of Montessori, her educational impact in the past and in the present, and the relevance of her figure and pedagogical thought, which continues to be useful and relevant in today's pedagogy.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Montessori; Pedagogy; History of pedagogy; Educational impact; Italy; XX Century.

1. *An introduction: Maria Montessori, the woman and the pedagogue*

Maria Montessori's work aroused criticism and devotion from the very beginning. More than one hundred and fifty years after her birth, the criticisms and mythologies are still relevant today. To speak of Montessori today is to speak of conflicting passions.

There is still a certain romantic and hagiographic patina about Maria Montessori, a mythologising and exaggerated halo about her life conditions and difficulties in life, turning her into a pedagogical heroine¹ which she herself contributed during her lifetime by providing data that have been taken for

¹ C. Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, in M. Montessori, *El método de*

granted. For example, she herself said on several occasions that she was the first Italian woman to study medicine, a fact that has since been denied², although this does not detract from the merits of her studies, nor does it detract from her determination and courage to pursue studies for which women were frowned upon. Little is known about how she gained admission, and although it is said that it was Pope Leo XIII who interceded, recent research seems to indicate that it was rather a misinterpretation of Montessori's own words and the subsequent imagination, dissemination, and novelisation by journalists of this woman's determination to study medicine³.

Trying not to fall into mysticism, we can indicate some relevant biographical information about Montessori in order to contextualise her life and work. Although the number of biographical studies is very numerous, and in many languages (which shows the impact and diffusion of the author), we will try to briefly summarise some of them. This selection, conscious and subjective on our part, is intended to attempt to establish a brief portrait of this woman through the sources available to us.

Maria Tecla Artemisa Montessori was born in Chiaravalle, in the province of Ancona, in central-western Italy, into a well-to-do bourgeois family on 31 August 1870. Her family, of bourgeois, traditional and Catholic origin, gave her a quiet and peaceful childhood, although according to several biographers, her relationship with her father, fluid until the end, was not very good⁴, perhaps due to Maria's extravagance and the desire of her father, an austere and formal 19th century Italian civil servant, for his daughter to be a wife and a socially useful woman, we can only make assumptions based on the stories and small sketches that Maria Montessori herself provided during her lifetime, to which we must add that solitary motherhood did not benefit the paternal-filial relationship either⁵. Some of her more contemporary biographers describe Maria as an intelligent and rebellious child, with feminist ideas and profoundly Catholic, with a biting and responsive tongue, contrary to what Italian society of the time expected of girls and women, but unconditionally supported by her mother, a teacher by profession, who protected her and educated her without social ties⁶.

la Pedagogía científica: Aplicado a la educación de la infancia, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2003, pp. 9-81.

² C. De Stefano, *The child is the teacher. Vida de María Montessori*, Barcelona, Lumen, 2020; R. Foschi, *María Montessori*, Barcelona, Ediciones Octaedro, 2020; G. Honegger Fresco, *María Montessori, una historia actual*, Valencia, Universidad de Valencia, 2021; R. Kramer, *María Montessori: Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*, Madrid, Ediciones SM, 2020; Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

³ Kramer, *María Montessori: Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*, cit.

⁴ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit.; Honegger Fresco, *María Montessori, una historia actual*, cit; R. Kramer, *María Montessori: Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*, cit; Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁵ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁶ De Stefano, *The child is the teacher. Vida de María Montessori*, cit.

Maria Montessori decided to study medicine, and she did so despite the difficulties of the time, the misgivings of men and the political and social situation of late 19th century Italy, characterised by social destabilisation and conflicting political positions. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, Montessori worked side by side with the male students, and despite not being the first woman to graduate as she would have liked⁷, she achieved a very meritorious degree in Medicine from the University of Rome in 1896. Before Maria Montessori, sixteen women graduated in medicine in Italy, although it is true that Montessori was the first woman to graduate in medicine from the University of Rome⁸.

His professional career began in medicine, working as an assistant in a psychiatric clinic, the University Psychiatric Clinic in Rome, in the treatment of children, at that time known as abnormal⁹. It was precisely through his experiences in the psychiatric clinic that he realised the importance of education, the erroneous methods used, the need for observation, the environment and the manipulation of objects, which convinced him that children build themselves, laying the foundations for the supremacy of the pedagogical method over the medical method for the treatment of deficient children, ideas that he would express at the Pedagogical Congress in Turin in 1898¹⁰.

In Montessori's pedagogical thinking we find important influences, especially those of the doctors Itard and Séguin. Other references had a relevant influence on Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking and on her professional development, such as Pestalozzi, who was vital for the later impact of her method in early childhood education¹¹. But, despite the influences, or rather, thanks to them, Maria Montessori became convinced of the need for better training in order to better educate children, and therefore did not hesitate to enrol in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Rome to study anthropology and apply it to school and education¹², constructing a Pedagogical Anthropology, a study of the child oriented to education and educational action, a discipline in which he gave lectures and classes, published a book in 1910 and served as the basis of his scientific method on education¹³.

From 1907 onwards, we witness the real Montessori revolution, as our protagonist became totally committed to the education of children. It was in

⁷ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit.

⁸ Honegger Fresco, *María Montessori, una historia actual*, cit.

⁹ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit.

¹⁰ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

¹¹ De Stefano, *The child is the teacher. Vida de María Montessori*, cit.

¹² Kramer, *María Montessori: Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*, cit.

¹³ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit; Kramer, *María Montessori: Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*, cit; M. Pla, E. Cano, N. Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, in J. Trilla, (ed.), *El legado pedagógico del siglo XX para la escuela del siglo XXI*, Barcelona, Graó, 2015, pp. 69-94; Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

1906 that she took charge of the *Casa dei Bambini*, an institution she founded in a slum area of San Lorenzo in Rome. It was the 6th of January 1907, and it meant a great revolution in the life and work of Maria Montessori, as it was the first centre where she put into practice all her pedagogical ideas, the basis of learning and the construction of the child, where she was convinced that the child was the teacher, a place that solved educational problems, but fundamentally social ones. From the first *Casa* in 1907, more foundations followed in the years that followed, demonstrating the success of Montessori's ideas, which, by chance, she had had the opportunity to put into practice in San Lorenzo, and whose success surprised Montessori herself:

My wish was to be able to experiment with the methods for abnormal children in the elementary class of the primary school, as I had never thought of children's asylums [...] The first [Casa dei Bambini] was inaugurated under this name on 6 January 1907 in Via dei Marsi, 58, and entrusted to a teacher who worked under my direction and responsibility. The social and pedagogical importance of such an institution was revealed to me from the beginning in all its grandeur and it seemed at the time that my vision of a triumphant future was exaggerated; today many are beginning to understand that my illusions are being realised¹⁴.

From 1907 onwards, her method began to become popular and to spread throughout Italy and abroad. In the years leading up to the World War I, Maria Montessori travelled and participated in a multitude of conferences in countries as diverse as the United States, where from 1911 onwards a multitude of Montessori schools were created¹⁵, and where she was received in 1914 as a great personality¹⁶. But it was after the end of the World War I that her method and her endless travels really exploded: Germany, Great Britain, Spain (especially Catalonia), Holland, Sweden, China, India, and her influence grew in countries such as France, Austria, Switzerland, and a long etcetera¹⁷.

The arrival of Mussolini to the government in Italy brought bad consequences for Montessori, whom Mussolini, who at first felt interested in her work and even intended to institutionalise it in the official Italian school¹⁸. Later, Montessori's positions of free thought, independence, freedom and autonomy did not fit in with the idea of new Italian government, so our author broke with Mussolini, her books were burnt and she opted for exile. She left her native Italy in 1934, she settled in Spain (where she had to leave due to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936), then in England, where she inaugurated the V In-

¹⁴ M. Montessori, *El método de la pedagogía científica: aplicado a la educación de la infancia*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2003, pp. 120-121.

¹⁵ Pla, Cano, Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, cit.

¹⁶ Ch. Poussin, *La pedagogía Montessori: Una introducción al método que revolucionó la enseñanza*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores, 2019.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit.

ternational Congress in Oxford and a new stage in her life¹⁹, and finally in Holland.

It would be in this country, after a long life of travels, conferences, enthusiasms and disappointments, struggles and disappointments, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, lights and shadows, when, after her third proposal for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951, she would die in Noordwijk, in southern Holland, at the age of 81, still active and planning trips and conferences²⁰. The year was 1952, the woman died, the myth was born.

Behind Montessori, the fighter, the leader, the revolutionary, the person who changed the education of thousands of children, the mystic of iron will and tireless dedication to childhood, the mythologised visionary and innovator, there is the real woman, the single mother broken by the pain of abandoning a child, of losing the love of her life, of the disappointment of love; the Victorian woman, contradictory, sweet and ungrateful, who in spite of everything returned to her son, who welcomed her with open arms and closed a wound²¹, but not the only one. However, it will be Montessori, and not Maria, who will go down in history.

2. *Maria Montessori: her pedagogical foundations*

There is no doubt, and a quick glance at the main manuals on the History of Education reveals that Maria Montessori's pedagogical thought is rich, relevant and rapidly and solidly disseminated. We are dealing with one of the great personalities of education, who is recognised as having made an important contribution to the theoretical and practical progress of education. Her pedagogical thinking can be summed up in the practicality of her method, in experimentation, testing and applicability to the education of the youngest children, infants and toddlers.

But before developing her ideas, it is necessary to dwell on something very relevant, a capital aspect in Montessori's pedagogical thinking, from which her entire pedagogical ideology is positioned: discovery and love for the child.

Maria Montessori's idea of childhood is an innovative vision, framed in part in the principles of the New School, and supported by the author's medical, psychiatric, psychological, anthropological and pedagogical knowledge. Montessori relied on scientific principles and the advances of the time, not so much on philosophical or metaphysical questions, which is why she called her

¹⁹ M. Castro, A. Castellarnau, *María Montessori: La mujer que revolucionó la educación*, Barcelona, RBA Libros, 2019.

²⁰ Honegger Fresco, *María Montessori, una historia actual*, cit.

²¹ De Stefano, *The child is the teacher. Vida de María Montessori*, cit.

method *scientific pedagogy*. In Maria Montessori, naturalist and positivist premises converge, empiricist in nature and with systematic observation as a method, and humanist, Catholic and Neoplatonic positions, where she explores a kind of spiritual experimentalism in which she emphasises the idea of the “new child” who, through freedom and self-discipline, will be able to fully develop his physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual capacities²². A new child who will be the germ of the new man for a new world, where education is for life, for the future; and the child, in this pedagogical thinking, becomes the teacher. Montessori herself, in her work *The Child: The Secret of Childhood*²³, indicated the importance of connecting the child from the past to the future:

To touch the child is to touch the most sensitive point of a whole which has its roots in the most remote past and is directed towards the infinity of the future. To touch the child is to touch the most delicate and vital point where everything can be decided and renewed, where everything is full of life, where the secrets of the soul are enclosed, because it is there that the education of man is elaborated²⁴.

Although the most prominent influences on Maria Montessori’s thinking place her in the New School, we cannot tie her to this movement with the utmost fidelity, and there are even authors who do not consider her to be a member of the New School²⁵. What is certain is that it has many ideas and similarities with the New School, although it did not fail to criticise some of the authors of this movement, and at the same time to be criticised by them. However, Montessori’s thinking about the child and educational activity, framed in the naturalism, positivism and spirituality that we have mentioned, is heir to his readings, and although he developed his own thinking, adopting ideas from some and adding his own reflections, we can recognise, mainly, Comenius (from whom he took the idea of innate aptitude towards knowledge), Rousseau (with his naturalistic idea of the child), Itard (the approaches of observation, observation and spirituality), Séguin (from whom he took the idea of the three times), Pestalozzi (with his idea of sensory-essential education), Fröbel (perhaps one of the most influential, from whom he took the idea of adaptation to the nature of the child and freedom), and even Freud, from whom he took the idea of repression and its influence on children by adults²⁶.

²² B. de Serio, *Ayuda a la vida. Educación desde el nacimiento. Una reflexión sobre la primera infancia a partir de María Montessori*, «RELAdEI. Revista Latinoamericana De Educación Infantil», vol. 3, n. 3, 2014, pp. 59-66.

²³ M. Montessori, *The Child: The Secret of Childhood*, México, Diana, 2006.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁵ C. L’Ecuyer, *Montessori ante el legado pedagógico de Rousseau*, Madrid, Ínsula Ediciones, 2020.

²⁶ Pla, Cano, Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, cit.; M.B. Ponce Mora, *La descubridora del “secreto” del niño: María Montessori*, «Temas de Mujeres», n. 15, vol. 15, 2019, pp. 47-60; Poussin, *La pedagogía Montessori: Una introducción al método que revolucionó la enseñanza*, cit.

Basically, what Montessori contributes and on which she builds her pedagogical thinking is her deep admiration for the child²⁷, her discovery, the praise of childhood which, from a scientific approach seasoned with spirituality, takes a stand against the hegemonic, hieratic, immovable and repressive models of the traditional school, ideals that it shares with other members of the New School, but it brings originality to the idea of freedom, of absolute faith in the potential of the child, in its evolution, in its true nature based on its stages of vital development and in the requirement for educators to meet the needs of children's sensitive periods²⁸. Its pedagogical foundations are peace, love for the child, knowing their needs, working with them from empathy, providing them with the means to be recognised and respected, understanding the child as a unique being, particular, and capable of self-education, of building themselves as adults in freedom, and all from a scientific knowledge of the child's personality. This is how he articulated what she called the «spiritual embryo», which refers to the construction of the human personality, to the incarnation in an environment that manages to respond to the vital needs of the child and facilitate his or her spiritual liberation, generating a change, a reform and regeneration of the human being:

The child who becomes encapsulated is a spiritual embryo who must live at the expense of the environment, but just as the physical embryo needs a special environment which is the mother's womb, this spiritual embryo needs to be protected by a lively, warm and loving external environment, abundant in nourishment: an environment in which everything is welcoming and where nothing hinders development [...] There is an exchange between, the individual, or rather, between the spiritual embryo and the environment; through this exchange the individual is formed and perfected [...] Thus the human personality is formed by itself as the embryo, and the child becomes the creator of man, the *Father of man*²⁹.

In general, the idea of free, autonomous, happy, active children, owners of their educational processes, is what Maria Montessori's pedagogical principles constantly revolve around, in a sort of cosmic education³⁰, an idea developed in her book *Education of Human Potentialities*³¹ and summarised in the importance of a universal vision of education and of the child.

Trying to summarise his pedagogical thinking in a few pages is very risky and complicated, especially because a multitude of works have been written

²⁷ A question shared with many previous initiatives on childhood and child marginalisation. M. Martín-Sánchez, *Historia y pedagogía del Colegio Menor de la Concepción de Huérfanos de Salamanca*, Salamanca, Universidad de Salamanca, 2007.

²⁸ M. Santerini, *Grandes de la educación: María Montessori*, «Padres y Maestros», n. 349, 2013, pp. 1-4,

²⁹ Montessori, *The Child: The Secret of Childhood*, cit., pp. 71-73.

³⁰ J.J. Morales Ruiz, *María Montessori y la educación cósmica*, «Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería Latinoamericana y Caribeña», vol. 7, n. 2, 2016, pp. 203-239.

³¹ M. Montessori, *Education of Human Potentialities*, Buenos Aires, Errepar, 1998.

about it, but to conclude, we will try to synthesise it, especially the points that seem most relevant to us: freedom, activity, environment, and specific materials, all based on the supreme idea of his pedagogical ideology: self-education.

If we had to select the main and most important principle on which Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking is based, we would undoubtedly choose the principle of freedom, both interior and exterior, so that the child can develop fully, according to his or her autonomy and based on activity, and preceded by observation.

The idea of freedom in Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking is not unlimited, but precisely limited, controlled, even if it is a paradox in itself. However, this paradox is resolved by Montessori herself when, to the idea of freedom, she adds other fundamental principles: the collective interest, the responsibility derived from positive discipline, self-control, and the (discreet) mediation of the teacher-guide who helps the child, without excesses, to conquer his or her own freedom³².

Freedom and discipline, in Montessori's pedagogical thinking, are relevant, for one is achieved by the other, because «discipline in freedom seemed to solve a problem which until then seemed insoluble. The solution consisted in obtaining discipline by granting freedom»³³ and they are closely related to the principles of self-education and to the environment. Freedom and discipline are not understood if they are not active, not for immobility, passivity or obedience, but for independence, as a result of active development through effort and one's own experience.

And within this freedom and active discipline, Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking achieves balance through the most absolute respect for the child's rhythm, the development of his or her personality, the maximum encouragement of spontaneity and self-control without using rewards or punishments, considered somewhat perverse in Montessori's own pedagogical approaches, which make no sense and are overcome through true freedom based on voluntary discipline³⁴.

To fully develop the child's idea of freedom, autonomy and an absorbing mind, the child needs a free environment to fully develop his or her activity, and therefore the environment, together with the materials, is another of the fundamental principles of her pedagogical thinking. The preparation of the environment is fundamental for Montessori, a whole educational science:

Development and growth have successive foundations and increasingly intimate relations between the individual and the environment; because the development of individuality

³² Ch. Piroddi, *Montessori en casa: Consejos y actividades para crecer, jugar y aprender juntos*, Milán, Editorial Point22, 2020.

³³ M. Montessori, *La mente absorbente del niño*, Barcelona, Ediciones Araluce, 1971, p. 254.

³⁴ Pla, Cano, Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, cit.

(that is, what is called freedom of the child) cannot be anything other than the successive independence from the adult, realised by means of a suitable environment, where the child finds the necessary means for the development of its functions [...] The error of the freedom of the child in education has been to consider a hypothetical independence from the adult without the corresponding preparation of the environment. This preparation of the environment is an educational science³⁵.

The prepared environment will allow the child to feel unhindered in developing his or her freedom, activity and autonomy. It is a large and orderly space, organised by the guiding teacher and divided into several sections or areas which, together with the appropriate materials, will allow the child to be stimulated and to develop to his or her full potential. The prepared environment will facilitate the construction of a free will, an active intelligence, a creative imagination and moral development, issues that are part of the great contributions of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thought³⁶.

Montessori resembles authors such as Fröbel, Dewey, Decroly and others, who were close to the New School, but there were also discrepancies and differences between the New School and Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking, which we will see later on.

3. *Concretisation of its pedagogical model*

Maria Montessori proposes a pedagogical model based on a scientific, naturalistic, positivist and Catholic pedagogy, holistic, active and spiritual, where the child is the teacher, who grows in freedom, self-disciplined and experiential, master of his or her educational process. However, although defined as Catholic, Montessori's relationship with religion was always influenced by her theosophical experience, which she never disavowed, travelled to India, and organised educational courses at the Theosophical Society³⁷. Her religious and spiritual ups and downs led her to establish a spirituality sometimes close to Catholicism, sometimes distant, but always in a *sui generis* game that brought her benefits, but also strong criticism for its philosophical contradictions³⁸.

To put her pedagogical thinking into practice, Montessori devised a pedagogical model, known as the Montessori Method, based on three fundamental

³⁵ Montessori, *The Child: The Secret of Childhood*, cit, pp. 293-294.

³⁶ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

³⁷ Foschi, *María Montessori*, cit.

³⁸ M.M. del Pozo Andrés, J.F.A. Braster, *The Reinvention of the New Education Movement in the Franco Dictatorship (Spain, 1936-1976)*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 42, nn. 1-2, 2006, pp. 109-126.

pillars: the teacher, the adapted environment, and the materials. All of this, of course, underpinned by her pedagogical thinking.

There are several authors who have synthesised the Montessori method, but we have chosen four main works, which we consider to be the best syntheses of the Montessori method: Standing³⁹, Pla *et alii*⁴⁰, Poussin⁴¹ and Sanchidrián⁴², who synthesise the Montessori method into the following active principles:

- The role of the teacher: We have already indicated above that the hard core of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking lies in the discovery of the child and in the importance she gives to his or her active, free and self-education-based development. Following this principle, the Montessori method gave a determining role to the teacher: that of a guide. Determining, yes, but not protagonist. Precisely, the Montessorian teacher is a secondary actress who reduces her interventions to a minimum, as she will not intervene until the child requires it; she is a teacher-guide, a director of lives and souls. The Montessorian teacher exercises the method with humility, but with scientific knowledge, aware of the importance of educating for autonomy, to make them move towards independence, so that they learn to wash themselves, to dress themselves, to run, to get up from the floor, «to speak to clearly express their own needs, to seek ways to satisfy their desires»⁴³, and for this, the Montessorian teacher is a secondary actress, and for this, the teacher must be prepared in the Montessori method, adapt to it, overcome the disorientation that it may produce at the beginning, know the specific materials, and adequately prepare the environment⁴⁴.
- The prepared environment: When Maria Montessori sets out the idea of the prepared environment in her method, she is referring to the idea of a carefully organised physical space adapted to the needs of the child, designed for the child, designed to encourage self-learning and personal growth. Thus, this prepared environment is something natural (although paradoxically artificially constructed by the teacher), free of obstacles, which responds to the emotional and intellectual needs of the child and which allows the child to develop autonomously, but secondarily controlled by the adult. As we have indicated in previous chapters, when Montessori developed her environment, she did so in opposition to the physical school model that prevails in the official educational systems, and created a space without desks (she

³⁹ E. Standing, *La revolución Montessori en la educación*, México, Siglo XX, 2000.

⁴⁰ Pla, Cano, Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, cit.

⁴¹ Poussin, *La pedagogía Montessori: Una introducción al método que revolucionó la enseñanza*, cit.

⁴² Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁴³ Montessori, *El método de la pedagogía científica: aplicado a la educación de la infancia*, cit, p. 154.

⁴⁴ Poussin, *La pedagogía Montessori: Una introducción al método que revolucionó la enseñanza*, cit.

hated school benches, and considered them to be slaves of the child)⁴⁵, with a free space, aesthetically adapted to childhood, creating fun, warm and attractive spaces, an environment designed for children. It is, therefore, of paramount importance in the Montessori method to organise the environment, in which the space is bright, with adapted, stimulating furniture, and where the materials are of interest to the child. It is in the environment that the Montessori teacher-guide must begin her practical efforts, to have it ready for when the children arrive. The prepared environment of the Montessori method is more than a classroom, more than a physical space, it is a spiritual, holistic, emotional entity, created to generate positive interactions in the child, who lives it in freedom, where students of different ages coexist, and divided into different areas: practical life, sensory, mathematical, language, and culture, which allow, together with sensitive periods, to make learning easier⁴⁶.

- The materials: to implement her method, Maria Montessori and her followers devised and constructed a multitude of specifically created (and controlled) teaching materials that constitute the practical foundations of her ideas. As we have indicated, Montessori understood activity, autonomy, practice, and self-learning as essential to her method, so her materials (still used in virtually original form) are characterised by self-control by the child, attractive aesthetic qualities, manipulative, self-correcting, realistic, accessible and structured⁴⁷. In our opinion, the most relevant aspect of the didactic materials is the importance given by Maria Montessori to self-correction, in that the child can use the materials to correct and self-educate themselves, encouraging concentration, self-esteem and control of their own learning, as they cannot complete any task without being correct or without realising the error, used and selected freely, so that they discover things on their own⁴⁸. Maria Montessori herself speaks of her materials with passion, convinced of their usefulness, but warning that they must be prepared and organised, worked with according to her method, sequenced, and observed, but leaving the child free to use them; the teacher will be the guide, the observer and the ‘preparer’ of the materials, but it will be the children who manipulate them, use them and give them the value of self-education that permeates her pedagogical thinking. The furniture, spaces

⁴⁵ Montessori, *El método de la pedagogía científica: aplicado a la educación de la infancia*, cit.

⁴⁶ A. García, *Otra educación ya es posible: una introducción a las pedagogías alternativas*, Valencia, Litera, 2017; Poussin, *La pedagogía Montessori: Una introducción al método que revolucionó la enseñanza*, cit.

⁴⁷ Pla, Cano, Lorenzo, *María Montessori: el Método de la Pedagogía Científica*, cit.; Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁴⁸ S. D’Esclaiibes, N. D’Esclaiibes, *Ayuda a tu hijo a concentrarse con el método Montessori*, Madrid, Editorial EDAF, 2018.

and materials must be organised and distributed from the simplest to the most complex, and in accordance with the different areas of work of the Montessori method. Among the materials best known or originally used by Montessori, we find his famous pink tower, cylinders, rods, geometric shapes, or materials prepared for practical life. All of them meet the basic characteristics of being manipulative, attractive, appropriate to the development and strength of the children, adapted to the areas and, especially, self-corrective. However, although much of the Montessori method rests on the materials, these will be the main focus of criticism of Montessori, even to the point of tyranny of the material.

4. *Historical and pedagogical impact of Maria Montessori*

Maria Montessori was a woman like few others in the history of education. A doctor by training, but an educator by lifelong learning, she began to develop her ideas at the *Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica*, where children considered uneducable were taken in, and she became convinced of the need to change and innovate educational methods.

Maria Montessori's contributions to education at the time were many, and it was precisely her revolutionary contributions, together with the dissemination and acceptance of her method, that had a profound historical impact on her contemporaries.

We have already indicated above that Maria Montessori was a very active woman in life, which led her to live in several countries, to travel to many continents and to give lectures in various places. These journeys, and her own self-propaganda, helped to spread her pedagogical thinking and educational method throughout much of the world. Indeed, Maria Montessori herself prided herself on the success of her scientific pedagogy:

Why have so many difficulties, so many contradictions, so many uncertainties arisen with regard to what are called 'Montessori schools' and 'Montessori method'? And yet the schools are going ahead in the midst of wars and cataclysms, and are spreading more and more all over the world. We find them even in the Hawaiian Islands, in Honolulu in the middle of the ocean. We find them among the natives of Nigeria, in Ceylon, in China; that is to say, in the midst of all races and in all nations of the world [...] all agree that Montessori is the most widespread modern educational method today⁴⁹.

The Montessori Method was widely and rapidly disseminated throughout the world, mainly thanks to the success and enthusiasm with which it was

⁴⁹ M. Montessori, *Formación del Hombre*, Amsterdam, Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 10-11.

received, and especially due to the important dissemination work carried out by Maria Montessori herself and the numerous acolytes that arose in different countries, mainly after the end of the First World War and the first International Montessori Courses held in Rome (1912 and 1914) and in Barcelona (1916), which generated great expectations and attendance of students from Europe, America and Asia⁵⁰.

Her activism is one explanation for the success of her educational impact, but not the only one. During her life she travelled around giving lectures where she proclaimed her pedagogical enthusiasm and the success of her method, although she herself sometimes indicated that she gave lectures and wrote books for years, but this did not disseminate her method, it was the children themselves who disseminated it⁵¹.

Other factors also contributed to her success and dissemination, such as her academic reputation, her scientific training as a physician, her publications and research, her circle of friends and contacts, teacher training courses, and the tremendous success of her lectures and interviews in the press which created a media impact that facilitated the spread of her ideas.

One of the major events that explain the impact and diffusion of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking is the creation in 1929 of the *Association Montessori Internationale* (AMI) in Amsterdam by herself to preserve her legacy and officialise her method.

In its development and impact, which spread, as we have indicated, to various countries, it found a favourable and welcoming place in Spain, partly thanks to the Spanish pedagogical reform movements and the pedagogical renewal movements led by Claparède, Dewey, Sluys, Decroly and Freinet. The New School movement meant an important change in the education of the time, and although with differences and important nuances, it was well received in Spain. Maria Montessori visited (and even lived in) Spain on several occasions, and found in the pedagogue Joan Palau Vera an enthusiast, to the point of being considered the introducer of Montessori in Spain, together with Juan Bardina, Rosa Sensat, Alejandro Galí and Pedro Vergés⁵². But it was Palau, with his translations, who was the real driving force behind Montessori pedagogy in Spain.

Nevertheless, Montessorian diffusion in Spain was uneven, with Madrid and Barcelona being the two major Spanish cities that embraced Maria Montessori's ideas and procedures most enthusiastically from the outset. In practice, the main urban centres in the Madrid and Catalan areas of influence, as well as in rural Catalonia, were particularly successful with Maria Montessori's initiatives; while elsewhere Spanish schools only showed interest and

⁵⁰ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁵¹ Standing, *La revolución Montessori en la educación*, cit.

⁵² Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

worked with Decroly's centres of interest, Freinet techniques and the project method, in addition to Montessori⁵³.

In Madrid it was also felt, and even the influences received at the Residencia de Señoritas were important, as a result of the correspondence between María de Maeztu and María Montessori and the series of lectures that, despite the difficulties, Montessori gave in 1934 in the Spanish capital, generating a strong impact, among admirers and strong detractors⁵⁴.

We can summarise the impact and diffusion of Maria Montessori in Spain in three periods: a first stage from 1914 to 1936 of reception and visits, a second stage of rejection during the Franco regime, and a third and final stage of Montessori renaissance after the arrival of democracy until the present day⁵⁵.

To conclude this section on her dissemination and impact, we cannot fail to reflect on her work, mythologised by many, reviled by others, demystified by some, but indifferent to none. It must be made clear that not all that glitters is Montessori, and that even Montessori's method and pedagogical thinking was harshly criticised by the fellow travellers of renovating movements such as the New School. Even today, it continues to receive criticism and praise, although many schools today only bear the name Montessori and have distorted its ideology.

As far as criticism and mysticism are concerned, few people in the history of education have aroused as much interest as Maria Montessori. In truth, in Maria Montessori we find mainly a political and pragmatic woman, both in her work and thought, and in life itself. She was practical because she sought (and found) the support of networks and power groups that facilitated her triumph and social diffusion, the support of Catholics with her closeness to Pope Pius X, with the idealists she was able to occupy a place in the famous Gentile Reform of 1923, and even with Mussolini's regime⁵⁶.

The relationship with the most relevant authors of the New School was also singular, complicated; a relationship of shared admiration and criticism. Montessori was sometimes harsh against the New School, which she accused of generating ignoramuses⁵⁷. She had and shared approaches with Dewey and others, but she did not hesitate to criticise them, and they did the same. Thus, among the main critics, we can cite John Dewey, who pointed out the defects

⁵³ M.M. del Pozo Andrés, *La escuela nueva en España: crónica y semblanza de un mito*, «Historia de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria», voll. 22-23, 2004, pp. 317-346.

⁵⁴ A.S. Porto Ucha, R. Vázquez Ramil, *María Montessori en la Residencia de Señoritas de Madrid (1934): entre la visita social y el esbozo de proyecto pedagógico*, in J.M. Hernández Díaz, J.L. Hernández Huerta (edd.), *Influencias italianas en la educación española e iberoamericana*, Salamanca, FahrenHouse, 2014, pp. 251-262.

⁵⁵ C. Sanchidrián Blanco, *El método Montessori en la educación infantil española: luces y sombras*, «Historia de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria», vol. 39, 2020, pp. 313-335.

⁵⁶ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁵⁷ C. L'Ecuyer, *Montessori ante el legado pedagógico de Rousseau*, Madrid, Ínsula Ediciones, 2020.

of the Montessori method, its materials and the need for experience to be global, a matter that is not achieved, according to Dewey, in the Montessori method because of the exaggeration of the external control of the materials and the consequent loss of spontaneous experience⁵⁸.

Another strong criticism came from another great of the New School, the Swiss Édouard Claparède, who considered the Montessori Method to be excessively artificial, that it ignores the true development of the child, that it is not truly free because it is subject to the dictatorship of the «sacrosanct material», and that Montessori herself did not sufficiently understand the importance of linking exercises to vital problems⁵⁹.

Other authors such as Paew also criticised Montessori in relation to fantasy, stories, imagination, moral formation⁶⁰. She was also harshly criticised by the most conservative Darwinians, who did not admit ideas other than the inheritance of fixed intelligence, and that this alone determined the child's development, attacking the foundations of Montessori's pedagogical thinking⁶¹.

But, undoubtedly, the greatest criticism came from the United States, especially from one of John Dewey's main disciples. It was William Heard Kilpatrick who was possibly one of Montessori's greatest detractors.

Professor William Kilpatrick was a reputed follower of Dewey, and enjoyed prestige among American academics. A professor at Columbia University, in 1914 he published a book entitled *The Montessori System Examined*, in which he criticised Montessori's pedagogical thinking and considered it outdated⁶². Among Kilpatrick's main criticisms of Montessori, we can list the following: he considered the approaches of the method outdated; he criticised especially the areas of social life of the school group and the curriculum, considering that the Montessori child works in an individualistic way, whereas in his opinion the school should be an environment for social life and action; he criticised the teaching materials, which he defined as unsuitable for children, lacking in variety, unstimulating, too limited in manipulation, and although he shared with Montessori the importance of self-education and self-correction, he thought it was more utopian than real. He indicated that social play was reviled and ignored by the Montessori method. He also did not consider the materials useful for social life, and especially how limiting it was to use materials to work with and educate children in real life.

In general, although Montessori shared principles and ideals with the New School, she departs from it in its purity, that is, in Montessori we find ideas of the New School such as activism, paidocentrism, naturalism, and others that

⁵⁸ J. Dewey, *Democracia y educación*, Madrid, Ediciones Morata, 1998.

⁵⁹ Sanchidrián Blanco, *Edición y estudio introductorio*, cit.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ N. Obregón, *Quién fue María Montessori*, «Contribuciones desde Coatepec», vol. 10, 2006, pp. 149-171.

⁶² *Ibid.*

we have indicated, but also discrepancies, ideas that ‘separate’ her from the pedigree movement. Montessori’s pedagogy has a teleological dimension⁶³, oriented towards an end (the child himself) and ordered by reason; and it is this teleological approach that separates it from the purism of the New School movement, that breaks with the schemes of New Education⁶⁴.

Although there were many criticisms, and they had an important effect on dissemination, it was the praise and success that contributed to a strong diffusion and impact throughout the world. Maria Montessori did an important work of diffusion, to which her son Mario, the *Association Montessori Internationale* and the many acolytes of her method contributed. This contributed to her mythification, but also to the fact that her pedagogical ideology remains more than a century after her birth. Its impact is still enormous today.

However, it should be noted that Montessori’s current situation is very multifaceted, with multiple edges, and that its name has become a brand name. There are many Montessori schools around the world, thousands of books written in the main languages of the world, commercialised materials, training courses, conferences, etc., but also fierce criticism, accusations of being a sect, a fad or a method for the rich. But above all it is necessary to warn that not everything that is named Montessori is Montessori, even many of the so-called Montessori schools have not read the original writings of the author and her pedagogical principles that we have analysed so far, observing in some cases that the method has been distorted, or the worst option: manipulated and consciously adapted to one’s own interests.

Conclusions: The Montessori legacy. Actuality and relevance.

To speak of the Montessori legacy is to speak of conflicting passions. As we have indicated in the previous section, Maria Montessori’s work aroused criticism and devotion from the very beginning. More than 150 years after her birth, the criticisms and mythicisms are divided and are still relevant today.

Talking about Maria Montessori today is easy and risky at the same time, because there is a lot of bibliography, press articles, manuals, web pages, etc., that deal with her figure, her life, her personality and the work of this woman. But it is also risky because of the danger of falling into romanticism and mysticism, generating a whole hagiography about her figure (or doing the opposite

⁶³ C. L’Ecuyer, J.I. Murillo, *El enfoque teleológico de la educación Montessori y sus implicaciones*, «Revista Española de Pedagogía», vol.78, n. 277, 2020, pp. 499-517.

⁶⁴ C. L’Ecuyer, *La perspective montessorienne face au mouvement de l’éducation nouvelle dans la francophonie européenne du début du XXe siècle*, «European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire», vol. 27, n. 5, 2020, pp. 651-682.

in a fierce and destructive criticism); and risky in short, because the nuances are so many, and the character has transcended in such a way, that talking about Maria Montessori will always be incomplete, which makes her tremendously attractive and current for researchers, as evidenced by the large number of works that continue to see the light of day. Therefore, we cannot harbour any great conclusions or culmination about the pedagogical thought and the figure of Maria Montessori, because she still has a long way to go.

Continuing with the current impact and relevance of Maria Montessori in the world, it is necessary to indicate some figures to assess it. In a first approximation, and according to the AMI (2024), in Spain alone there are 27 Montessori centres officially recognised by the *Spanish Montessori Association*; in the world there are more than 150,000, although not all of them are officially recognised.

If we try to break down this data, we can get an idea of the magnitude, diffusion, presence and relevance of Montessori today. Thus, we find a whole global organisational network that controls the “Montessori brand” and which has multiple delegations throughout the world. We are talking about the *Association Montessori Internationale*, founded by Maria Montessori herself in 1929 and whose headquarters are located at 161-163 Koninginneweg in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The AMI is the repository of Montessori’s pedagogical principles and work, a sort of primate apostolate, which watches over the purity of Montessori values.

AMI carries out important global learning and international impact through the division called *Educateurs sans Frontières* (EsF), a network of Montessori practitioners and followers working around the world to promote human development from prenatal to old age. Among the most relevant objectives of *Educateurs sans Frontières* is to promote the rights of children all over the world regardless of race, religion or social status.

The *Educateurs sans Frontières* division joined AMI at the initiative of Mario Montessori’s daughter, Redilde Montessori, the youngest granddaughter of Maria Montessori, Secretary General of the *Association Montessori Internationale* (1995-2000) and President of the *Association Montessori Internationale* (2000-2005). This NGO carries out multiple initiatives all over the world, such as helping underprivileged communities in India, the Corner of Hope in Kenya, the schools in Bangkok, the nomadic schools of Samburu in Kenya and the Peter Hesse Foundation in Haiti, among others.

But perhaps the most obvious initiative for the dissemination and impact of the Montessori legacy is the *Montessori Around the World* programme, which promotes the goals of AMI and EsF by connecting Montessori programmes with the world’s most disadvantaged children. These programmes are run in Bhutan, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Guatemala, Romania and elsewhere. Through donations and volunteerism, AMI and EsF train teachers, purchase materials and build Montessori schools in these places. Donations requested can range

from financial support for materials and teacher training to funding construction projects and volunteering as a Montessori educator.

One of the current criticisms of the Montessori method is its supposedly elitist character. Although there are private Montessori centres at a high cost, it is fair to recognise that the *Montessori Around the World* programme carries out initiatives to combat social inequalities, and that it is precisely oriented towards the most vulnerable populations on the planet, which would make it clear that Montessori is not for the elites, or at least not all programmes. *Montessori Around the World* carries out social and educational initiatives in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and America.

On the other hand, although the current impact and legacy is evident, it should be noted that not everything that glitters is Montessori, neither alternative nor innovative⁶⁵. In the last 40 years, in the world and in Spain in particular, a multitude of self-styled Montessori centres have flourished which, on many occasions, only use Montessori as a brand of quality, educational innovation and pedagogical alternative to attract families to their centres, sometimes with the best of intentions (even buying Montessori materials) but without training or specific preparation, without a correct application of the method⁶⁶ and on more than a few occasions, distorting the pedagogical principles of Maria Montessori, many of whom have not even read her works, nor understood her method, nor understood her educational philosophy, much less are they capable of implementing her methodology and generate a kind of self-interested adaptation of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking, where we also find a pedagogical eclecticism that is far from Maria Montessori's purist pedagogical thinking. In short, as Catherine L'Ecuyer⁶⁷ points out, it would be good for many of the self-proclaimed Montessori centres to go and read Maria Montessori's writings, because her pedagogy was by no means learning through play and freedom without control or measure, as many centres reduce it to, but something complex, holistic, and cosmic.

Many Montessori centres openly claim to be inspired by Maria Montessori, but this does not guarantee that they follow the Montessori method as indicated by the author herself or as suggested and standardised by the AMI; in other words, it is not an authentic and genuine Montessori. As it is not a registered trademark, anyone can call their centre Montessori, but they are not all the same. And this is relevant, because many centres use the word Montessori as a hook to attract families, selling an alternative quality education, and making parents believe that their children will be educated in an original Montessori method.

⁶⁵ M. Martín-Sánchez, *Two Centuries of Educational Innovation in Spain. Alternative Pedagogies: Are They Neo or Retro?*, «The New Educational Review», vol. 63, 2021, pp. 49-58.

⁶⁶ García, *Otra educación ya es posible: una introducción a las pedagogías alternativas*, cit.

⁶⁷ L'Ecuyer, *Montessori ante el legado pedagógico de Rousseau*, cit.

Maria Montessori was deeply spiritual, difficult to fit in and to label, sometimes rigid and distant, but at other times loving and close. In her life we observe contradictions, which are still present in her legacy. Many so-called Montessori centres do not follow her recommendations, others do the opposite extreme, in a rigid, limited and strict way, not taking into account the advances in child psychology and pedagogy in recent years and taking the idea of autonomy to macabre limits. A cursory *Google* search yields hundreds of press reports of malpractice in Montessori centres, highlighting the fragility and dangers of untrained misinterpretation or abuse of Montessori's pedagogical approaches.

More than 150 years that have passed since the birth of Maria Montessori have given rise to many things, as is evident in the pages of this article. But undoubtedly one of the most interesting characteristics has been its spirit of endurance, of survival, adapting to the times, which casts light and shadow on Montessori's heirs⁶⁸.

What we have seen so far shows that Maria Montessori's legacy is very much alive, active and productive. Her legacy continues to have an important impact today, despite criticism, controversy and mythification. It may be easier to identify what Montessori is not than to demonstrate what it is, because the Montessori method is not learning by playing, but enjoying learning; it is not learning without effort, but with self-discipline; it is not uncontrolled libertarianism, but self-discipline; it is not individualism, but collective interest; the Montessori exercises are not symbolic or simulation, but practical life exercises; the teacher is not absent, but a secondary guide; the environment is not disorderly, but rigorously structured.

Montessori's legacy is rich in nuances, and the actuality of her ideas and method is real thanks to her mimicry, syncretism and capacity for adaptation, which implies the risk of infidelity to her original thinking⁶⁹. What has been seen so far implies that, before deciding on a Montessori school, it would be good to study it in depth, because sometimes its pedagogical principles are followed, but on other occasions it is a mere use of its name, perhaps more commercial now than a hundred years ago when it was introduced.

⁶⁸ Sanchidrián Blanco, *El método Montessori en la educación infantil española: luces y sombras*, cit.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*