

Historical and Cultural Evolution of the Montessori Method: Some Considerations for Irish Early Years Practice

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Introduction

In this paper I will give a brief overview of the original literature surrounding the Montessori Method, how Montessori used a process of action research to evolve her method, the cultural interpretations or variations of the Method and what implications or opportunities this has for practitioners currently mapping the children's learning in Montessori environments with *Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)*.

Background and Context

In 2009, with the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, Irish Montessori pre-schools agreed to use *Aistear*, a play based curriculum framework to map the learning goals and aims of the children in their settings. This brought about a conflict of pedagogical language. *Aistear* uses the language of 'play' while Montessori used the language of 'work' to describe the activities of the child in a Montessori setting (Montessori 1936). When examined more closely the two are in fact found to be describing the same phenomenon. Play, in *Aistear* is defined as 'a way of doing things'

and toys are described as 'props' (NCCA 2009). 'Work' in Montessori terms is any activity the child is concentrating on and the Montessori materials are used as props to facilitate that concentration (Montessori 1909, 1936, 1948).

The argument could be made by practitioners that the Montessori Method is somehow incompatible with *Aistear* and should remain true and unchanged from its original form. The literature surrounding the evolution of the Montessori Method, both culturally and historically, will be used to question the validity of this view.

An Examination of the Literature

In her book *The New Children: Talks with Dr. Maria Montessori* (1919) Sheila Jamieson Radice discussed how she used a combination of her conversations with Montessori along with articles which appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement* from September to December 1919 to answer some questions readers had about the Montessori Method. Radice details how Montessori's colleague, Anna Maccheroni, commented that the Montessori Method was not finished or finite, but that it was evolving and would continue to evolve. Later Radice (1919, p. 30) credits Montessori with saying that the materials are not "all-sufficient" and that not only "should" more materials enter the method but they "must". Culverwell also mentions this in his exploration of the Montessori Method (Culverwell, 1913) as does Henry Holmes in his introduction to the American version of *The Montessori Method* (Montessori, 1912). Thus, it is possible to

draw the conclusion that both Montessori and her academic contemporaries were agreed that the Method is flexible and responsive and not a finite, fixed Method but one which evolves within time and context.

This knowledge should empower the Montessori practitioner in Ireland to use the Montessori Method as an action research process

If it is possible to conclude that Montessori herself, and her fellow contemporaries agreed the Method was not finite and should evolve; the implications of that conclusion are that it did evolve and continues to evolve. This knowledge should empower the Montessori practitioner in Ireland to use the Montessori Method as an action research process (Montessori, 1909/1912) and to introduce other materials which children respond to and apply the same Montessori principles inherent in the method.

Some authors (Holmes 1912³; Culverwell, 1913; Smith, 1912; Craig, 1913) spoke about the need to, and feasibility of, adapting the Montessori Method to reflect the needs and culture of the child's own country. Radice (1919) compares the average English school to their Italian counterpart and comes to the conclusion that they are not parallel but unique to their own culture. Holmes went as far as to suggest that either the Froebelian and Montessori system be interwoven together or that American children should undertake a two year course with the first year being dedicated to Montessori and the second to Froebel (Holmes, 1912). This begs the question, what modifications and adaptations were made between 1912 and today which are considered to be fundamental components for contemporary Montessori schools. Given that Dr. Montessori herself signed off on Holmes' very radical introduction which suggested mixing two methodologies, can it be taken as an indicator that Montessori, in 1912, was open to the idea of the method being modified to suit each child's individual culture?

³ Henry W. Holmes, Harvard University wrote the introduction to English version of *The Montessori Method* by Dr. Montessori published in America.



Taking it that Montessori was open to the idea of the method being modified to suit the child's culture and using the process of action research to eliminate and identify elements and practices which captured the child's interest (Montessori 1909/1912), we can conclude that Aistear (which developed out of research with children in Ireland (NCCA, 2009)) gives practitioners a context within which to develop and evolve the Montessori Method further.

In Montessori's first four Casa dei Bambinis (opened between 1907 and 1912) there is plenty of written evidence to suggest that while there were no dolls or dolls teasetts available to the children, there

were a lot of gross motor, opened ended, manipulative toys available, particularly outside (Bailey, 1915; Craig, 1913; Culverwell 1913). Professor Culverwell (1913) noted that as well as the gymnastic exercises, silence and marching games, the children play with hoops, balls, bean bags, swings, kites, Froebel's occupations and gifts as well as modelling clay and gardening. Smith, who also travelled to Rome, observed the children working in the four established Casa's in 1912; he noted the children building with blocks

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and sticks and remarked that free play had its place in the children's physical training (Smith, 1912, p. 48 and 49). As well as the above documented use of Froebel's gifts and occupations, Montessori herself credited some of her didactic materials and methods which she introduced and kept as part of her action research process to French physicians Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin (Standing, 1957; Montessori 1909); thus it can be concluded that Montessori was open

to different types of play, play materials and methods in her schools as long as the children were drawn to them and used them.

Standing (1957), in Montessori's biography, also notes that it would be

wrong to assume that Montessori would like practitioners to suppress any make believe activities that come from the children. Rather she would have asked the practitioner to observe the child and identify that the make believe play is not due to any deficit in the environment (i.e. an unfulfilled desire for something real). He also wrote that Montessori believed that fantasy should not be enforced on the child by the adult (Standing, 1957). Montessori, herself wrote in the concluding lines of a 1948 re-working of *The Montessori Method* published as *The*

⁴ The NCCA carried out a 'Portraiture Study' of children between birth and six in Ireland, gathering information on what they liked to do, who they liked to spend time with and the places they liked to spend time in, to best inform the development of Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

⁵ Montessori discusses in *The Secret of Childhood* (Montessori, 1936) how she removed the dolls and tea sets from the first Casa Dei Bambini through a process of action research when she saw the children were not attracted to using them, choosing instead to mimic the role of adults in the home environment through the use of practical life exercises and the didactic equipment which Montessori adapted to their needs and wants. When this author researched further it was noted that tea sets in Italy in 1907 were made for dolls and were no bigger than an inch to two inches in height and not the size of a dolls' tea set in Ireland in 2013.



Discovery of the Child that, “a child who shows a desire to work and learn should be left free to do so even if the work is outside the regular programme” (Montessori, 1948). This provides clear evidence that imaginative role play was facilitated, as was alternative use of the didactic materials, in Montessori’s time.

Conclusion

As Montessori practitioners map children’s use of the Montessori didactic materials and their ‘work’ in the Montessori environment to the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009), it is important to remember the cultural and historical evolution of the Method throughout time. There is evidence to suggest that while the pedagogical languages of Montessori and *Aistear* differ they share one and the same meaning, which should reassure practitioners trying to reconcile the Montessori Method to the *Aistear* curriculum framework. Considering the literature, I have demonstrated how Montessori and her academic contemporaries expected the Method to evolve and change as it situates itself in other cultures and times. This should empower Montessori practitioners who may feel challenged in mapping Montessori under the *Aistear* framework.

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Sinead Matson is currently a PhD student with Maynooth University. Her research interests include early childhood education and care, professionalism and professional practice in early childhood education, the evolution of the Montessori Method, play in early childhood education and the culture of play in Ireland from birth to six years. Sinead has worked in the Montessori and ECE sector for fourteen years both as a Montessori practitioner and a lecturer.

Transitions between Irish-medium preschools and primary schools

Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Fiona Nic Fhionnlaioich

Introduction

The transition from preschool to primary school is recognised in early childhood education literature as an important social and educational process for young children and their families (Hopps, 2014). This paper will consider a research project which was commissioned by Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (agency for Irish-medium preschools) and Gaelscoileanna Teo (agency for Irish-medium Schools) in 2010 on transitions between pre-school and primary school through the Irish language and aims to contribute to understanding the role of second languages within the transition process. A ‘second language’ is understood to mean a language that is learned after the native language has been acquired (Ellis, 2008, p.5). Both naíonraí (Irish-medium preschools) and gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium immersion primary schools) adopt a total language immersion approach in regard to using the Irish language for all classroom activities and interactions (Johnson and Swain, 1997). The paper presents an overview of the three phases of the project: a literature review, a small scale pilot study and an evaluation of the project. The paper concludes with some final reflections.

Most children face a number of changes as they transition from pre-primary to primary school

Phase 1: Literature Review

The analysis of the early childhood education literature on transitions revealed that most children face a number of changes as they transition from pre-primary to primary school (OECD, 2006; Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2013). These include changes in their physical environment, personnel and pedagogical changes, changes in their own

