



The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Status of Montessori Schooling in New Zealand

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This doctoral study examines the historical evolution and contemporary status of Montessori schooling in New Zealand, as an example of the adaptation of an alternative educational ideal to a particular national context. The examination of the Montessori method and its history in New Zealand and overseas provides an opportunity to investigate professional and public reactions to a specific early years curriculum model in relation to changing historical and societal circumstances and shifting educational thought. Moreover it allows for the examination of the circumstances that have supported the continuation of Montessori's early years curriculum over time.

The concept 'alternative', when applied to schools and educational systems, implies a break with established practices characterising bureaucratised state and national systems of schooling. There has been considerable interest in how such alternatives are established and developed within contexts still dominated by State schooling (see Ignas & Corsini, 1979; Lucas, 1984). The alternative method of education developed by Dr. Maria Montessori was first implemented in Rome, Italy in 1907, making it the oldest enduring early years curriculum model (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). Montessori's approach to early years education has survived despite challenges made to its underlying assumptions and practices. In New Zealand, like most other English speaking countries, Montessori's ideas and method were embraced with initial enthusiasm, followed by a gradual decline in interest over some decades, and then revived again in the mid-1970s. Petersen (1983) states that Montessori is the only method of education that has enjoyed two 'vogues'.

The history of the Montessori movement must also take into account Maria Montessori's particular character and her personality. She was an extremely vain woman, regarding her method of education as a 'personal triumph' (Cohen, 1972: 372). Montessori felt that her curriculum was complete as it was based on scientific results. She was a charismatic figure, with an extraordinarily vital and powerful personality, and many who heard Montessori speak became her worshipful followers. They were attracted to her in an almost fanatic, cultist way, and Montessori demanded from her followers a great deal of time, energy, and a total allegiance to her educational ideas. Montessori surrounded herself with devoted disciples, some of whom lived with her. They called her 'mother', and existed 'in and for her ideas as ardently and whole heartedly as nuns about an adored Mother Superior' (Fisher, 1920: 227). According to Hainstock (1997), the Montessori movement became characterised by this small, loyal band of followers who were personally devoted to Montessori and dedicated themselves to the spreading of her method of education. Along with Montessori they were totally committed to retaining the purity and integrity of her method, despite changes in society and an increasing professional knowledge base underpinning teaching practice.

Maria Montessori became a global educator. Her ideas were embedded in a world-wide system whose philosophy and pedagogy transcended national boundaries. Despite this, the integration of Montessori education within any country results in a culturally specific Montessori education (Rambusch & Stoops, 1992). The major aim of this thesis was to examine how Montessori education changes and adapts in different cultures and during different time frames. The thesis concentrated on New Zealand as a culturally specific example of a global phenomenon.

In New Zealand as in the United States, Britain and Australia, the enthusiastic initial reception accorded Montessori teaching was replaced in the 1920s by what Cohen (1972) terms 'adoptive failure', where an educational innovation 'is rejected by the target system due to deficiencies in resources and power or incongruence with existing target system norms and procedures' (p. 358). During the first phase of Montessori in New Zealand the State infant schools adapted aspects of Montessori, which went towards supporting existing aims of education. The intention was not to challenge the State education system (Miltich-Conway & Openshaw, 1988). A brief history of the Montessori movement in England, from 1911 up until the mid-1920s, is included to illustrate this. The English experience had an impact on the implementation of Montessori education in New Zealand.

Initial interest in the Montessori system of education in New Zealand, along with the reemergence of interest after its 'adopted failure', illustrates the significance of historical timing. Montessori arrived on the international scene in the early 1900s when her ideas were embraced in relation to popular interest and societal need. In the early childhood sector, though, teachers and educators had just finished a stressful examination of their teaching practices and were less than willing to replace Froebel's curriculum with another one they perceived to be even more rigid. Moreover, even with shared beliefs in science as a basis for early education and the importance of a child-centred approach, Montessori's ideas were too dissonant from others emerging at that time (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Hunt, 1964; May, 1997).

The North American revival of the Montessori movement in the late 1950s was a forerunner to its re-introduction into New Zealand in the mid-1970s. Parents wanting a different type of early childhood education for their children, other than kindergarten or the parent cooperative playcentre, established Montessori as an alternative early childhood curriculum model. A case study of one Montessori early childhood centre shows how the policies and practices of the parent-run committee supported the delivery of an educational programme in accordance with Montessori's philosophy. The Montessori Association of New Zealand has built a national network of Montessori schools, including the case study early childhood centre and a teacher-training programme, inserting Montessori's ideas into New Zealand culture to produce a culturally specific Montessori education. The Montessori revival in New Zealand is still in progress.

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