



## MARK POWELL

Mark Powell taught 6–9 and 9–12 classrooms in the US and Australia for 28 years. In addition to teaching and Montessori qualifications, Mark has a M.Ed. specialising in Conflict Resolution. He has published widely on Montessori education and designed many classroom materials sold around the world. As a Montessori trainer he has delivered many workshops at international conferences and consulted for dozens of Montessori schools in many countries. In 2021 Mark joined Montessori Australia as Director of Education Services. He gives regular workshops on a variety of topics, although bringing the unique Positive Discipline approach to relationship building to Australian parents and educators is a mission dear to his heart.

## MONTESSORI: THE MAGIC AND THE MADNESS

### The Magic

Since its publication 15 years ago, *Montessori Madness!* has been hailed around the world as the most accessible parent-to-parent guide to the magic of Montessori education. Trevor Eissler laid out a compelling case for Montessori education in its capacity to address many of the issues that confront traditional schooling in the United States, and with which schools continue to struggle. The same can be said for Australia.

As Eissler describes, with the rapport of a parent next door, Maria Montessori's method is designed to serve the needs of children first and foremost. Dr Montessori based her method on extensive scientific research, in particular her observations of the needs and tendencies of children, over several decades and in many countries. These needs and tendencies are universal and have not fundamentally changed since Dr Maria Montessori conducted her research.

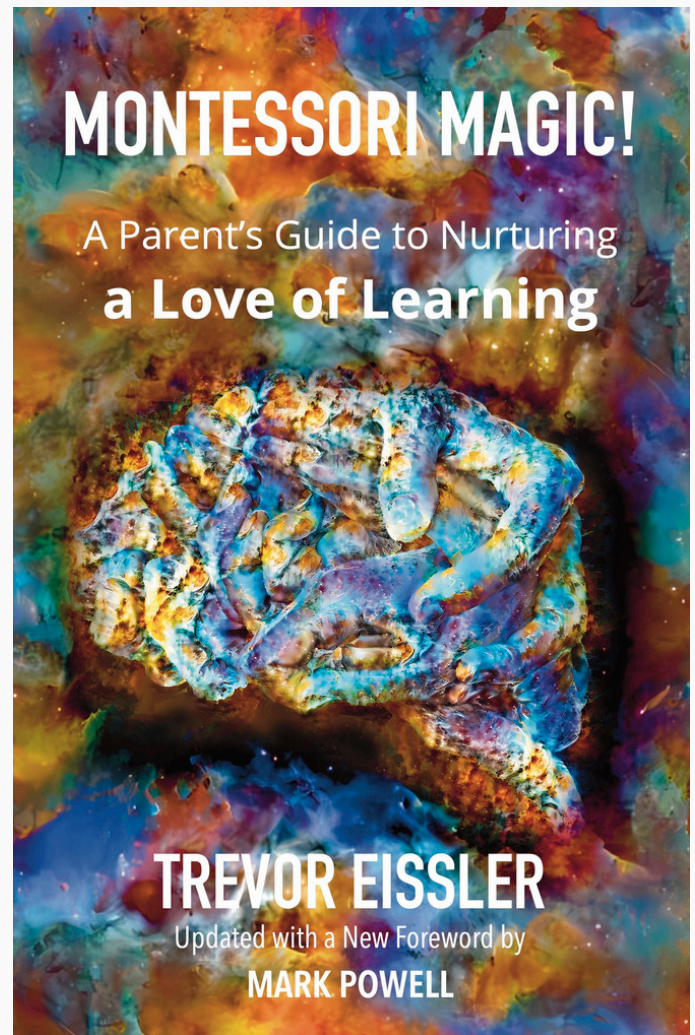
Eissler's experience observing at his children's Montessori school in Texas threw into stark relief the pervasive assumption he sensed during his own schooling that children are inherently disinterested, even lazy, and must be cajoled and coerced to complete learning tasks. It became clear to him that the chronic apathy observable in so many students in conventional schools is more likely a result of the lack of agency they feel over their own education. "Effort is pleasurable," he writes in his chapter on the sensitive periods, "it puts one in a good mood." Any effort to force children to put in their best effort using rewards or punishments will inevitably result in "the torpor of indifference" from which is born "the weariness of labor". Self-chosen effort energises all of us; when concentration is self-chosen, and it occurs during a sensitive period, children take ownership of their own education.

Eissler takes Montessori's sometimes rather academic concepts and makes them relatable with vivid descriptions and personal anecdotes. In his chapter on this core element of her theory of mind he writes, "The sensitive periods stoke a fire in the belly, a physical or intellectual itch which must be fed or scratched. An opportunity is missed when this period passes...If one learns while the iron is hot—when the brain is focused—the effectiveness of the education received is multiplied: receptivity increases; understanding is deeper; learning is easy, enjoyable, and voracious." The timing of sensitive periods cannot be dictated by a teacher or their syllabus, therefore it is essential that children have the freedom to choose the activity on which they would like to work.

Eissler suggests that the awareness and strategic use of sensitive periods could go a long way to solving the problem of “herding cats” felt by so many teachers in conventional schools. Eliminating the need to put all thirty children in the class on the same lesson, at the same time, would mean that authoritarian-style discipline is no longer needed. “By definition, if a child chooses to work on something that interests them, he’s going to be interested in it! When every child in the class is engrossed in something, there’s not much need for the teacher to run the class any longer.” This has proven to be the case in well-run Montessori classrooms all around the world for more than one hundred years!

Montessori students, he says, “taste” their own work. These classrooms put the child in charge of their own learning by allowing them to set goals that are separate from the goals of others, and allowing them to concentrate freely on a self-chosen task for as long as their interest is held. Since most of their activities contain a built-in control of error, students get immediate feedback on their explorations without having to wait for the teacher. An inevitable result of their self-directed learning, day-in day-out, year after year, is that children become comfortable with error and learn to take ownership of their own education.

For Dr Montessori, the purpose of education is more than the passing on of knowledge. For her, education must become an aid to life, and establishing lasting peace was her ultimate goal. She believed that with a supportive environment children naturally express the finest of their human tendencies, free of selfish aggression. Montessori believed that lasting peace would come when children are raised in this kind of liberating environment, free of coercion and full of joy. These children will create the new peaceful human who is both an independent thinker and a collaborator down to their DNA!



## The Madness

The publication of the new Australian edition of Eissler's classic guide offered an opportunity to update some of the content, and also its puzzling title. Why Montessori *Madness*? This isn't a word most parents would want to see associated with their child's education, especially a Montessori one! Eissler chooses his words very carefully, so it's worth a closer look.



Like the boy who called out the emperor with no clothes, Dr Montessori spoke out during a time of unprecedented technological and social change, after the collapse of “robber baron capitalism” and subsequent world wars, against the madness that was driving humans to extract every last penny of profit from natural resources and machines, while at the same time squandering the creative potential of the human mind that could lift humankind out of poverty, war and self-inflicted misery.

Although Dr Montessori understood the importance of technological innovation to human progress and was not frightened by it, she saw the untapped power of the human mind as an even more important source for the peaceful progress of human society. Why is it, she asked in 1948, that any little piece of land or some natural source of energy is pounced upon, while the immense power of the human mind, from which the whole of civilisation and all its inventions has been created, remains uncultivated? If each of the discoveries around us ultimately begins as an idea in someone’s imagination, to be refined by their intelligence, why has the study of the child and education been so modest in comparison to studies in other fields? Education today, she railed, remains merely the passing on of information, static and stagnant. *“It is the cultivation of the values that are hidden in the human personality that is of importance and urgently needed today. The mere transmission of a greater amount of information cannot help much. It is the cultivation of the personality itself, of man himself, that is necessary.”* [1]

Almost a century later, with similarly graphic exasperation, Eissler dubbed as madness our modern mainstream education system that in many ways is hardly distinguishable in all its variations, both private and public, from that of Montessori’s day. This system, he says, spends untold public resources micromanaging children daily to the point of paralysis, while also incidentally teaching them to lack motivation, to learn passively and parrot back information instead of thinking for themselves, to rely on authority rather than solving their own problems and making decisions independently, to compete with their peers and return the disrespect they experience from others (including their teachers), and to resist the discipline and order that is imposed on them daily without their consent.

“

*That is where the lumbering bus that is our traditional school system missed the turn, flattened the guardrail, and settled into the mud, hopelessly stuck. Mistakenly, we have tried to build a student from the top down by telling him everything we think he should know. We have given administrators, curricula designers, and teachers complete responsibility for the intellectual, psychological, and physiological development of our children. We goofed. Children want and need to build themselves. It is that simple.”* [2]



Just as Montessori did, Eissler calls out as madness the suffering and the incalculable waste of human potential that this system engenders. And just as the crowd gasped in horror and confusion as the boy called out the emperor's nakedness, it's the Montessori model that seems crazy to a society entranced by the mainstream education system that is so pervasive it goes largely unquestioned.

Many everyday ideas we take for granted now were once seen as madness – for example, that the earth is round, not flat; that microscopic germs cause disease, not bad air; that women are equally capable of contributing to every field of human endeavour, not just caring and child-bearing. The remarkable ability of the human mind to recalibrate as normal almost any situation it finds itself in makes us an incredibly versatile all-purpose species. But our tendency to stop paying attention to what has been taken for granted can also keep us mired in situations that are not to our individual or collective advantage.

Educational fads have come and gone, but mainstream schooling continues to be based stubbornly around the needs of adult convenience. This is of course a big incentive for adults to keep things as they are, but by ignoring the needs of the child the traditional model of schooling has become a wilfully self-inflicted wound that lays waste to society's greatest resource – the imagination and creativity of future generations. As Eissler and Montessori both called out, it's madness that all children everywhere don't have access to a life-affirming education free of coercion and full of joy!



## A Stalled Movement

In the parable of the emperor's new clothes, the boy's innocent observation interrupts the crowd's trance and they recoil in horror. But then, one by one, people in the crowd begin to wake up, allowing them to see the reality that is in front of them also – the naked emperor – and not what the merchants wanted them to see.

Just as in Hans Christian Anderson's fable, Montessori wrote that children, by virtue of their innocence, are in a position to teach adults valuable life lessons, such as the nature of human development and how to live in the moment. In *Education and Peace*, she wrote:

“

*The child is capable of developing and giving us tangible proof of the possibility of a better humanity. He has shown us the true process of construction of the human being. We have seen children totally change as they acquire a love for things and as their sense of order, discipline, and self-control develops within them.... The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind.”*

Dr Montessori's ideas have been on display for all to see for well over a century now, and Eissler's for a decade and a half. Most people who observe in a well-functioning Montessori classroom have an experience akin to waking from a trance. And yet despite the powerful effect that Montessori pedagogy has had on those whose lives it has touched, on the macro scale Montessori remains an insignificant percentage of schools everywhere, nowhere near enough to effect the peaceful social transformation that Montessori had hoped for.

The 2022 Global Montessori Census documented almost 16,000 Montessori schools around the world, roughly 9% of which are government funded. Countries with the largest numbers of Montessori schools include the United States, China, Thailand, Germany, Canada, Tanzania, United Kingdom, Russia, Poland and the Netherlands. The United States, Thailand, the Netherlands, and India have the largest number of

government-funded or public Montessori programs. The U.S. has about 570 public district and charter Montessori programs, and while this sounds impressive taken in isolation, in the context of the entire US public education system of 98,577 schools, Montessori represents only 0.57% of that system, barely a drop in the ocean. Worldwide, our 16,000 Montessori schools represent only 0.29% of the roughly 5.5 million extant schools that have been estimated globally as of 2023. [3]

The Montessori movement has fared no better in Australia. In 2022, Montessori schools made up 3% of all independent schools in Australia, but the total of 39 independent Montessori schools served only 0.7% of students enrolled full-time in independent schools. This means their average enrolment of 100 students was far smaller than the average enrolment of 570 students in Australian independent schools. Montessori schools served fewer independent school students than Steiner schools (1.4%), Jewish schools (1.3%), Seventh Day Adventist schools (2.3%), Baptist schools (3.7%), Islamic schools (6.7%), Lutheran schools (6.3%), Catholic schools (6.4%), Christian schools (12%), Non-Denominational schools (14.5%) and Anglican schools (24.4%). Only Greek Orthodox schools (0.6%), other Orthodox schools (0.4%), and schools serving other religious affiliations such as the Church of Christ, Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna and the Society of Friends (0.9%), served fewer independent school students in this country. [4]

In early 2023 there were a total of 4,086,998 school students enrolled in 9,629 Australian schools, government and non-government. [5] About 11 public schools in Australia currently use the Montessori method or are working towards doing so. [6] So Montessori schools currently make up only 0.5% of all schools in Australia and serve only about 0.15% of all school-age students in this country.

If we look at the early childhood sector the picture improves a little, but not by much. According to the national register of approved education and care services and providers kept by the *Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority* (ACECQA), in 2024 there were 17,651 centres in Australia caring for children prior to school age that are covered by ACECQA standards. This includes stand alone centres, family day cares,



**Blackfriars Practising School, Sydney (1914)**

and school-based early learning centres, and of those 298 or 1.7% identify as Montessori. [7] Taking into consideration that self-identification as a Montessori program is quite loose in the early childhood sector, the real picture may be no more positive than it is for schools.

Any way you look at it, 110 years after Blackfriars Practising School in Sydney became one of the first schools in the world to adopt the Montessori approach, the only conclusion possible is that Montessori is a movement that has failed to take hold. This is not to discount the transformative work done by educators at those 50 schools and 298 centres, as well as the many others that have existed in Australia in the past. However, the question deserves to be asked: Why has an educational philosophy with so much promise for solving so many of the problems that plague humanity still not been accepted more widely?

## Is it us or them?

If there was any country where Montessori education should be expected to flourish, Australia would surely be it. Australians have shown a greater preference for independent schooling than parents in other developed countries with almost twice as many children going to non-governmental schools as the OECD average. Together with the Catholic sector, about 35% of Australian parents send their children to non-government schools, and this figure has doubled over the last 30 years. [8] According to the 2021 *Australia Talks National Survey*, 92% of independent school parents are satisfied with their child's education, compared with 85% in the Catholic sector and 77% for public schools. Independent schools remain the fastest growing school sector in Australia, even though average student-teacher ratios are not significantly higher in government schools and even though non-government schools generally don't perform any better on average. [9] Along with Chile and Colombia, Australia has one of the highest percentages of private expenditure within the school sector in the world, far higher than countries that perform better on international rankings such as New Zealand, Finland or Sweden. [10]



One possible reason that many archaic assumptions about children that are baked into mainstream schooling persist so stubbornly may be that they are also cornerstone beliefs of old school parenting. For example, many traditional parents still see children as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information from a more knowledgeable parent or teacher. They assume that children need to be controlled because they are not capable of doing things on their own or cannot be trusted, and that children must be made to feel bad about their mistakes and poor behaviour before they can learn to do better. When these assumptions about children are mirrored in both mainstream schooling and traditional parenting they start to look like facts rather than beliefs, and the trance becomes very compelling.

And yet, dissatisfaction among Australian parents with institutionalised schooling of all kinds has also been reflected in a rapid growth in homeschooling, and this has only been accentuated by the Covid epidemic. The numbers of Australian students registered for home education rose 105% in the eight years to 2022, with an annual growth rate of 9.4%! In 2019 the total number of children being homeschooled was 21,437 – more than four times the number of Australian students enrolled in Montessori schools! [11] Official homeschooling enrolments have continued to rise exponentially since then, and the uncounted numbers of homeschoolers who fly under the radar are widely considered to be much higher still. [12]

Australia has had a long history of distance education with the government-approved *Schools of the Air* serving remote outback areas since 1951 and correspondence schools operating even longer. More recently, with the rise of homeschooling support organisations and greater accessibility through the Internet, homeschooling has become more popular – even normalised – and this has led to increasing media and community acceptance. The average length of time that children are home educated has decreased to about four years as more parents choose to home educate their older children for the first time for a year or two to help with lagging confidence or a chronic bullying issue in an institutional school. [13]

Low ————— Kindness —————> High

High  
↑  
Firmness  
↓  
Low

### Authoritarian

Order, no freedom



### Authoritative (Democratic)

Freedom and order



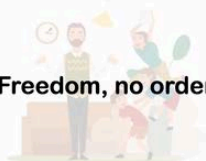
### Uninvolved

No order, no freedom



### Permissive

Freedom, no order



## Relationship Styles

Apart from persistent bullying, other reasons that parents typically choose to home educate include a child whose special needs are not able to be addressed in their local school but who doesn't qualify for extra services. Homeschooling parents also cite the inability of local schools to provide adequate one-on-one instruction, with most school students receiving on average only four minutes of one-on-one instruction each day. Many parents also turn to homeschooling because they are looking for a different philosophical method (such as Unschooling or a particular religious approach). Other parents say they are not happy with the culture of local schools, peer pressure, or a recent cultural shift in their local schools. And some parents are moved to consider homeschooling when their child continually complains of stomach cramps at the thought of entering their school environment, even when they're not being bullied.

Decades of research (including randomised control trials) have backed up what Eissler discovered a couple of decades ago through lucky happenstance – that not only are the typical injuries to young people's well-being associated with traditional education generally not present in well-functioning Montessori programs, but Montessori children also outperform non-Montessori students at reading and maths as well as a whole host of other indicators, including social skills, self-regulation, creativity and a sense of "justice and fairness". And the effect is more pronounced with minority and lower-income children. [14]

By offering classes in authoritative parenting, Montessori early childhood centres and schools could help parents put Montessori principles into practice at home with skills they can use to improve the quality of life for their families. While learning about their child's classroom or curriculum doesn't directly affect a family's happiness on a day-to-day basis, parent education events focused around gaining a child's cooperation without coercion are more relevant for parents because they offer practical tools for struggles that parents deal with in the relationships that matter the most to them. Authoritative parenting classes could become a drawcard for luring the wider community, as well as enrolled families, into standing room-only parent education events. Once they see how simple and effective it can be to empower children rather than to control them, parents with no Montessori experience might be more likely to show an interest in Montessori education for their children.

Unlike independent schools that serve communities with a particular religious worldview, interest in Montessori schools is not limited by the size of their parent constituency. Why are parents who are dissatisfied with their local schools opting for homeschooling instead of seeking out a Montessori education for their children? Is it possible that there could be more demand for Montessori lurking behind the visible data, but without an adequate supply of Montessori programs available to capture that interest?

If the failure of the Montessori movement to take hold in this country can't be convincingly blamed on lack of demand, what then needs to change in order for Montessori to become a viable movement for educational change and social reform in Australia? Perhaps it's a problem of supply. Could it be us?

**Three words:  
training, standards and  
leadership.**

## Training

Shortages of trained teachers have bedevilled the Montessori movement in many parts of the world over the last century, particularly in Australia. [15] There are many layers to this problem which have all been accentuated by particular conditions in this country.

Montessori teacher education takes a very different approach from traditional teacher training, and this goes back to a fundamental difference with the method. Actually, Dr Montessori never used the term “Montessori Method” and even expressed irritation when others used it. She always referred to her approach as “scientific education” or “scientific pedagogy”. All other educational methods – whether mainstream, alternative, or progressive – start with an abstract theory of how the child learns and deduce a practical method from there. As a scientist by training, Montessori worked the other way around. She started tinkering with materials, first in a hospital setting with patients and then in her first school, which originally looked quite different in many ways to modern Montessori programs. Dr Montessori observed carefully in her own schools and made refinements based on the children’s reactions. Hers is the only pedagogical approach developed and refined through scientific observation of how real children learn.

Montessori teachers must learn to observe their students objectively too – to see them for who they really are, without projecting their own needs and desires. A child’s internal motivation to learn can be a very delicate flame, too easily snuffed out by an unconscious adult who influences the child with their own motivations, pressures or goals that have nothing to do with the child in front of them. To be effective, a Montessori teacher must have internalised the curriculum for the age level they are teaching so that they can intervene when their observations suggest the child is most receptive to a particular concept, right when that flame of enthusiasm begins to glow. Teaching to a rigid schedule from an open textbook may be more convenient for adults, but it can easily crush a child’s self-confidence and willingness to learn. Montessori training needs to give the teacher an ability to find that exciting sweet spot right at the pleasurable edge of each individual’s comfort zone where they have the most energy, between far too easy and way too hard. Challenging yet doable, but this method of teaching requires more of an investment up front in learning the craft.

Apart from learning to ‘see’ the child so they can recognise their receptivity for a particular concept, the other part of a Montessori educator’s job is to present activities with minimal contact (the “first period” of learning) so that the child can internalise a concept or skill through their concrete manipulation of a material (the “second period” of learning is the longest). Later the child demonstrates their mastery of a concept by re-presenting that material back to a teacher or to another child (the “third period” of learning). Presentations are often choreographed down to the minutest detail – practically every word and gesture – because Dr Montessori proved through countless experiments, over decades, on children from every background and on every continent, that those specific attributes produce the same results. When implemented inauthentically, Montessori does not show the same benefits, and some say it may even have worse outcomes for some children. [16]



To achieve this level of proficiency Montessori teachers must rehearse the details of a broad and deep curriculum for the multi-age group they will be teaching during substantial periods of “supervised practice” with the materials, under the guidance of an experienced mentor. Quality Montessori training also includes a final “practicum” or internship in a functioning Montessori classroom to give the student teacher hands-on practical training that reveals the nuances and complexities that are inevitably faced by teachers in their interactions with a multitude of different children situated in a particular cultural context. In Australia, the “tyranny of distance” makes it challenging and relatively expensive to bring together smaller numbers of trainee teachers in the same location for periodic face-to-face training. At the same time there has long been a general reluctance to embrace digital technologies among some older members of the Montessori community, particularly those who control teacher education programs.

Understanding and balancing all the moving parts in creating a nurturing and respectful environment for the child calls to a particular kind of person. Many Montessori teachers see it as a calling rather than a job, a privilege and a pleasure to be a guide in the development of a new and unique human being. Dr Montessori believed that in order to create an inviting atmosphere of respect for the child, the new Montessori teacher must experience what she called a “spiritual transformation” as they develop a humble and non-judgmental mindset, and her own training programs focused as much on the spiritual preparation of the teacher as on their academic preparation. For this reason, Montessori teachers are sometimes referred to as “guides” because their role involves guiding the child’s self-exploration (or “auto-education”) more than it involves direct teaching.

Although the *Montessori National Curriculum* developed by the *Montessori Australia Foundation* was approved by the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA) as an equivalent alternative curriculum for Australian students in 2011, Australian federal and state governments do not as yet recognise Montessori training as an equivalent alternative teacher

education program for Australian teachers. This means that in Australia Montessori teachers must train twice, first to obtain a traditional four-year teaching qualification and then after graduation they generally have to undergo up to two years of Montessori training before they can work in a Montessori environment as a lead teacher. Given the current regulatory environment around teacher education in Australia, this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Not only does this make it especially onerous to become a Montessori educator in Australia, but Dr Montessori believed that people with education degrees and previous teaching experience in traditional schools made less effective teachers because many of the habits they learned there were contradictory to Montessori principles and needed to be unlearned. [17] Given the limited availability of adequately trained Montessori educators in this country, many Australian schools have found it easier to source teachers from overseas, or to send suitable Australian candidates to train in the United States or Europe, than to find Australians with appropriate Montessori training. This chronic shortage of Montessori teachers in Australia will likely remain until there are undergraduate Montessori teacher education programs available in Australian universities so that young teachers can do Montessori training at the same time they are undertaking traditional teacher education.



## Standards

Another issue that has inhibited the growth of a robust movement in Australia and elsewhere in the world is the lack of widely accepted standards for both Montessori teacher education and classroom practice, and even the absence of universal agreement over a minimum definition for what constitutes an 'authentic' Montessori program.

From the very beginnings of the movement, Dr Montessori's insistence on tight control over the training of teachers, the elaboration of her method, the production and use of materials, and the establishment of schools became a source of conflict and controversy, especially in the United States. [18] There was great excitement over the arrival of the Montessori method initially in that country with over 100 schools established there by 1913, only six years after Dr Montessori established her first school in the slums of Rome. Her method had the support of many notable public figures, including Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel Gardiner Hubbard, as well as Thomas Edison and Woodrow Wilson. In that year the first International Training Course held in Rome was sponsored by the *American Montessori Committee*, and 67 of the 83 students were from the United States. [19]

Dr Montessori travelled to the US in 1913 on a three-week lecture tour in front of enthusiastic crowds. She returned again in 1915 to present at the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition* in San Francisco and to give a third international training course. During this early period, thirteen states in the US had decided to incorporate Montessori into their public schools. The Montessori method had also been officially adopted in public schools in Italy, Switzerland and Australia (notably Blackfriars School in Sydney) as well as in public programs in London, Johannesburg, Rome and Stockholm. Private Montessori schools were also planned for Argentina, China, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Syria and New Zealand. [20]

Despite travelling widely in Europe and giving numerous teacher training courses, Dr Montessori found it difficult to meet the demand for teachers herself, especially in the US. After her last visit there in 1915 the Montessori movement fragmented and

controversy raged in her absence, fanned most noticeably by the progressive educator William Heard Kilpatrick, as well as by the influential *National Kindergarten Association*. With travel restrictions imposed by war and Dr Montessori's internment along with her son in India, Montessori did not regain a noticeable influence again on education in the US until 1952.

In 1929, at the first *International Montessori Congress* in Denmark, Dr Montessori and Mario Montessori Sr founded the *Association Montessori Internationale* (AMI) "to oversee the activities of schools and societies all over the world and to supervise the training of teachers." [21] During this early period, AMI was the sole official outlet for Montessori support, materials and teachers. The AMI controlled rights to Montessori publications as well as the production of authorised Montessori materials. It was the central authority for the Montessori movement: authorisation to start national societies, orders for Montessori manipulatives and requests for trainers all flowed through AMI. [22] Maria Montessori remained founding president of AMI until her death in 1952, and Mario Montessori was general director until his death in 1982. After Mario died, AMI continued under the control of the heirs and family members of Mario Montessori, and later through those who were most closely associated with Mario during the time of his leadership. The authority of the organisation has tended to be closely defined by the personal relationship of its senior leadership with Dr Montessori herself.

**Dr. Maria Montessori during her 1913 trip to the US with S. S. McClure, owner of the then popular McClure's Magazine. McClure funded her trip and introduced Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel Hubbard Bell to her method.**



Dr Montessori feared that the uncontrolled dissemination of her method would lead to its dilution. However those who saw the potential of her method for liberating humanity were impatient with the slow pace of growth. As this tension between control and excitement grew, it wasn't long before independent training programs emerged. In 1946, Dr Montessori established a training institute in London called the *Montessori Centre* with two of her students, Margaret Homfray and Phoebe Child. A few years later it became independent of her and continued as the *St Nicholas Training Centre for the Montessori Method of Education*. The *St Nicholas Centre* eventually offered full-time residential training in two former embassy sites in Princes Gate in London, as well as a correspondence course. [23]

Like many Montessorians, Margaret Homfray and Phoebe Child found it difficult to put aside their passion for the movement when they retired in 1978. For a few years they lived in California where they started the *Montessori World Education Institute* (MWEI) to train teachers around the world, including in the Southern Hemisphere. After Child suffered a stroke, Margaret Homfray continued her involvement with teacher training in Australia and New Zealand. In 1983 MWEI (Australia) was established using the course and albums Homfray had developed for teacher training at the *University of California, Santa Barbara*. Beth Alcorn, originally from New Zealand, became its first educational director and held that position until 2007. Now known as the *Montessori Institute*, this organisation has grown to become the largest Montessori training organisation in Australia and the first to revise the cultural albums for the Australian context. [24]



**Margaret Homfray**



**Beth Alcorn**



**Phoebe Child**

Even before MWEI made its way to Australia, Willemien Duyker-de-Vries was providing independent Montessori training through the school she founded in Kingsley, Western Australia until her death in 2014. Mrs Duyker, as she was known, had attended a Montessori preschool in The Netherlands and was trained by Dr Montessori and Mario Montessori in Amsterdam from 1939 to 1941. She and her husband moved to Western Australia in 1951 where they founded the *Kingsley Montessori School* in 1963. The school opened a 6–12 program in 1965, an adolescent program in 1972, and in 1993 became the first Montessori school in the world to offer the *International Baccalaureate* diploma. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Mrs Duyker's focus shifted from the school to providing training in WA, NSW and QLD and supporting Montessori schools across the country. Although she was trained by Maria and Mario Montessori themselves, Mrs Duyker's training programs were never acknowledged by AMI.



**The Montessori School, Kingsley (WA) 1960s**

**Willemien Duyker-de-Vries**



Meanwhile, in 1958, a reflective and intrepid young teacher from New York City named Nancy McCormick Rambusch founded the Whitby School, the first Montessori school to be opened in the United States in the post-War era. Mario Montessori had urged Rambusch to bring Montessori back to the US following their meeting in Paris. At his urging she took Montessori training in London, an experience that she subsequently dismissed as “uninspired and without academic rigour”.

Pleased with the energy Rambusch brought to her work, Mario in 1959 named her his personal emissary to the United States and strongly supported the founding in 1960 of the *American Montessori Society* (AMS) with Rambusch at the helm. At first the goals of AMS mirrored those of AMI: to support efforts to create schools, develop teacher education programs, and publicise the value of Montessori education. Under her leadership, the Montessori movement achieved a degree of stability that was elusive to American Montessori promoters in earlier decades. Rambusch herself attributed this achievement to her persistent focus on promoting Montessori as a “social movement” rather than a teaching method.

**The Whitby School (1958)**



Nancy Rambusch believed that Montessori needed to be adapted to American culture. Professor John J. McDermott, her friend and colleague, argued that Dr Montessori’s tenet of the universality of children showed a basic naiveté about the interrelationships between the child’s development of consciousness and the culture in which they are embedded. McDermott also stressed the need to move Montessori into the public sector so it would be available to all children, regardless of their circumstances. This remains a guiding principle of the *American Montessori Society*, along with a belief in the need for adaptability. [25]



**Nancy McCormick Rambusch**

The AMS soon began accrediting a new wave of Montessori schools in the US as well as teacher education programs with different priorities to Montessori training programs of the Old World. AMS insisted that all teacher educators attain a college degree so that the Montessori coursework could potentially be recognised by state education departments. It also sought to connect with mainstream education by offering Montessori coursework in traditional teacher education programs.

By 1960 Mario Montessori was concerned that the rift between AMI and AMS would cause AMI to lose control of content and of standards. [26] The 1960s offered an opportunity for the AMI to embrace the diversity that was emerging in the worldwide Montessori movement and reaffirm its mission by codifying standards that every Montessori teacher, school and teacher education program could aspire to meet. Instead, tensions escalated and in 1967 a trademark dispute arose between AMS and AMI over the use of the term "Montessori". The legal battle was finally settled by the *US Patent and Trademark Trial and Appeal Board*, which refused to grant exclusive use of the term "Montessori" to any one particular organisation, ruling that the term has a generic and/or descriptive significance. [27]

This dispute drove an ideological wedge between the two largest Montessori organisations in the world, leaving the Montessori community without a central governing authority. Although AMI maintained a sense of legitimacy by virtue of its legacy with the Montessori family, AMS is by far the largest Montessori membership-based organisation in the world. However, AMS accredits only about 25% of schools that call themselves Montessori in the United States; the other schools are accredited with around 15 other organisations, or with no organisation at all. The vast majority of US public Montessori schools report no accreditation with any Montessori professional association, either AMI or AMS. [28]

Meanwhile, the United States Department of Education (USDE) refused to recognise either organisation as accreditors of their own teacher education programs. The USDE directed AMS to gather all voices in the Montessori community and collaboratively work together to form an independent accrediting organisation. In 1995, the *Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education* (MACTE) was founded with the mission to improve academic degree and certification programs at all levels for professional Montessori educators and leaders in schools, and also to assure the public of their quality.

MACTE is now the only international accrediting organisation recognised by the USDE to accredit Montessori educator preparation programs. MACTE's scope of recognition covers programs within colleges and universities, free standing teacher education institutions, and distance education institutions which require at least 180 hours of synchronous in-person residency for Elementary I-II and 120 hours at all other levels. In February 2024, in recognition of the changing needs of adult learners in the post-Covid era, the synchronous hours requirement from training programs was reallocated to online hours, either synchronous or asynchronous. Secondary I-II requires a minimum of 500 hours.

MACTE accredits certification programs based on evidence that they prepare competent, caring, and qualified professional Montessori educators, as well as their capacity to monitor and improve their program's quality. MACTE does not accredit 100 percent on-line educator preparation programs. Online-only programs that do not require an 80 hour in-person residency and a practicum cannot be accredited by MACTE.



MACTE recognised organisations (MROs) include AMS, AMI-Global, AMI-USA, Christian Montessori Fellowship (CMF), International Association of Progressive Montessori (IAPM), International Montessori Council (IMC), Montessori Educational Programs International (MEPI), Montessori Institute of America (MIA), Pan American Montessori Society (PAMS) and Montessori Australia (MA). There is also a group of independent training programs that are not part of any affiliation but that choose to go through the MACTE accreditation process. There are strict guidelines for all Independent Educator Preparation programs. All are listed on the MACTE website, [www.macte.org](http://www.macte.org).

These ten organisations work together through MACTE to uphold and meet the standards and Quality Principles set by MACTE as the threshold for Montessori educator preparation globally. Their clout reflects the fact that the American Montessori movement has become a world leader in terms of the sheer number of schools and their growing influence over mainstream education in that country, as well as the numbers of affiliations and the volume of academic research published there. At international conferences held prior to the Covid pandemic, North Americans would typically outnumber Montessorians from any other region except the host countries.

In many parts of the world, when teachers are needed to fill local shortages, school leaders turn to the United States for teachers or trainers. "Americans, in other words, have become the exporters of Montessori to the world." [29]

In 2021, Montessori Australia was accepted as the *Recognised Membership Organisation* for MACTE in the Australasian region. Montessori teacher education programs in Australasia can apply for MACTE accreditation through affiliation with Montessori Australia. Since MACTE credentials are recognised globally by 27 governments around the world, this will mean better recognition for high quality Montessori teacher training programs being offered in the Australasian region and greater employability of graduates from their programs, both nationally and internationally.

Mario Montessori's fears have come to pass. The Montessori movement no longer has a central authority, although progress has been made over the last quarter century towards the acceptance of universal standards due to the work done by MACTE. However, more open debate is needed, backed by rigorous research, about what standards are most effective and how best to balance the purity of those standards with greater accessibility for the majority of the world's children.



**MACTE**



Well-funded and impartial empirical research into effective standards may well have been more forthcoming had the various leaderships of the global Montessori movement pursued alignment to tertiary teacher education, rather than operating training primarily on the academic margins. So much record-keeping data in schools has been lost over the decades that could well have informed education reform at the national level. This has been a major systems failure of our movement that continues to this day.

2022 was the 70th anniversary of Dr Montessori's death. Society has changed a great deal in those seven decades. Have changes in culture, technology and nutrition had any effect on the universal tendencies of children? Are the traditional Montessori didactic materials and presentations still able to meet the needs of modern children who have ready access to digital devices? Does the definition of an 'authentic' Montessori program in 1950 remain unchanged today? What's the most effective way of substantially increasing the supply of Montessori teachers in a world that has changed dramatically over the last 70 years while still maintaining its transformative character?

Without more research and open debate about these questions, divisions will likely linger between those who advocate for the preservation of historical standards for what constitutes 'authentic' Montessori, and those who call for the greater accessibility of the method even if implemented imperfectly.

## Leadership

The revival of the Montessori movement in Australia since the early 1970s saw an explosion in the number of community-based Montessori schools, many of which are still operating today. Dr Lesley Payne has developed a useful framework for understanding the typical phases of development these schools have gone through, as well as the organisations spawned to support them. [30]

This rebirth coincided with the introduction of the community-based funding model by the new Whitlam Labor government which enabled parents to propose early childhood services of their own choosing. To establish a community-based Montessori school, parent groups needed to form a not-for-profit association, obtain council approval, raise awareness through public meetings, obtain funds, find premises, purchase equipment and find a teacher trained in Montessori who also had qualifications recognised by state authorities. [32] This *pioneering phase* was usually fuelled by a sense of mission and fervour on the part of one or two visionary parents or a charismatic teacher who would become a de facto executive.

Most of these schools have stories like that of Georgiana Poulter, founding teacher of *Brisbane Montessori School* (BMS). Poulter, a state school teacher from Adelaide, had attended a workshop in 1981 by Margaret Homfray which led her to study Montessori with St Nicholas. During the first six months of BMS in 1982, Poulter worked for no pay and provided most of the equipment herself. When she did start receiving a small allowance she made ends meet by living with her mother, riding her bicycle to school and cleaning offices at night to earn enough money to enable her to teach during the day! Within ten years BMS had grown to become one of the largest Montessori schools in Australia. The school now serves 160 students from 2½ to 16 years of age.



**Brisbane Montessori School**

This culture of volunteerism and sacrifice was mirrored to varying degrees in the start-up stories of many other Montessori schools in Australia, and no doubt elsewhere in the world. Vast amounts of work was done by unpaid volunteers (often mothers of children enrolled at the schools) who were often unprepared for the amount of work required. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities, most had little conception of how to run a small business and no idea of their obligations to their employees. As schools grew, the executive role would generally be handed over to a principal who worked in collaboration with a school board or similar parent body. In many schools, at some point there was a crisis, usually financial, which would shake the board's confidence in the principal and in its own role in governing the school.

To address the problem, new board members with specific expertise or particular skills would be appointed – usually professional men with backgrounds in business or law. This newly energised board would take the school into a *super-managing phase* of development during which the orientation of the board would shift from a shared sense of mission that fuelled the first phase to a focus on goals, objectives and results. Board committees would meet regularly, consult outside the school community and even override decisions made by the principal and teachers. Where tensions were allowed to escalate and principals were unable to adapt, often this phase would see resignations of key staff and the loss of disillusioned parents.

To remain viable during this phase of their growth, Montessori schools needed reliable sources of funding that would allow them to keep school fees within reach of their families. Parents who had worked hard to establish Montessori preschools were now working to establish 6-12 classrooms so their children could continue their Montessori education. They also needed to find trained teachers and deal with the associated regulatory hurdles, tasks that were often too much for individuals or small community groups to manage in isolation. During the 1980s many banded together to form regional or state-based Montessori associations which worked to establish Montessori teacher training in Australia and to

provide member schools with the support they needed to access funds and improve governance. They also worked to re-establish Montessori classrooms in public schools to help make Montessori more accessible for families unable to pay fees. Some of these organisations included the *Queensland Montessori Association*, the *NSW Montessori Association*, the *Montessori Association of Victoria*, the *Montessori Society of Western Australia*, the *Montessori Teachers Association of Western Australia*, the *Montessori Education Association of South Australia*, and the *Montessori Australia Council*.

The change to a more market-oriented regulatory environment in Australia during the 1990s saw the introduction of accreditation schemes and compliance regimes, all of which placed additional burdens on small independent Montessori schools. These external challenges pushed Australian Montessori schools founded in the 1970s and 1980s into a new phase that Payne called the *corporate phase* in which these schools endeavoured to become more professional and competitive. Volunteer board members overwhelmed by the commitment needed to micromanage a school handed more responsibility for day-to-day administration to principals hired more for their professionalism rather than their Montessori experience, perhaps also supported by an administrator or business manager. In this third phase, boards would continue to manage long-term planning, policy and financial projections.

As schools stabilised, they moved into Payne's final *ratifying phase*, in which the role of the board typically diminished and the principal functioned more as a manager than a visionary. Where a school's survival was threatened again due to financial crisis or difficulty complying with stricter government regulations, the principal or board might be blamed for not anticipating the problem or for losing touch with the school community or the vision of the founders. If a school survived the new crisis, Payne found that it would typically be due to two or three individuals stepping in with extraordinary amounts of time, energy or skill to save the situation and return the school to a new *pioneering phase*.

In 2007, one hundred years after Dr Montessori opened her first *Montessori Children's House* in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, the *Montessori Australia Foundation* (MAF) was finally established to bring all Montessorians in Australia together. As the national peak body, MAF was able to integrate many of the functions of previously disparate state-based organisations in coordinating support for schools, teachers and teacher education. One of MAF's most significant achievements was to gain approval for the *Montessori National Curriculum* as an alternative to the national government's Australian Curriculum.

In late 2008, the Australian Parliament passed legislation requiring that schools receiving government funding must implement the traditional government curriculum. MAF convened a meeting in January 2009 involving heads of Montessori schools and representatives of both the AMI and MWEI training programs, where it accepted the opportunity to bring together in one document a *Montessori National Curriculum* for Australian schools for children from birth to adolescence. MAF commissioned Dr Susan Feez from the University of New England to edit the document in collaboration with Dr Jean Miller and David Kahn. On 9 December 2011, after two years of

seemingly endless revisions in consultation with the Montessori community and ACARA, the *Montessori National Curriculum* was recognised as an alternative national curriculum framework by the Australian government. A world first!

Despite this and other successes in giving Montessori in this country a national platform, MAF's leadership of the Australian movement was not without its challenges. There were concerns that the organisation did not equally represent Montessorians of all training backgrounds and was unresponsive to the needs of all sectors of the Montessori community. Heavy reliance on membership dues from schools and early childhood centres for funding meant that it was chronically underfunded and over-reliant on the dues from a small number of larger schools. Like most membership-based associations, MAF's products, services, traditions and decision-making structure reflected a world that was fading rapidly into the past.

In late 2019, MAF went into receivership and the assets were offered for sale by the liquidator. A successful tender was made by Hani and Liz Ghali, Montessorians with extensive backgrounds in the classroom, school leadership as well as the business world. Despite restrictions imposed by the Covid pandemic, they began the process of building on the past successes of MAF to reinvent the future of the Australian Montessori movement. The innovative contemporary structure of the *Montessori Australia Organisation* (MAO) reflects recent trends in the evolution of not-for-profit associations that will protect the new national peak body from the political instability that has plagued previous Montessori associations. Its grassroots, needs-driven, participatory structure provides avenues for all segments of the Montessori community to contribute their energies to focus groups of interest, including Curriculum and School Support, Montessori Adult Care Support Services, Special Education Support Services, Early Childhood Support Services, the Montessori Registered Program, Support Services for Parents, Government Advocacy, Christian Montessori Schools, Research & Development, Events and Marketing, Professional Development and Montessori in the Public and Faith-Based Sector Support Services.

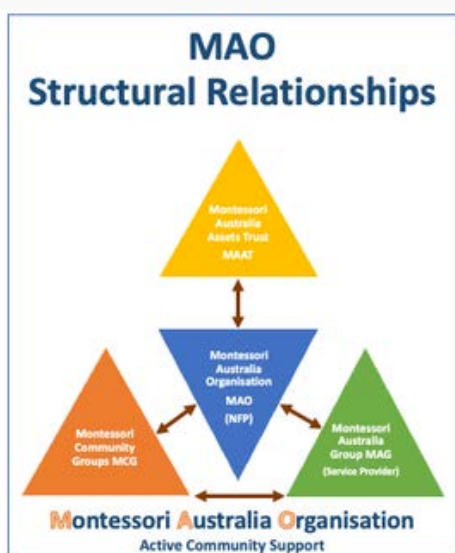


Montessori  
National Curriculum

November 2011

*Montessori Australia Organisation* (MAO) protects the work of its board from financial concerns by contracting essential functions to a dedicated for-profit service company, thus shielding the organisation's intellectual property from the possibility of future financial instability. The new organisation also seeks to diversify sources of funding that will allow it to not only reduce fees to schools and centres (and thus diversify membership) but also to increase professionalism by hiring a dedicated staff of experienced and skilled Montessorians to perform roles through the service company that previously relied on the unsustainable passion of volunteers.

The *Montessori Australia Organisation* is building on the solid foundations previously laid by the *Montessori Australia Foundation* with a modern, innovative, democratic, not-for-profit structure that will allow it to lead the Australian Montessori movement through the new realities that confront Australian society, seven decades after Dr Montessori's death. Montessori Australia's prime directive is to make available the potential of her educational method to more children in this country and in an increasingly interconnected world.



## Our Cosmic Purpose

Training, standards and leadership. These factors have compounded one another to stall the Montessori movement, both in this country and around the world. Lower demand for, and awareness of, Montessori education puts less pressure on Montessorians to find ways to make teacher education more accessible and affordable. The lack of universally accepted standards creates divisions within the movement that make it difficult for us to speak with one voice to the government and to successfully market Montessori education to the wider public. The madness in this situation is that Montessorians have created this situation themselves through their unwillingness to work together peacefully to resolve these issues and move the movement forward.

Strong, unified leadership at the international level is needed to resolve the issues around standards and to develop a model for training that addresses the needs of the modern workforce, prepares teachers well for working in public as well as private Montessori environments, and also resolves the contradiction between the fast-paced, increasingly digital-focused world in which we live and the slower-paced analog needs of childhood. Unified and well-funded leadership at the national level will be needed to bring greater awareness of the benefits of Montessori to the general public and to governments, to advocate for the acceptance of Montessori teacher education as equivalent to traditional teacher education, and to champion the inclusion of Montessori content in undergraduate teacher education programs. Our cosmic purpose as Montessorians is surely to use the magic to navigate the madness.

Effective leadership capable of moving this movement forward will need to include and give voice to all sectors of the Montessori community. To create a strong and unified movement of parents and educators who can respect one another's differences and yet all pull in the same direction, it must recognise that the movement has grown well beyond its beginnings with the Montessori family, and that breaking down dogma and walls starts with listening to one another. We will need to put into practice at the wider political level the same principles that we use in classrooms to prepare children for peaceful, respectful and productive futures.

Cosmic education was a gift to Dr Montessori from her internment in India. It has come to be the most profound and transformational aspect of her pedagogy. Rather than being a specific curriculum, Cosmic Education is an orientation that infuses all that the child is exposed to, especially in the 6-12 classroom. Cosmic Education prepares children to understand that everything in the universe is connected, and that all parts of life have a role to play in the whole scheme of things.

Montessori discerned an ever-increasing factor of love in the evolution of life, that behind what appears as selfishness and violence there is something in the events of life that supports and prepares the environment for the unknown beings who will inhabit the future. Every living creature renders service to others just by its mere existence.

Since humans first evolved, the whole of humanity has tended towards unification into a single organism. This perspective is not presented to children as an ideal to guide their actions or to pressure them to cooperate more harmoniously among themselves. Rather it is presented as a reality that already exists, although still in the process of being realised. In other words, Cosmic Education seeks to raise the consciousness of humanity so that we can more clearly see the real state of affairs in which we live and more easily see past our differences.

Cosmic education allows the movement from personal experience to universal experience. As the child begins to see the Cosmic Task in the connectedness of all things, they may begin to ask themselves what their Cosmic Task is. As they do, the work of the child thus becomes a service to others and the world, a small task that is part of the larger story of the cosmos. This is where the real magic of Montessori education emerges.

If we are to move this movement beyond its current existence on the margins, the question we Montessorians must ask ourselves is, what is our Cosmic Task as adults? Certainly our cultivation of the next generation is a large part of this task, and this should not blind us to an equally important part of our Cosmic Task, which is our relationships with one another as we bring Montessori's pedagogy to as many children as possible, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Do our actions, as members of organisations and as individuals, support the broader Cosmic Task that Dr Montessori envisioned? Magic, or madness – it's up to each of us.



**Maria and Mario Montessori , India (1928)**

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