

# Preschool Education and Maria Montessori A Review

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## ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori is one of the prominent philosophers in the field of early childhood education, noted for her innovative perspectives and contributions. In this paper, the researcher aimed to investigate Maria Montessori's educational philosophy as it pertains to preschool education, with a specific focus on the model she developed, the principles she advocated, the curriculum derived from her philosophy, and the teaching methods she recommended. Additionally, the article evaluated the perspectives of other philosophers on Montessori's preschool model and assessed the impact of her insights on the evolution of preschool education.

The researcher employed a qualitative approach, drawing upon existing studies conducted by other scholars in the field of preschool education. The findings indicated that Montessori's educational philosophy presents a distinct and innovative approach to preschool education. Her model, characterized by foundational principles, a thoughtfully designed curriculum, and effective teaching methodologies, has marked a significant advancement in the discipline. Moreover, the research illustrated that Montessori's approach fosters independent thinking among students while enhancing their sensory awareness, self-esteem, and social skills.

While her work has been influenced by other prominent figures in the field, Montessori has established a unique educational philosophy that stands independently. It is also important to note that critiques of her model often originated from a superficial understanding of her philosophical framework. Montessori's philosophy has served as an exemplary model for preschool education, advocating for a child-centered learning environment that emphasizes the collaborative involvement of parents and educators, as opposed to a narrow focus on assessment-driven standards.

**Keywords:** curriculum, Maria Montessori, preschool education, preschool models, principles, teaching methods

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of early childhood education has gained significant importance globally, forming a vital part of the educational process in every country. Numerous educational psychologists, philosophers, and educators have made substantial contributions to the advancement of preschool education, among whom Maria Montessori is particularly notable.

This paper aims to explore Maria Montessori's educational philosophy regarding preschool education, including the model she developed, the principles she advocated, the curriculum derived from her philosophy, and the teaching methods she recommended. This research paper also examines the perspectives of various educational philosophers regarding Montessori's preschool model and evaluates the degree to which her insights have influenced the advancement of preschool education.

Conducting this type of research will significantly inform policy development and decision-making processes for school administrators. Additionally, it will assist in designing appropriate curricula and enable the effective implementation of proposed educational frameworks at the preschool level. By integrating Montessori's principles, stakeholders can foster a more enriching learning environment that aligns with child-centered

educational philosophies. This approach encourages collaboration among educators and parents, ultimately enhancing children's overall development and learning experiences.

## **Research Method**

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing existing studies conducted by other scholars in the field of preschool education to explore the philosophy of Maria Montessori. The data collected were analyzed thematically to draw meaningful insights.

## **Preschool Education Process**

There remains a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate age range for children to begin preschool education, with varying opinions among educators. Some experts assert that preschool education typically encompasses the ages of three to five years (Goffin and Washington, 2007), while others suggest that the age range of two to five years is applicable (Sanja, S., Maja, C, 2015). Furthermore, certain sources indicate that education commencing from infancy and concluding at ages four, five, or six can also be classified as preschool education (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). This timeframe tends to differ from one country to another.

UNICEF (n.d.) characterizes preschool education as a supportive framework that fosters creative learning for children under the age of five while aiming at their holistic development. UNESCO (n.d.) further emphasizes that preschool education provides a foundational educational orientation that extends beyond mere preparation for primary education, promoting the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth of the child. Thus, preschool education can be defined as the structured learning experiences offered to children aged three to five, provided by institutions with a specialized program dedicated to their overall development prior to their entry into formal education.

Around the world, several models have been employed in preschool education, including the Micro Schools Model, Montessori Model, Waldorf Model, Reggio Emilia Model, High Scope Model, Forest Schools Model, Bank Street Model, and the Religious Model. In the Sri Lankan context, Montessori education is predominantly recognized as the framework initiated by Maria Montessori. It is important to recognize that while Montessori is a prominent preschool model, it is one of many approaches to early childhood education. Montessori's educational framework has significantly impacted the global proliferation of preschool education, with numerous preschools established by missionary organizations and religious institutions still in operation as a testament to her influence. Currently, the Montessori model of preschool education is implemented in 154 preschools worldwide (AMI, 2020).

## **Maria Montessori's Preschool Model**

Maria Montessori's preschool model, widely recognized as the "Montessori" approach, has been a foundational framework in early childhood education for over a century. Influenced by the philosophical teachings of prominent thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel, this model emphasizes the importance of fostering an environment where children can learn through exploration and self-direction. The Montessori approach promotes a curriculum that allows children the freedom to engage in learning experiences tailored to their interests, thereby enhancing their autonomy as learners. In this model, educators serve as facilitators, guiding students rather than directing them and creating an atmosphere that stimulates curiosity and fosters independent thought.

A distinctive aspect of the Montessori method is its integration of conflict resolution and social justice within educational objectives. This integration equips children with essential life skills and encourages them to approach problems creatively and collaboratively. Furthermore, the model emphasizes the development of communication skills and the cultivation of healthy social behaviors. Through careful observation, parents can gain insights into their child's unique learning journey, thus enriching their understanding of early childhood development. The Montessori model is particularly beneficial for children who thrive in collaborative environments and seek to fulfill their learning needs in a more flexible format.

Moreover, the Montessori approach prioritizes sensory learning, facilitating the enhancement of children's sensory abilities alongside their character development and practical life skills. The overarching goal is to prepare children for meaningful and purposeful lives through thoughtful early education. This educational philosophy respects the inherent potential of each child, recognizing them as reflections of their cultural environment and natural learners. By providing appropriate learning tools sourced from the natural world, the Montessori model enables children to deepen their understanding of life and scientific concepts, guiding them to progressively and sequentially build upon their learning experiences while supporting their holistic development (Montessori, 2002).

### **Montessori's stages of child development**

Montessori's stages of child development present an insightful framework comprising four distinct phases: Early Childhood (0-6 years), referred to as The Absorbent Mind; Childhood (6-12 years), known as Conscious Imagination; Adulthood (12-18 years), termed New Identity; and Maturity (18-24 years). In Montessori's terminology, these phases are called "planes," emphasizing that the developmental experiences within one stage significantly impact subsequent stages, a unique characteristic of her pedagogy (Selda et al., 2012). In her philosophy, Montessori perceives the child as a biological entity, intricately connecting the processes of learning to both the mind and body. She underscores the extensive adaptive capabilities inherent in humans compared to animals, enabling a broader spectrum of activities and the capacity for adaptation through engagement with their environments (Montessori, 2002).

The Early Childhood stage (0-6 years) is further subdivided into two segments: the first from 0 to 3 years and the second from 3 to 6 years. The initial segment typically occurs in a home setting, while the latter transitions to a school environment. This first phase is characterized as a time of unrestricted development, during which children absorb information from their surroundings with remarkable receptiveness. This period is defined by unconscious learning, making it essential for the environment to be nurturing and supportive. During these early years, children rely heavily on their caregivers as they develop language and motor skills, learn to respond to guidance and enhance their social interactions. Montessori emphasizes the importance of mindful communication and the influence of adult interactions, recommending against formal educational structures during this early phase.

The subsequent segment of Early Childhood (3-6 years) aligns with the introduction of preschool education. This stage is marked by a more intentional approach to learning, wherein children refine their experiential understanding through repetition and enjoyment. They begin to actively construct new knowledge, laying the groundwork for individualized and profound learning experiences. This selective ability empowers them to acquire essential skills and knowledge tailored to their developmental needs and interests.

### **Characteristics of Development of the early childhood**

According to Maria Montessori, the early childhood stage represents a significant period of physical and cognitive development. During this phase, children typically experience feelings of love and security, enabling them to adapt actively to their environment. This period is characterized by the systematic advancement of cognitive abilities, with the emergence and refinement of coordinated motor skills. Spontaneous physical movements frequently occur, and knowledge is acquired through rich sensory experiences. Learning during early childhood takes place both independently and through collaborative group interactions, fostering the development of intellectual independence. Additionally, a sense of self-efficacy is cultivated, contributing to personal growth.

This stage also encourages the development of imaginative capabilities and creative thinking. Children often exhibit a deep engagement in activities with clear expectations, while their understanding of community, culture, and the natural world enhances their comprehension and communication skills. This overview captures the fundamental aspects of early childhood development and highlights the transformative experiences that shape young learners during this critical stage.

## **Maria Montessori's Preschool Education**

Maria Montessori's research in preschool education identifies a student-centered, activity-based framework as essential for fostering self-directed learning in children (Selda et al., 2012; Macy et al., 2021). This educational model promotes the establishment of a supportive learning environment where children can actively construct knowledge (Borelbach, 2009; Loyd, 2008; Zarybnisky, 2010). Montessori emphasizes the significance of experiential learning as a critical component of preschool education, recognizing creativity as an inherent quality of human development (Montessori, 2002). In Montessori's vision, preschool education should be an extension of the child's living environment, enabling an intrinsic connection between the educational setting and the child's everyday experiences (Hertzberg, 2008). The preschool program is designed to cultivate curiosity and promote exploration, with educators responsible for creating an activity-driven educational atmosphere. Montessori outlines several defining characteristics of this model: activities are conducted concurrently, children exercise autonomy in selecting activities, engagement occurs individually or in small group settings, and the same materials are utilized repeatedly in diverse ways. Within this framework, the teacher's role transitions from authority to a supportive guide (Selda et al., 2012).

Teachers are encouraged to facilitate a learning environment tailored to each child's individual needs while recognizing their unique potential. It is essential for educators to enhance children's cognitive skills through hands-on exploration, integrating subjects such as biology, ecology, and meteorology into the preschool curriculum. The inclusion of elements like sandpits, vegetable gardens, and small zoos in preschool settings can significantly enrich the educational experience, as exposure to natural phenomena is critical for a child's overall development.

Furthermore, the social context surrounding preschool plays a pivotal role in fostering socialization, enabling children to build community relationships and enhance their self-confidence. Montessori advocates for a departure from traditional, sedentary education models, promoting the development of new skills and learning styles from an early age. She contends that standardized testing and certification should not be the focus; rather, knowledge will organically develop over time without the constraints of examinations.

The Montessori approach aims to support the holistic development of the child by placing a strong emphasis on observation as a foundational learning principle. Additionally, she highlights the advantages of collaborative learning, recommending mixed-age classrooms for children aged 3 to 6 (Selda et al., 2012). In the Montessori approach to preschool education, the child is recognized as an explorer engaging in learning through experimentation and experiencing the process of making and correcting mistakes. This model acknowledges the individuality of each child and fosters a learning environment where children of varying ages can participate in self-directed activities, promoting independence and minimizing interference from peers (Denervand et al., 2021).

The Montessori preschool framework employs non-traditional teaching methods and creates an educational space that respects and responds to each child's needs and interests. It encourages the development of personal potential, fosters intrinsic motivation, and supports both active and autonomous learning as well as cooperative engagement among peers. Additionally, it emphasizes collaborative learning within the same age group, enhances self-regulation, values independence, and promotes creativity through exploration and learning from experience.

Classroom environments within this educational model require careful organization to maximize the use of available space effectively. For instance, hallways can be adapted into interactive learning areas instead of solely acting as connectors between classrooms. It is essential for the classroom design to facilitate movement, allowing children to take breaks as needed while strengthening social connections and accessing diverse learning opportunities. To maintain engagement and prevent monotony, classroom layouts are often suggested to be arranged in an L-shape. In instances where challenges arise, opportunities for peer observation and discussion should be encouraged. The Montessori philosophy advises against traditional rectangular classroom

configurations, which may restrict interaction and collaboration. Finally, it is essential to establish that children's movement should only be curtailed when their behavior disrupts the learning environment for others.

A designated space for children to display their creations is essential, as it fosters both self-satisfaction for the creator and educational insights for viewers. The Montessori approach to preschool education promotes an ethos encouraging children to value and protect the belongings of others. Classrooms designed according to this model emphasize flexibility, allowing children to collaborate in small groups. It is important that students can see one another clearly while working without disruptions. The arrangement of furniture, including cabinets, shelves, chairs, and tables, should reflect the preferences and needs of the students. Uniformity in the classroom should be intentionally disrupted, as the positioning and utilization of equipment should cater to the children's potential (Selda et al., 2012). Furthermore, the design of a Montessori classroom does not allocate a distinct space for the teacher, thus promoting a shared community atmosphere where students need not focus solely on the teacher. Despite this, some educators suggest that positioning the teacher centrally can be beneficial (Barbara, 2012). Montessori classrooms are characterized by simplicity, comfort, and a strong emphasis on promoting freedom, which contributes to an overall sense of beauty (Borellbach, 2009).

The incorporation of bright and engaging colors, natural materials, culturally significant artifacts, and aesthetically pleasing visuals plays a crucial role in creating an inviting Montessori environment. Attractive classroom equipment serves as a stimulus for active children, whereas an uninviting setting may adversely affect a child's happiness and mental development. It is imperative that children entering preschool feel a genuine connection to their environment, which should be thoughtfully arranged to feel personalized and welcoming. In such an environment, communication between teachers and students can flourish, fostering a sense of equity and engagement (Vaughn, 2012).

## **Maria Montessori's Principles of Preschool Education**

### **Freedom**

Freedom is an essential tenet of Montessori's approach. It posits that children should be afforded the opportunity to learn autonomously within a thoughtfully structured environment. This principle encourages children to take initiative in their learning, fostering self-confidence and enhancing self-esteem. By allowing children to make independent choices regarding their activities, they develop critical decision-making skills and a sense of identity, as exemplified by their ability to dress themselves and select tasks that resonate with their interests.

### **Observation**

Observation plays a pivotal role in Montessori education. It underscores the importance of attentive observation by parents and educators to better understand the unique needs and behaviors of each child. For instance, if a child frequently engages in knocking over objects, it may indicate a need for further development of gross motor skills. Through meticulous observation, adults can glean valuable insights that inform strategies to support each child's learning journey, ensuring they receive guidance aligned with their developmental progression. This approach not only strengthens the child's growth but also enriches the overall learning experience.

### **Standing Behind the Child**

Observing a child from behind allows for the identification of challenging situations and facilitates the organization of strategies to overcome them. This perspective enables the child to make informed decisions regarding their actions. When a child expresses a desire to climb to a higher level, it is advisable for adults to refrain from unnecessary interference and overprotectiveness. Such overzealous protection can impede the child's capacity to make independent decisions.

Rather than constantly directing the child on what to do, it is beneficial to provide a supportive environment that allows for independent exploration and learning. Caregivers whether parents or educators should create opportunities for choice and empower the child to navigate challenges by selecting the most appropriate options

from a range of alternatives. Intervention from adults is warranted only when the child's actions may pose a disturbance to themselves or others, and skilled educators and parents possess the insight to discern the appropriate moments for such intervention.

### **Correcting the Child**

The primary goal of correction should be to facilitate problem-solving rather than to assign blame or impose punishment after a mistake has occurred. In line with Montessori principles, the role of the educator is to assist the child in recognizing and rectifying errors within a safe environment. For instance, instead of reprimanding a child for spilling water, a more constructive approach would be to encourage the child to clean the spill, thereby minimizing potential consequences while promoting a learning opportunity. This method not only supports the child's understanding but also fosters a secure and nurturing environment conducive to growth and development.

### **Prepared Environment**

Creating a thoughtfully prepared preschool environment is essential for facilitating meaningful learning experiences, enabling children to engage with and learn from their surroundings. In line with Montessori principles, educators need to prioritize fostering awareness of this environment. A well-organized and aesthetically appealing classroom provides children with rich learning opportunities through interaction with informed adults while promoting independent exploration. Furthermore, such an environment not only prepares children for learning but also actively invites their curiosity. Caregivers and educators need to understand that a child's growth is greatly influenced by their surroundings; environments where terms like "no" and "can" are prevalent may limit the breadth of their learning experiences.

### **Respecting the Child**

Respecting the child involves recognizing and valuing each individual's unique learning style and needs. Educators must be mindful that every child possesses a distinct set of strengths, weaknesses, and potential challenges. The role of the teacher is to facilitate educational experiences that honor the child's dignity and individuality, ensuring that instruction is tailored to support their development without exerting undue authority.

### **Self-Education**

The concept of self-education revolves around guiding children towards independent learning. This can be achieved through the teacher's thoughtful support and encouragement, alongside the establishment of a conducive learning environment that nurtures autonomy and inquisitiveness.

### **Teaching methods recommended by Montessori**

The Montessori method emphasizes the importance of facilitating creative learning through a student-centered approach, particularly in the context of preschool education (Macy et al., 2021). This approach moves away from traditional sedentary educational practices, favoring more dynamic teaching strategies. Montessori underscores the value of various methods, including observation, self-directed learning, discovery learning, collaborative work, activity-based learning, play-based learning, experiential learning, role-playing, exploratory learning, hands-on learning, and modeling (Denervand et al., 2021). Regardless of the specific teaching methods utilized, the primary goal is to create learning experiences that build children's confidence and support their potential for growth.

Montessori specifically advocates for the integration of scientific observation into preschool education. She posits that basic activities, such as greeting and dressing, should present opportunities for children to learn through observations of their environment (Montessori, 1971). In the context of self-directed learning, children are encouraged to construct their own knowledge through firsthand experiences—knowledge that is developed in a personal and individual manner (Loyd, 2008).

Discovery learning plays a fundamental role in this educational framework, allowing for the exploration and uncovering of facts, whether conducted independently, in pairs, or within small groups. This approach nurtures opportunities for varied activities, transforming both the classroom and surrounding environments into dynamic learning centers. Through discovery learning, children engage with their surroundings to comprehend the relevance of various events and their impact on daily life. New knowledge is gradually formed as abstract thinking is cultivated within a thoughtfully structured, open, and secure environment.

In group activities, it is common for children in a classroom to engage in different tasks rather than participate in the same activity simultaneously. This approach not only encourages diverse interests but also allows for individualized learning experiences. The teacher plays a vital role in facilitating this process by providing assistance and guidance across various groups. Montessori education emphasizes the importance of practical learning over rote memorization. For example, rather than requiring students to simply remember that  $2 \times 2$  equals four, she advocates for exploratory activities that enable children to understand mathematical concepts through hands-on experiences. Similarly, when teaching vocabulary in English, the use of tools like a moving alphabet can transform language acquisition into an engaging and creative experience, ensuring that students feel comfortable in their learning environment.

The connections between subjects such as science, mathematics, language, and history are highlighted in this educational framework, as the skills and knowledge developed in one area are transferable to others. Recognizing that each child has unique interests and educational needs, it becomes essential to design activities that cater to these differences effectively.

Activity-based practical learning not only prepares children for real-world situations but also introduces them to a range of educational opportunities. Through this model, children develop a profound understanding of genuine education, cultivating self-control, discipline, and the ability to follow instructions. Montessori advocates for providing varied activities tailored to the individual needs of each child. However, there are differing opinions on the merits of implementing the same activities for all students (Barbara, 2012). In experiential learning, students actively engage in hands-on experiments and discover new concepts, with role-playing serving as a critical teaching method (Selda et al., 2012).

Moreover, Montessori promotes problem-based learning, where students are presented with challenges that encourage critical thinking and the construction of new knowledge (Lizard, 2013). This approach allows learners to develop in an environment conducive to self-discovery, fostering a sense of independence alongside structured support. The discussion surrounding the balance of freedom in learning, as proposed by Montessori, invites further exploration. In his analysis, Kilpatrick raises questions regarding Montessori's perspectives on the child's freedom in the learning process, categorizing her alongside esteemed philosophers such as Rousseau, Froebel, and Dewey (Barbara, 2012).

However, Kilpatrick does not attribute the same level of significance to Montessori as he does to these other figures, despite being unaware of her substantial biological research concerning child development (Barbara, 2012). Montessori herself cautioned that without engaging in tasks, children might focus more on catering to the needs of others rather than their own development (Montessori, 1971). In line with Montessori's philosophy, methods that stimulate the five senses facilitate learning through auditory, visual, and sensory experiences. While Vygotsky expressed reservations about the efficacy of learning solely through the senses, he also recognized Montessori's approach as a valuable bridge to creative educational practices, emphasizing the significance of supportive teacher involvement within the Zone of Proximal Development.

### **Criticisms of the Montessori Model**

The Montessori model has faced both praise and criticism from educators and philosophers alike. While Kiel Patrick commended Montessori's contributions to preschool education, he remarked that her philosophy was outdated, not accounting for advancements in psychological research from figures like Wundt in Germany (Barbara, 2012). He believes her teachings lack a solid philosophical and psychological foundation (ibid.).

Critics argue that the excessive freedom granted to children within this system may hinder their achievement (Faryadi, 2007). They contend that unfettered freedom can be detrimental if children learn in a preschool environment without sufficient supervision. They claim this model does not foster a conducive learning atmosphere. However, Montessori's notion of freedom does not equate to children being abandoned in a classroom; rather, it emphasizes supervised exploration where children engage with one another and learn both independently and collaboratively, developing respect for themselves and their peers. This balance between freedom and discipline is essential in creating a safe and supportive educational environment that encourages inquiry and knowledge discovery (Humphry, 1998).

Additionally, Williams (2000) asserts that the Montessori method cultivates democratic values in children. Some critics question the emphasis on the child's active nature in the Montessori model, claiming it does not nurture creativity (Faryadi, 2017). Conversely, there are arguments that active boys adjust well to creative classroom settings, leading to positive learning outcomes (Yen, 2000). Engaging in planned activities fosters internal discipline and personal growth, where children learn responsibility by managing their environment, including furniture and interactions with peers and pets. Dewey raised concerns about the lack of assessment within the Montessori method. Still, proponents argue that it is an effective preschool education approach that stimulates cognitive development (Andrew, 2015). The belief is that a child's closed-off mind must be opened for effective learning to occur (Spodek, 1996). Critics note that while activities in Montessori settings can be brief, some children may engage in tasks for extended periods, which is seen as a shortcoming (Barbara, 2012). Yet, this extended engagement, characterized by active and sensory learning experiences, challenges the criticisms posed by Kilpatrick and others. Additional criticisms mention the perceived drawbacks of the Montessori model, such as a lack of traditional structure, absence of grading systems, insufficient opportunities for socialization, limited exposure to technology, and inadequate diversity.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that Maria Montessori's educational philosophy offers a distinct and innovative approach to preschool education. Her preschool model, including its foundational principles, curriculum, and teaching methods, diverges significantly from conventional models. Research reveals that Montessori's approach cultivates students who are independent thinkers, enhancing their sensory awareness, self-respect, and social competencies. While it is evident that other philosophers and psychologists have influenced her work, Montessori has established a unique educational philosophy that stands on its own merit. It is important to note that critiques of Montessori's model often arise from a lack of in-depth analysis of her philosophical framework. When considered thoughtfully, Montessori's philosophy can serve as an exemplary model for preschool education, advocating for a child-centered learning environment facilitated by the constructive involvement of parents and educators, rather than one that is bound to assessment-driven standards.

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