

Montessori: Pedagogical innovation, fascist affinity, and the commercialization of education

Montessori: innovación pedagógica, afinidad fascista y comercialización de la educación

Montessori: Inovação pedagógica, afinidade fascista e a comercialização da educação

Irene Moreno Navarro

Universidad de Málaga

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4108-3186>

imornav2201@gmail.com

Marta de la Torre Cano

Universidad de Málaga

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9671-3642>

redorchestra@uma.es

Ricardo Morales Ruiz

Universidad de Málaga

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8464-7026>

0610900409@uma.es

Abstract

Even today, for certain people, Maria Montessori remains one of the most influential figures in education, and her methodology continues to be applied in tens of thousands of schools worldwide, more than a century after its invention. However, this article presents a narrative review of the darker and lesser-known aspects of the method and its creator, with the aim of initiating a critical debate. It analyzes how her methodology has been commercialized to this day, as well as how the interests behind this process may have altered our perception of the Italian educator's pedagogical proposals and her own history, minimizing questionable aspects such as her relationship with Mussolini's regime. Investigating and revealing this dark side of Montessori's life and work is essential for applying her ideas critically and responsibly in the classroom, without being influenced by interests unrelated to education. According to our research, the Montessori Method appears to have become practically a commercial "brand" for the sale of materials, the creation of centers, and the offering of private training courses. Regarding the method itself, while it represented a significant advance for its time, it was not based on a rigorous scientific methodology that would justify some of its more questionable principles and elements for classroom application, such as the lack of cooperative work and the development of creativity before the age of six. As for the author, among other aspects, it has been shown that Maria Montessori collaborated with Mussolini's fascist regime between 1922 and 1933, and the regime's great interest in the methodology, coupled with Montessori's silence on the matter, is curious.

Keywords: Educational capitalism, didactics, fascism, history of education, pedagogical research, Montessori method, Montessori, educational theory.

Resumen

Aún hoy hay para quienes María Montessori es una de las mayores referentes en el mundo de la educación, y su metodología sigue aplicándose en decenas de miles de centros escolares a lo largo y ancho del planeta, incluso tras más de cien años de su invención. No obstante, en este artículo se ha realizado una revisión narrativa sobre los aspectos más oscuros y desconocidos sobre el método y su creadora, para iniciar un debate crítico al respecto. Se ha realizado un análisis de la forma en la que se ha comercializado su metodología hasta la actualidad, además de cómo los intereses detrás de este proceso han podido alterar nuestra percepción de las propuestas pedagógicas de la italiana y su propia historia, minimizando hechos cuestionables de la misma como su relación con el régimen de Mussolini. Investigar y dar a conocer este lado oscuro de la vida y obra de Montessori es necesario de cara a aplicar o no sus ideas en el aula de manera crítica y responsable, sin dejarse influir por intereses ajenos a lo educativo. Según nuestra investigación, el Método Montessori parece haberse convertido prácticamente en una “marca” comercial para la venta de materiales, la fundación de centros y cursos de formación privados. Sobre el método en sí, pese a haber supuesto un gran avance en su época, no se creó en base a una metodología científica rigurosa que justifique algunos de sus principios y elementos más cuestionables de cara a su aplicación en el aula, como la falta de trabajo cooperativo y desarrollo de la creatividad antes de los 6 años. Sobre la autora, entre otros aspectos, se ha demostrado que María Montessori llegó a colaborar con el régimen fascista de Mussolini de 1922 a 1933, resultando curioso el gran interés del mismo en la metodología, además del silencio de Montessori al respecto.

Palabras clave: Capitalismo educativo, didáctica, fascismo, historia de la educación, investigación pedagógica, método Montessori, Montessori, teoría de la educación.

Resumo

Ainda hoje, para alguns, Maria Montessori continua a ser uma das figuras mais influentes na educação, e a sua metodologia continua a ser aplicada em dezenas de milhares de escolas em todo o mundo, mais de um século após a sua invenção. No entanto, este artigo apresenta uma revisão narrativa dos aspetos mais obscuros e menos conhecidos do método e da sua criadora, com o objetivo de iniciar um debate crítico. Analisa a forma como a sua metodologia foi comercializada até aos dias de hoje, bem como a forma como os interesses por detrás deste processo podem ter alterado a nossa perceção das propostas pedagógicas da educadora italiana e da sua própria história, minimizando aspetos questionáveis, como a sua relação com o regime de Mussolini. Investigar e revelar este lado obscuro da vida e obra de Montessori é essencial para aplicar as suas ideias de forma crítica e responsável na sala de aula, sem ser influenciado por interesses alheios à educação. De acordo com a nossa investigação, o Método Montessori parece ter-se tornado praticamente uma "marca" comercial para a venda de materiais, a criação de centros e a oferta de cursos de formação particulares. Em relação ao método em si, embora representasse um avanço significativo para a época, não se baseava numa metodologia científica rigorosa que justificasse alguns dos seus princípios e elementos mais questionáveis para aplicação em sala de aula, como a ausência de trabalho cooperativo e o

desenvolvimento da criatividade antes dos seis anos de idade. Quanto à autora, entre outros aspetos, ficou demonstrado que Maria Montessori colaborou com o regime fascista de Mussolini entre 1922 e 1933, sendo curioso o grande interesse do regime pela metodologia, aliado ao silêncio de Montessori sobre o assunto.

Palavras-chave: Capitalismo educacional, didática, fascismo, história da educação, investigação pedagógica, método Montessori, Montessori, teoria educacional

Introduction

Both the Italian lady-doctor Maria Montessori, and the educational methodology she developed at the beginning of the twentieth century -which would later bear her name-, are extraordinarily well known within the field of education and, perhaps, beyond it as well. There are approximately 25000 Montessori schools worldwide, although this figure includes only those institutions that apply the Montessori methodology in its entirety (Hermida, 2021). If all schools implementing her ideas partially, in combination with other methodologies, are taken into account, the number may be considerably higher, though no precise registry exists. The relevance of this methodology within the educational landscape more than one hundred years after its creation is therefore undeniable.

At the international level, two major organizations are dedicated to promoting and training teachers in the acquisition of this methodology: The Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), founded by Montessori herself, and the American Montessori Society (AMS) (Seldin, 2026). Both institutions also “certify” centers that choose to apply the Italian educator’s methodology, although such certification does not appear to be an indispensable requirement, since the Montessori Method is not a registered trademark and can therefore be applied -or claimed to be applied- without any official accreditation or qualification.

Rivers of ink have been devoted to writing biographies of Maria Montessori and analyzing the virtues of her methodological proposals, and in most cases both she and her method have been praised as major references for contemporary education. Nevertheless, what this investigation proposes is something rather different and far less commonly addressed: although the Montessori Method and its creator undoubtedly enjoy an excellent reputation, both also possess little-known shadows largely unfamiliar to the general public (Marazzi, 2000).

Today there is at least some awareness that certain private companies profit from selling teaching materials branded as “Montessori,” a clear example of the commercialization of the method within a business sector of considerable economic volume: the global Montessori toy market reached a value of 3.5 billion dollars in 2025 (Intel Market Research, 2026). Yet there remains widespread ignorance concerning questionable aspects of the methodology itself and controversial dimensions of its creator’s life. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to present some of these issues and to open certain debates surrounding the Montessori Method that we consider relevant to twenty-first-century education.

Methodology

In preparing this study, we conducted a narrative review of the existing literature on Montessori, especially concerning her years of collaboration with Benito Mussolini. We relied both on primary sources, and on authors offering critical and historical analyses of Montessori herself, while also drawing upon information provided by various Montessori associations through their websites, which enabled us to deepen both the commercial analysis and the examination of educational institutions and training courses.

The generation of data for social research is generally a costly process in terms of time, organization, and coordination... (García, 2018). For this reason, and from both an ethical standpoint, and our backgrounds in Education and Psychology, we sought to conduct our investigation as coherently as possible, assembling data capable of moving beyond the official and commercial narrative surrounding the subject.

For this reason, we chose a qualitative methodology, since our objective was to investigate Montessori's history, her educational method, the commercialization of that method, and its relationship with fascism (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This type of methodology enables a deeper understanding of its development within its social context and helps explain how the educational method has resurfaced in twenty-first-century classrooms (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Pérez, 2002).

The Brand

The commercialization of teaching materials within education -particularly in early childhood education- is nothing new, having existed since the late nineteenth century and continuing today (Martínez and Marín, 2022). At present, one of the brands promoted by companies as pedagogical innovation consists precisely of Montessori-method materials. The method is currently experiencing renewed popularity, being described as "innovative" and promoted as a new methodology intended for early childhood education and even for schools more broadly. Yet a brief look at history reveals that the first center opened by Maria Montessori, using her method dates back to 1907, in a working-class neighborhood in Italy, a context quite distant from the environments in which the method is generally applied today (Barnes, 2020).

At first, the Montessori method was not yet a brand, but rather another way of educating the most disadvantaged groups, such as the children of San Lorenzo or abandoned children housed in psychiatric institutions... effectively a form of public service. However, over time Montessori became acquainted with Samuel McClure, an American businessman who helped publicize her work, and with Josephine Tozier, who published an article about her method in 1911 (Martínez and Marín, 2022). Thanks to these figures, the Montessori methodology began gaining recognition and spreading internationally. Nevertheless, internal disputes emerged between McClure and Montessori, since he wished to organize Montessori courses in the United States, a proposal with which Montessori disagreed: the Italian educator preferred the training to remain under her direct control (Kramer, 2019).

In response, Montessori created her first course in Rome in 1913, compelling Americans to travel there for instruction. Later, she began traveling to other countries in order to expand her methodology through lectures, courses, materials, manuals, and other means... all organized personally by her and financed by interested participants (De Stefano, 2020). Consequently, the capitalization of the Montessori methodology is not a recent phenomenon; rather, the creator herself initiated its global “branding,” transforming her educational system into a commercial identity that remains active in the marketplace to this day.

With the creation of Montessori associations -the first established in 1929- the legacy of Maria Montessori has not disappeared. Beyond the organizations already mentioned, there are now institutions such as Montessori Canela Internacional (2026), Asociación Montessori Española (2026), Fundación Argentina María Montessori (2026), Asociación Montessori Málaga (2026), and many others besides.

Through these associations, as already noted, the legacy of the method has neither been altered nor lost, but rather repopularized in the West, now resurfacing with distinctly elitist overtones. It is important to stress that the “Montessori brand” rests upon three principal elements: materials, courses, and manuals (Martínez and Marín, 2022).

Many of the materials sold through websites such as “Montessori para todos,” among many others, command high prices simply because they carry the Montessori label. For example, a single language-learning material may cost more than 130 euros (Montessori para todos, 2026a). Even practical-life materials can cost nearly two hundred euros (Montessori para todos, 2026b). Various forms of furniture are likewise marketed under the label, and a simple six-compartment cabinet may exceed eight hundred euros in price (Segurbaby, 2026).

If one wishes to implement this methodology at home, as proposed in 1912 by Dorothy Canfield Fisher in her publication *A Montessori Mother* (De Stefano, 2020), doing so today is considerably more difficult. The reason is that only wealthier families can realistically afford these supposedly “exclusive” Montessori materials. We say “exclusive” because many wooden materials merely bear the Montessori label despite not truly being Montessori materials at all, while genuine Montessori materials can often be created independently by individuals themselves.

On the other hand, the training courses currently offered are hardly affordable either, since one must not only obtain a university degree or vocational qualification in early childhood education, but also complete accredited specialization courses in the methodology, whose costs at the time of writing this article ranged from €783.75 to €6,440 (International Montessori Institute, 2026). Nor should one overlook the manuals associated with the methodology, which must likewise be purchased by anyone aspiring to become an “expert” in the method.

Therefore, as Sanchidrián (2020) argues, the method has now become “a brand that sells — and sells everything: naturally teaching materials, schools, training courses, publications, and so forth, but also

furniture for children's rooms and all manner of related products (there are blogs, TED talks, and publications of every kind)" (p. 315). As we have seen, the capitalization of this brand is not a recent phenomenon that has suddenly appeared in contemporary society; rather, it has been commercialized for many years. How did a method originally conceived -supposedly- to educate the children of the most disadvantaged classes become an educational option primarily associated with the wealthy? There is a certain aura of sophistication surrounding the Montessori method. Perhaps this derives from its austere classrooms, muted neutral colors, and minimalist furniture. Perhaps the premise of education "in freedom" creates the impression that children are somehow outside the grasp of indoctrination. But is this truly the case, or merely an illusion?

The Method

From our perspective, the methodology developed by Dr. Maria Montessori represented a major advance in education when it first emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was an especially significant period for the development of pedagogy, as numerous movements began criticizing with increasing intensity both the effectiveness and ethics of traditional education based on lectures and direct instruction. Within this context, new alternatives to the traditional school model emerged in both the United States and Europe, one of the most famous in the latter being the Montessori Method, originally designed for children between the ages of three and six (Morssink-Santing et al., 2024).

Montessori's proposals broke with the traditional conception of education by granting the child a central role in the teaching-learning process while substantially limiting the participation and control traditionally exercised by teachers (Morssink-Santing et al., 2024).

According to Maria Montessori, children naturally possess the intrinsic motivation necessary to seek learning actively, even unconsciously: a phenomenon she referred to as the "absorbent mind," which she believed characterized the period between birth and six years of age (Britton and Molina, 2000). Consequently, attempts to generate extrinsic motivation for learning, both within and outside school, merely obstruct children from expressing this natural tendency (Montessori School of Silicon Valley, 2018). For Montessori, children should remain in control of their own learning, guided by their interests, progressing according to their own rhythms, and free from external reinforcements that manipulate or distort the process (Edwards, 2006).

In addition to defining the teacher's role as that of a guide while limiting direct control, the methodology also placed meticulous attention upon the learning environment itself, a responsibility resting directly with educators (Britton and Molina, 2000). Schools following the Montessori methodology are expected to create highly organized and structured classrooms, ensuring that furniture corresponds to children's size, placing all materials within view and reach, permitting free movement throughout the classroom, and facilitating spaces for individualized work (García, 2025). All these measures were considered necessary to create an optimal learning environment without compromising the child's autonomy within the teaching-learning process.

In practice, Dr. Montessori implemented these ideas through a methodology in which students worked autonomously within the classroom using manipulative materials -most of them of her own design- in an orderly and carefully structured environment (Marshall, 2017).

Principal Criticisms

The Montessori Method is marketed as an important educational advance, yet certain aspects of it remain questionable both historically and today. One possible example is the well-known “silence exercise,” since within Montessori pedagogy children are expected to work in complete silence, with virtually no auditory stimulation (Chavarría, 2012). This means that students themselves are not permitted to interact freely with one another, because such interaction is regarded as a disruption or distraction from learning. Within the logic of the Montessori Method this position possesses a certain coherence, since the methodology prioritizes individual work and self-discipline while relegating cooperative work and peer learning at this age (Sanchidrián, 2020).

Furthermore, Maria Montessori’s conception of childhood may also appear questionable from the standpoint of contemporary education, since one of the foundational ideas sustaining her method was the belief that children do not truly play, but are in reality “working” with their immediate physical environment. In Montessori’s view, children are workers by nature, a condition she described with the grandiloquent expression “The Great Work.” According to this perspective, if children are provided with appropriate educational materials, they will prefer to work calmly with them rather than run about or engage in physical play, their behavior changing once they are allowed to reveal their true nature (De Stefano, 2020). Hence the importance Montessori assigned to designing specific materials herself.

Montessori’s conception of the child’s inherently industrious nature also played an important role in her management of disruptive behavior in the classroom. If a being naturally inclined toward work and silence refused to work quietly, then such a child was in some sense “ill” and had to be treated accordingly. Within this logic, the disruptive child was required to “rest,” which effectively translated into isolation from the classroom and near-total deprivation of stimuli. In this state of rest, the child’s own working nature would supposedly overcome the disruptive conduct and ultimately “cure” the child, who would then seek once again to work silently (De Stefano, 2020).

Another example of Montessori’s distinctive view of childhood was her belief that imagination should not be fostered before the age of six. In other words, within the Montessori classroom there should be no place for fairy tales, drawing, theater, or any form of symbolic play. As described by L’Ecuyer (2023), Montessori believed that children should first be educated sensorially before progressing toward abstraction, which she considered appropriate only from the age of seven onward.

Indeed, one of the major criticisms directed at the methodology is that it appears to leave little room for the development of symbolic play or language itself by depriving children of the stimulation necessary for both (Gentaz and Richard, 2022). In fact, such criticisms emerged almost from the very birth of the method. When Montessori attempted to introduce her method into the United States during the 1910s,

figures such as William Heard Kilpatrick and John Dewey (L'Ecuyer, 2023) sharply criticized what they perceived as the lack of creative freedom afforded to students.

As can be seen, certain elements of the Montessori Method, once analyzed independently from the figure of its creator, invite debate concerning their relevance and real benefit for children. This discussion becomes even more legitimate when one considers that the implementation of these principles within the educational methodology created by Dr. Montessori was not based upon rigorously verified empirical evidence, or the application of scientific methodology, something the creator herself explicitly acknowledged: "My experiments, however, were far from rigid and logical conclusions corresponding to the application of an exact and positive method" (Montessori, 1948, as cited in L'Ecuyer, 2023, p. 256).

Indeed, most contributions to the Montessori Method originated from specific educational experiences obtained in the Casa dei Bambini founded by the Italian educator, rather than from the disciplines of psychology and anthropology, whose research methods Montessori regarded as excessively "invasive" toward children and prone to dehumanizing them (Foschi, 2020).

Even so, it is true that several principles of her methodology -such as the importance of movement, manipulation of objects during learning, the need for student autonomy, and the negative effects of promoting extrinsic motivation- do correspond to a certain extent with later studies in educational and cognitive psychology (Edwards, 2006). However, not all aspects of the method appear to be supported by research. For example, the meta-analysis by Demangeon et al. (2023), examining thirty-three studies comparing the effectiveness of Montessori education with other methodologies, suggests that while the method may have a significant effect on academic achievement, this does not appear to be the case regarding cognitive development, creativity, or motor skills.

Likewise, the study conducted by Morssink-Santing et al. (2024) found no significant differences in academic performance between students educated through the Montessori Method and those receiving traditional education during the transition to secondary schooling. Indeed, other variables related to students' social, familial, and educational context appeared to exert a greater influence.

What Can and Cannot Be Considered "Montessori"?

Even setting aside criticisms of the methodology originally created by Maria Montessori, one cannot ignore the reality that many centers claiming to employ this methodology today may not even apply it in the same way as its original creator. The "Montessori Method" is not a registered trademark, meaning that legally any individual may describe a school or educational institution as "Montessori," regardless of the methodologies actually practiced within it. This raises the question of how genuinely Montessori contemporary Montessori education truly is.

It would be necessary to analyze the criteria used when selecting Montessori schools, for example if we were to focus exclusively on institutions certified by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) or

the American Montessori Society (AMS). Secondary schools adopting the Montessori methodology are in fact an even more controversial case, since although Montessori herself adapted her method for primary education, she died in 1952 before completing its adaptation for secondary schooling (Lillard, 2013). Indeed, attempts to introduce the “Montessori Method” into secondary education, such as those by Bernabé (2016) or Delgado et al. (2021), appear less an effort to apply a specific method than an attempt to incorporate more active and manipulative methodologies into the classroom in general. Consequently, is it really legitimate to describe such institutions as “Montessori”?

The reality is that it is difficult to establish clear boundaries regarding when one system or another is actually being used, since strategies employed in methods such as Montessori or Dalton are frequently adapted and incorporated into traditional education, and vice versa (Morssink-Santing et al., 2024). Nor is it uncommon for teachers, without even knowing the origins of certain practices, to rely simply upon the notion that “this works for me” or upon sheer serendipity, arriving at similar methods through entirely different routes. Thus, does it really make sense to categorize a school as “Montessori”?

Undoubtedly, although the Montessori Method may have been considered innovative at its inception, some of its principles and characteristics are, to put it mildly, highly questionable. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to deny that the methodology has enjoyed substantial institutional support in different countries and at various moments throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ranging from the Spanish Second Republic to the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini (De Stefano, 2020).

Relationship with Fascism

Many claims have been made about Maria Montessori. It is often asserted as fact that she was the first woman to obtain a medical degree in Italy (Infinite Women, 2026; School of Feminism, 2022). This assertion is questionable, since such a distinction would appear instead to belong to Maria Dalle Donne, who graduated in 1804 (Palumbo and Calzolari, 2005), or to Maria Pettracini, who earned a medical degree in Florence in 1780 (Carrera and D’Ottavio, 2016), or to Zaffira Peretti, daughter of the latter, who studied surgery in Bologna and obtained her qualification in 1800 (Lizabe et al., 2015), or even to Trotula of Salerno, an eleventh-century woman who addressed topics that remain strikingly contemporary today: women’s health and self-care (Palacios et al., 2026).

Nor does it seem likely that Pope Leo XIII intervened on her behalf to secure her admission to university, a legend popularized by Montessori herself in several interviews (Kramer, 2019). Yet these anecdotes pale in comparison with the period of her life during which she maintained close ties with the Italian fascist regime. What happened during those years, from 1922 to 1934? How did this collaboration originate?

According to De Stefano (2020), the first contact with Benito Mussolini occurred through her son Mario in 1922:

“[Mussolini] was attracted by the idea of classrooms filled with industrious and disciplined children, as well as by the early acquisition of reading and writing, which was fundamental in a country still

struggling against illiteracy. Montessori, for her part, hoped that the moment had finally arrived for her to return home.” (De Stefano, 2020, p. 174).

Supported by Giovanni Gentile, an intellectual aligned with the regime and Minister of Public Education between 1922 and 1924 (Kramer, 2019), Montessori -surprisingly enough- contributed to the closure of certain Montessori schools after being appointed by the fascist government as Inspector General of Schools, since her “educational” standards were extremely strict: she shut schools down whenever she believed they did not follow the method properly (Kramer, 2019). During these same years, Montessori training courses began being offered exclusively to Italian citizens, and by 1929-1930 the Montessori Method enjoyed greater success and popularity in Italy than ever before, under Mussolini’s government.

Eventually, it appears that Adolf Hitler’s regime indirectly contributed to Mussolini’s opposition to the Montessori Method, since by 1936 Montessori schools had been banned both in Germany and Italy (Quarfood, 2022): “Ultimately, the fascists closed her schools, condemned her principles, and prohibited all activities related to the method” (De Stefano, 2020). When asked in a 1947 interview why she had been forced to leave Italy in 1934, Montessori explained that it was due to “ideological differences” (Kramer, 2019): “The fascists closed my schools because they were based on an international idea and I refused to teach war” (Quarfood, 2022). According to these accounts, Montessori opposed the regime’s attempt to introduce militaristic elements into her method, and this constituted the line she refused to cross (Kramer, 2019). Yet one might ask whether this opposition to fascism stemmed more from wounded pride than from deeper underlying values.

Earlier, in 1932, Montessori had already clashed with the regime when it attempted to interfere in the selection of teaching staff (Marazzi, 2000). Considering how resistant Montessori was to anyone altering her method, it is not unreasonable -even if speculative- to imagine that what troubled her more was interference with her educational system itself rather than fascism as such. Despite these declarations, Montessori never publicly denounced or openly opposed fascism (in 1926 she was named an “honorary member of the Party” [Kramer, 2019]), and she did not wish to be perceived as a “fierce anti-fascist” (Quarfood, 2022), which naturally raises questions about what she found objectionable in such a description.

Perhaps we shall never know the real motives behind the collaboration between Maria Montessori and Mussolini’s regime, since Montessori herself remained largely silent regarding this chapter of her life. Montessori defined herself as apolitical (Kramer, 2019). If we take this ambiguous declaration at face value, then even in the most charitable and naïve interpretation, one could argue that her collaboration with the fascists stemmed from simple opportunism: she saw an opportunity to expand her method in her homeland and chose not to let it pass. Before and during those years, her method had also been introduced with considerable success in Spain, Holland, England, Austria, and elsewhere. Whatever the motivations, the collaboration clearly flourished, which implies that the Montessori Method possessed characteristics useful to Mussolini’s government. Which aspects of Montessori’s pedagogy might have appealed to fascists? Below we list those we believe may have aligned with fascist ideology:

– Freedom and Discipline: Both Montessori’s own writings (Montessori, 2002) and other sources (De Stefano, 2020; Kramer, 2019; Quarfood, 2022) repeatedly stress that freedom constituted the central priority and ultimate goal of her method. Yet what exactly did Montessori mean by “freedom”? How did the Italian educator define this term? Numerous texts concerning her method emphasize her preference for discipline. One chapter of her book (Montessori, 2002) even defines freedom within a chapter ironically titled “Discipline,” since she regarded freedom as the foundation of discipline: “We call an individual disciplined when he is master of himself and can therefore regulate his own conduct whenever it is necessary to follow some rule of life” (Montessori, 2002, p. 100). However, in order to attain such discipline, Montessori argued that freedom must come first, understanding freedom essentially as activity itself, since her “...goal is to discipline for activity, for work, for goodness; not for immobility, not for passivity, not for obedience” (Montessori, 2002, p. 106). Therefore, without freedom -the basis of discipline- independence becomes impossible, since “no one can be free unless he is independent” (Montessori, 2002, p. 109). Although Montessori appears to refer here to a form of self-discipline, it would not have been difficult for a fascist regime to reinterpret these ideas in favor of externally imposed discipline.

– Domesticity and Femininity: Although Montessori advocated a society in which men also performed domestic tasks (Montessori, 2002), one must remember the era and social environment in which she lived. Consequently, it is unsurprising that, even perhaps unconsciously, she reproduced gender biases within her methodology, such as associating domesticity with femininity (Bone, 2017).

– Racism and Supremacism: In a 2023 article, Fallace argues that Montessori’s work *Pedagogical Anthropology* is saturated with racist declarations and justifications for racial segregation. Racist remarks can likewise be found in her letters written during travels abroad (Hawthorne, 2019). Montessori’s sense of “Italianness” is unmistakable throughout her work (Marazzi, 2000), and according to her own words:

In summary, my method can collaborate with fascism because it establishes the possibility of constructing great spiritual energies; it creates a genuine mental hygiene which, when applied to our race, can enhance its enormous capacities, capacities which, I am convinced, surpass those of all other races. (quoted in De Stefano, 2020, p. 265).

Umberto Biscottini, propaganda secretary for the fascist regime, compared Montessori’s ideas to Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* (Quarfood, 2022). Montessori aspired, through education, to create the “perfect child” from a markedly Eurocentric -and also ableist- perspective (Seichter, 2024). In keeping with this notion of the “perfect child,” the Italian educator tended to classify children as either “normal” or “abnormal” within her own writings, at times displaying a certain contempt toward the latter category as something requiring correction, which may explain why she abandoned schools for “oligophrenic” children in order to concentrate on “healthy” ones (De Stefano, 2020). Montessori equated “healthy development” with “normal development,” especially in relation to physical health (Leenders, 2017). This also connects to her concept of activity discussed above, and to beauty, which she likewise associated with race (Fallace, 2023).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the relationship that existed for more than a decade between Maria Montessori, her methodology, and the Italian fascism of Benito Mussolini is beyond dispute, even if the precise extent and circumstances of that relationship may remain open to debate. Consequently, attempting to deny it or look the other way merely serves to avoid a discussion that, for some reason, sectors profiting from the method seem reluctant to encourage. Part of this undoubtedly stems from the fact that the Montessori Method is, to a considerable degree, a commercial brand generating substantial revenue, and the figure of its creator forms an essential component of its public image. It is therefore understandable that most biographies of the Italian educator tend to omit these aspects of the historical figure that was Maria Montessori, especially those produced by associations and companies bearing her name. After all, who would willingly pay tuition fees for a nursery school named after a collaborator with fascism? At present, at least, this is hardly an effective marketing strategy.

Likewise, just as certain dimensions of Montessori's life have been omitted, there also appears to be an effort to overlook some of the principles and characteristics of her century-old method. As we have already seen, although the Montessori Method represented what was supposedly a major pedagogical advance in its time, it nevertheless contains flaws and questionable aspects that are seldom discussed. The purpose of this analysis, however, is not so much to demonstrate the pedagogical invalidity of the method as to invite readers -especially teachers, parents of school-aged children, and critical researchers- to question which methodologies are being implemented in our classrooms and why.

The methodology created by Maria Montessori currently enjoys extensive support through private organizations and academic institutions of every kind, while its creator is regarded worldwide as a major authority in "education." Such is her prominence that questioning her almost appears heretical. Yet it is precisely the duty of every conscientious educational professional to commit this kind of heresy in the interest of guaranteeing a high-quality education for students. Teachers must develop and apply the same critical and reflective thinking that, for example, Spanish educational legislation itself explicitly states should be transmitted to students (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022).

In our humble judgment, any teacher who applies an "innovative" methodology without investigating or questioning the reasons behind it is scarcely a better professional than one who simply continues reproducing traditional methodologies within the school system. It is for this reason that we wished to gather information and shed light upon the darker aspects of one of the presumed great icons of contemporary education, together with some of her pedagogical contributions, in order to open them to debate. Ultimately, debate and critical thought are indispensable to quality education, and if these are avoided, meaningful progress toward such an education becomes impossible.

Indeed, this text has not even addressed other striking dimensions of Montessori's life, such as her fascination with occultism, theosophy, and mysticism, or the manner in which her exile in India influenced her to the point of developing what she termed "cosmic pedagogy" (De Stefano, 2020). These aspects of the Italian educator's life would undoubtedly merit further exploration, since such intellectual

currents influenced, in one way or another, the decisions she made in constructing her method. In other words, if she did not rigorously employ scientific methodology (Foschi, 2020), then it becomes entirely reasonable to investigate her beliefs and worldview. There also remain numerous unresolved questions concerning the ways in which her methodology is currently applied, especially in those schools and classrooms where it is implemented only partially. The boundary separating what may legitimately be categorized as the Montessori Method from what may not appears diffuse and highly debatable, constituting yet another discussion worthy of consideration within the educational community. Without question, much remains to be critically examined concerning the life and work of our protagonist, and the circumstances under which the myth, the business, and the misinformation surrounding her were created, elements that ought never to form part of any education aspiring toward a better world.

References

- Asociación Montessori Española. (2026). *Asociación Montessori Española*.
<https://asociacionmontessori.net/>
- Asociación Montessori Málaga. (2026). Nuestra asociación. *Asociación Montessori Málaga*.
<https://asociacionmontessori-malaga.org/>
- Barnes, H. G. (February 12, 2020). No es Montessori todo lo que reluce: España enloquece con el método educativo de moda. *El Confidencial*. https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-02-12/metodo-montessori-educacion-espana_2450892/
- Bernabé, E. E. (2016). María Montessori y su método educativo ¿Es posible su aplicación en el aula de Educación Secundaria y Superior? En M. G. Rios, M. B. Hernández y E. E. Bernabé (coords.), *Mujeres en las letras: pioneras del arte, el ensayismo y la educación* (pp. 1135-1148). Región de Murcia. https://www.carm.es/edu/pub/20_2016/libropdf/MUJERES_DE_LETRAS_html.pdf
- Bone, J. (2017). María Montessori as domestic goddess: iconic early childhood educator and material girl. *Gender and Education*, 40(1), 673-678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1396293>
- Britton, L., y Molina, P. P. (2000). *Jugar y aprender: el método Montessori: guía de actividades educativas desde los 2 a los 6 años*. Paidós.
- Carrera, L. I. y D'Ottavio, A. E. (2016). La lucha social multiseccular femenina por acceder a la práctica médica. *Contribuciones a las Ciencias Sociales*, Marzo de 2016, s. p.
<https://www.eumed.net/rev/cccss/2016/01/lucha.html>
- Chavarría, M. C. (2012). ¿Está Montessori obsoleta hoy?: a la búsqueda del Montessori posible. *Revista Rupturas*, 2(1), 58-117. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4888197>
- Creswell, J.W. y Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Desing. Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE.

- De Stefano, C. (2020). *El niño es el maestro. Vida de María Montessori*. Lumen.
- Delgado, J. R., Vivanco, C. I., Ayala, M. A. y Cuenca, L. (2021). Una experiencia didáctica a través del ambiente montessori [sic] en la enseñanza de la matemática. *Boletín Redipe*, 10(11), 198-215, <https://doi.org/10.36260/rbr.v10i11.1527>
- Demangeon, A., Claudel-Valentin, S., Aubry, A., & Tazouti, Y. (2023). A meta-analysis of the effects of Montessori education on five fields of development and learning in preschool and school-age children. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 73, 102182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CEDPSYCH.2023.102182>
- Denzin, N. y Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks.
- Edwards, C. P. (2006). Montessori education and its scientific basis. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 27, 183-187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2005.12.012>
- Fallace, T. (2023). The racism of Maria Montessori. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55(5), 619-631. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2005.12.012>
- Foschi, R. (2020). *María Montessori*. Ediciones Octaedro.
- Fundación Argentina María Montessori. (2026). Historia y misión. *Fundación Argentina María Montessori*. <https://www.fundacionmontessori.org/somos-famm/historia-y-valores/>
- García, G. (May 11, 2025). "Después de 4 años en una escuela Montessori, me vi obligada a poner al día a mi hija con clases particulares": la crítica de una madre al famoso método de aprendizaje. *Infobae*. <https://www.infobae.com/espana/2025/05/11/despues-de-4-anos-en-una-escuela-montessori-me-vi-obligada-a-poner-al-dia-a-mi-hija-con-clases-particulares-la-critica-de-una-madre-al-famoso-metodo-de-aprendizaje/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDespu%C3%A9s%20de%204%20a%C3%B1os%20en%20una%20escuela,una%20madre%20al%20famoso%20m%C3%A9todo%20de%20aprendizaje>
- García, L. (2018). La utilización de fuentes de datos secundarios. En F. Requena Santos y L. Ayuso Sánchez (Eds.), *Estrategias de investigación en las ciencias sociales* (pp. 139-172). Tirant Lo Blanch.
- Gentaz, E. & Richard, S. (2022). The Behavioral Effects of Montessori Pedagogy on Children's Psychological Development and School Learning. *Children*, 9(2), 133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9020133>
- Hawthorne, B. (2019). Dr. Montessori's Racism. *Montessori Life*, 31,61. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2460562919?sourcetype=Magazines>

- Hermida, A. L. (September 6, 2021). 10 preguntas y respuestas sobre el método Montessori. *International Montessori Institute*. <https://montessorispace.com/blog/10-preguntas-y-respuestas-sobre-el-metodo-montessori/>
- Infinite Women. (2026). Maria Tecla Artemisia Montessori. *Infinite Women*. <https://www.infinite-women.com/women/maria-tecla-artemisia-montessori/>
- Intel Market Research. (2026). *Montessori Toys Market Growth Analysis, Dynamics, Key Players and Innovations, Outlook and Forecast 2026-2034*. Intel Market Research. <https://www.intelmarketresearch.com/montessori-toys-market-37156>
- International Montessori Institute. (2026). Cursos destacados. *International Montessori Institute*. <https://montessorispace.com/>
- Kramer, R. (2019). *María Montessori. Biografía de una innovadora de la pedagogía*. SM.
- L'Ecuyer, C. (2023). Montessori: origen y razones de las críticas a una de las pedagogas más controvertidas de la historia. *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 81(285), 251-270. <https://revistas.unir.net/index.php/rep/article/view/64/451>
- Leenders, H. (2017). A special meaning of "health". Towards a theory-immanent explanation for the use of the Montessori Pedagogy in fascist Italy (1926-1934). *Annali di Storia dell'Educazione*, 25, 197-207. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327246407_A_special_meaning_of_health_Towards_a_theory-immanent_explanation_for_the_use_of_the_Montessori_Pedagogy_in_fascist_Italy_1926-1934
- Lillard, A. S. (2013). Playful learning and Montessori education. *Namta Journal*, 38(2), 137-174. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1077161>
- Lizabe, G., Binia, I. y Vasquez, M. G. (2015). Historia de la medicina a través de sus mujeres. Sanadoras y médicas desde la antigüedad hasta el Siglo XX. Editorial Dunken. https://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar/objetos_digitales/14165/lizabe-biniayvasquez-historiadelasmujeresenlamedicina.pdf
- Marazzi, G. (2000). Montessori e Mussolini: la collaborazione e la rottura. *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, 1, 177-195. https://mega.nz/file/mB5miDKS#jXZ_kr-5rT8mINyjNgirqT7nJm6G1KcbPQVvMQ3AOUU
- Marshall, C. (2017). Montessori education: a review of the evidence base. *npj Science Learn*, 2, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-017-0012-7>

- Martínez, M. J. y Marín, J. P. (2022). Origen, difusión y comercialización del material Montessori en el primer tercio del siglo XX. *Revista d'Història de l'Educació*, 40(1), 131-159. <https://doi.org/10.2436/20.3009.01.287>
- Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional. (2022). Real Decreto 157/2022, de 1 de marzo, por el que se establecen la ordenación y las enseñanzas mínimas de la Educación Primaria. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 52, 1-109. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2022-3296>
- Montessori, M. (2002). *Método de la Pedagogía Científica*. Dover. [Trabajo original publicado en 1912]. <https://dspace.itsjapon.edu.ec/jspui/bitstream/123456789/3976/1/EI%20Metodo%20Montessori.pdf>
- Montessori Canela Internacional. (2026). Formación humana y accesible. Nuestros cursos de Pedagogía Montessori para profesores. *Montessori Canela Internacional*. <https://www.montessoricanela.es/>
- Montessori para todos. (2026a). Caja de sonidos Montessori Minúscula + Mayúscula. *Montessori para todos*. <https://montessoriparatodos.es/caja-de-sonidos-montessori-minuscula-mayuscula.html>
- Montessori para todos. (2026b). Mueble con 12 bastidores Montessori. *Montessori para todos*. <https://montessoriparatodos.es/mueble-con-12-bastidores-montessori.html>
- Montessori School of Silicon Valley. (June 22, 2018). Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards. *Montessori School of Silicon Valley*. <https://msosv.com/2018/06/22/intrinsic-vs-extrinsic-rewards/>
- Morssink-Santing, V. E., van der Zee, S., Klaver, L. T., de Brouwer, J., & Sins, P. H. M. (2024). The long-term effect of alternative education on self-regulated learning: A comparison between Montessori, Dalton, and traditional education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2024.101380>
- Palacios, A., Barreras, A. y Pascual, V. (March 29, 2026). Mil años antes del 'skincare': la herencia borrada de Trótula de Salerno. *The Conversation*. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAO.dyraxx7gh>
- Palumbo, M. y Calzolari, E. (2005). Maria Dalle Donne M.D. two century after her appointment as director of the School of Midwifery in Bologna. *Med Secoli*, 17(1), 205-219. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16285091/>
- Pérez, C. (2002). Sobre la metodología cualitativa. *Revista Española de Salud Pública*, 76(5), 373-380. http://scielo.isciii.es/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1135-57272002000500001&lng=es&tlng=es
- Quarfood, C. (2022). *The Montessori Movement in Interwar Europe: New Perspectives*. Palgrave

Macmillan.

Sanchidrián, M. C. (2021). El método Montessori en la educación infantil española: luces y sombras. *Historia de la educación*, 39(1), 313-335. <https://doi.org/10.14201/hedu202039313335>

School of Feminism. (2022). María Montessori, la primera mujer médica y educadora italiana. *School of Feminism*. <https://www.schooloffeminism.org/post/mar%C3%ADa-montessori-la-primera-mujer-m%C3%A9dica-y-educadora-italiana>

Segurbaby. (2026). Mobiliario Montessori. *Segurbaby*. <https://segurbaby.com/39198-mobiliario-montessori>

Seichter, S. (2024). *Der lange Schatten Maria Montessoris. Der Traum vom perfekten Kind*. Mit E-Book inside Beltz Verlagsgruppe.

Seldin, T. (2026). Which should I choose, AMS or AMI? *The Montessori Foundation*. <https://www.montessori.org/which-should-i-choose-ams-or-ami/>