

BOOK REVIEWS

Angela K. Murray, Eva-Maria Tebano Ahlquist, Maria K. McKenna, and Mira Debs, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 585 pp.

Barbara Beatty 

Wellesley College, MA

Email: bbeatty@wellesley.edu

With over one hundred contributors and profiles of more than twenty-three countries, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education* is truly global, as was the Montessori movement. In their preface, co-editors Angela K. Murray, Eva-Maria Tebano Ahlquist, Maria K. McKenna, and Mira Debs write that a “recent global census estimates nearly 15,800 Montessori schools around the world,” and that the Association Montessori Internationale (one of two main Montessori organizations) “documents Montessori schools in 148 countries” (p. xvii). Later in the volume, Debs calls Montessori education “the largest alternative pedagogy in the world” (p. 283). This huge, heavy volume does justice to those claims! I can’t do justice to the volume’s scope in this review.

Overwhelmingly positive, *The Handbook* reads as a paean to Montessorianism. Organized into six parts, it covers “Foundations and Evolution of Montessori Education,” “Key Writings of Maria Montessori,” “Montessori Pedagogy across the Lifespan,” “The Science of Montessori Education,” “Global Montessori Education,” and “Contemporary Considerations regarding Montessori Education.”

With a list price of \$175 the volume may be targeted at libraries, but readers interested in learning about the breadth of the Montessori movement will find their perspectives widened, greatly. Christine Quarfood’s account of Montessori’s life is a useful addition to the work of Rita Kramer, Gerald and Patricia Gutek, Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline Cossentino, and others. Per Gynther’s chapter on Montessori’s *The Child, Society and the World: Unpublished Speeches and Writings* provides a helpful reminder about the historiographical complexity of interpreting works in translations, which may have altered content in layered, idiosyncratic ways.¹

¹ Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1988); Gerald L. and Patricia A. Gutek, *Bringing Montessori to America: S. S. McClure, Maria Montessori, and the Campaign to Publicize Montessori Education* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016); Gerald L. Gutek and Patricia A. Gutek, *America’s Early Montessorians: Anne George, Margaret Naumburg, Helen Parkhurst, and Adelia Pyle* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline Cossentino,

Somewhat surprisingly, to this reader, in her introduction to the section on “The Science of Montessori Education” Angela K. Murray does not mention one of the main critiques of Montessori: that her work was prescientific and unscientific. In 1914 in his influential *The Montessori System Examined*, William Heard Kilpatrick of Teachers College wrote that her psychology would have been better had she known about the research emanating from William Wundt’s German laboratory where what would become developmental psychology was aborning. Nor was Montessori’s “actual science,” according to Kilpatrick, always “above reproach.” I was also surprised that this section, which includes a chapter by Mara Fabri on “Montessori Education from a Modern Neuroscience Perspective” and others relating Montessori positively to different forms of modern psychology seen as sciences, did not reference Angeline Stoll Lillard’s *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, probably the best-known claim for Montessori’s method as a science.²

Although the section on the science of Montessori includes a chapter by Murray and Carolyn Daoust on “Fidelity Issues in Montessori,” the contributors might have referred to some of the extensive literature on teacher fidelity, autonomy, resistance, school reform, and scripted instruction generally. Remaining on the margins, as Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline Cossentino describe, helped Montessori survive as a distinct pedagogy. When a scripted model moves into the mainstream in public education, the tinkering David Tyack and Larry Cuban describe often leads to a loss of identity and regression to the “grammar of schooling.” There must be other alternative pedagogies on the margins we don’t know about, some that disappeared with barely a trace. The volume made me wonder about what’s been hiding out there and what it takes to create a new pedagogy that stays the course, outside or inside of the margins.³

Another interesting issue, pedagogical branding, comes up in the endnotes to Murray’s and Daoust’s chapter. The “name ‘Montessori’ was formally registered as an international trademark in 1939, renewed in 1959, and then in 2003 it was ruled that the mark/brand had degenerated” (p. 206). A single mother with a son to support, Montessori had “at least eighteen international patents to her name.” Trademarking and branding raise questions about the history of commodification and commercialization. While educators may think of what we do as nonprofit work, like it or not, education

“Montessori and the Mainstream: A Century of Reform on the Margins,” *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 12 (Dec. 2008), 2571–600; and see, among others, Noah Sobe, “Challenging the Gaze: The Subject of Attention and a 1915 Montessori Demonstration Classroom,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3 (July 2014), 281–97; and Jonna Perrillo, *Educating the Enemy: Teaching Nazis and Mexicans in the Cold War Borderlands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

²William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Montessori System Examined* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 5, 4; Angeline Stoll Lillard, *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³On fidelity, resistance, scripted instruction, and school reform, see, among many others, Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1971); Richard Elmore, *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004); David Cohen, “A Revolution in One Classroom: The Case of Mrs. Oublier,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1990), 311–29; David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Barbara Beatty, “The Dilemma of Scripted Instruction: Comparing Teacher Autonomy, Fidelity, and Resistance in the Froebelian Kindergarten, Montessori, Direct Instruction, and Success for All,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 3 (March 2011), 395–430.

is also a business. The *Handbook* made me wonder about how and why some methods got branded and others did not, and about what trademarked approaches have garnered the most profits. It also raised larger questions for me about who got the money and where it went, and about informal branding that spreads desire to learn more about a particular approach, from which publishers, teacher education programs, and education professors profit, in different ways. Speaking of brands, Montessori is now associated with one of the most profitable, well-known brands in the world. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is investing millions in Montessori schools.⁴

The section on “Global Montessori Education” is impressive and fascinating. In her introduction, Mira Debs notes positive and negative aspects of Montessori’s “charismatic” leadership style and the question of Montessori fidelity internationally (p. 286). In twenty-three short profiles of different countries and regions, we learn about Montessori across the world, from its origins in Europe, to Africa, Southeast and East Asia, Australia, and North and South America. Montessori was planning to go to Ghana when she died in 1952. By 2020, there were Montessori schools in thirty-three African countries (p. 333). In their chapter “Montessori Education in the United States,” Katie Brown and Richard Ungerer provide a concise overview of the movement’s three phases: an introduction by Montessori and mostly Montessori-trained followers in 1911; a return led by Nancy McCormick Rambusch, who founded the American Montessori Society in 1960; and the extensive growth of private and public Montessori schools from the 1990s on. They describe the Montessori Census, run by the nonprofit National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, which in 2021 listed more than 2200 private Montessori schools, likely an undercount, and over 560 public schools offering Montessori programs to some 150,000 to 200,000 children. Most of these public Montessori schools are charters (p. 401). Brown and Ungerer note that although the movement in the United States has been dominated by white, upper- and upper-middle-class “voices,” a Black Montessori Education Fund was established in 2020 (p. 403).

In their chapter on “Montessori Education and Critical Race Theory in the United States,” Lucy Canzonieri-Golden and Juliet King cite from Debs’s book, *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*, that “the majority of students attending public Montessori are students of color” (p. 504). When I checked Debs’s book myself, I learned that public Montessori schools enrolled “a higher percentage of Black students (27 percent) compared to the national average (15 percent).”⁵ At the same time, however, Debs writes that Montessori charter schools enroll a “higher percentage of White students” than students of color, leaving me a bit confused about the statistics on enrollments by race.⁶

Canzonieri-Golden and King discuss the debate over whether Montessori’s “hands-on” learning is “more congruent” for students of color than traditional academic learning, suggesting that the learning styles and needs of children of color are monolithic.

⁴Frederick Hess, “Bezo’s Bold Bet on Montessori,” *Forbes*, March 14, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/frederickhess/2023/03/14/bezoss-bold-bet-on-montessori-preschool/?sh=1d41f3f61e3a>

⁵Mira Debs, *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019), 4, 11.

⁶Debs, *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools*, 47–50, 58–61, 75, 84.

They also assert that “some Montessori schools have been found to be guilty of racial bias” and “institutional racism,” but cite a 2022 study that the “frequency of such practices is less than in traditional public schools” (p. 505). I worry, however, about sampling, reporting, methodology, and other confounding variables, and how “racial bias” and “institutional racism” are defined in studies such as these.

As the contributors document, Montessori education was supremely transnational and transcultural. Originally a Western European pedagogy, it arguably was also a form of colonization. Montessori spread to non-Western countries that, of course, already had many existing forms of education, with which it competed. I would have liked to hear more about how this expansion affected and interacted with different national, state, regional, and tribal education methods and systems, at different periods in time. I also would have liked more on how Montessori was adapted and changed. As Roberta Wollons shows, American Froebelian missionaries adapted Frobel to Japanese culture, sometimes under pressure. Who adopted and adapted Montessori, how, and why? A wealth of new research to which the contributors might have alluded addresses educational colonializing, cultural imposition, and transcultural exchanges.⁷

As Rukmini Ramachandran and Debs show in their chapter on “Montessori Education in India,” where Montessorianism thrived, she was invited by Theosophists, moved there with her son Mario in 1939, and was embraced by Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and other nationalists. As was often common internationally, Indian Montessori schools primarily served children from the upper classes and castes. A system of rural Montessori preschools was established in Gujarat, however, which served scheduled castes [Dalits] and Adivasi tribal groups. Montessorianism is a rich source for examining complicated intercultural issues of race, class, region, religion, and other factors.⁸

With so many confounding variables, which beleaguer all education research—indeed, social science research generally, Montessorianism taken as a whole does not lend itself easily to generalizations. This can make the volume seem a bit overwhelming. At the same time, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education* represents a monumental effort. It’s a trove of information that raises many interesting questions. I hope it inspires much future research.

doi:10.1017/heq.2024.39

⁷Roberta Wollons, “The Black Forest in a Bamboo Garden: Missionary Kindergartens in Japan, 1868-1912,” *History of Education Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 1-35.

⁸Rukmini Ramachandran and Mira Debs, “Chapter 40: Montessori Education in India,” in Murray et al., *Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education*, 367.