

# Drawing Inspiration from Montessori During the Pandemic

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**“Through the thirty years and more that I have been involved in Montessori, I have studied Maria Montessori’s philosophy and methodology in depth, reading her books over and over again, and each time coming up with something new. She never fails to surprise me, nudging me to think harder and deeper, and always making it clear that our work be centered on the child.”** (*Bhatia, 2019, p. xi*)

It was only natural then that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, and I had to make the very hard decision to close our school on March 13, 2020, I turned to Maria Montessori once again. I was looking for insight, for wisdom, to regain my balance so I could deal with this situation effectively. Some parents were unhappy, voicing their opinions clearly and loudly, disagreeing with my decision, still thinking this was just a flu and everyone was overreacting. My teachers and staff were looking to me for guidance and, honestly speaking, I had no idea what to do next. None of us had been in this situation before...it was totally unprecedented.

We had been given a “stay-at-home order” with no idea how long this might last. Dr. Maria Montessori persevered and her work continued through some of the most politically volatile times in history.

After being forced out of Italy because of her liberal and anti-fascist views, she fled to Spain where she lived until she was escorted out one night and taken to England. There, with Europe on the brink of war, she accepted an invitation by the Theosophical Society to visit India for four months. With nowhere else to go, she accepted this invitation and, with her son Mario, landed in India in November of 1939. She was given a hero’s welcome with a guard of honor and children waving flags along both sides of the street; but just imagine how uncomfortable it must have been for her – especially as things only got progressively harder. Mario was considered



**A child returns to school after an 8-week absence and begins to work right away**

to be a threat and was taken away from her and put in jail.

Maria did not know if she would ever return to Europe, let alone to her home country. It was possible she may never even see her grandchildren again.. It is

not surprising she was reportedly often seen pacing on the balcony of the Olcott Bungalow where she lived. The Olcott Bungalow is grand, with gigantic Roman pillars that once had a spectacular view of the Bay of Bengal. She was, in theory,

confined to this place with her movements restricted to a zone of five miles. She worried that all her work in Europe was lost, with her schools shut down by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

**“I imagined Maria Montessori in a white, very loose-fitting full-length gown...walking up and down most of the time in the open balcony of the bungalow. What had she been thinking as she lived in this foreign country that showered her with respect and strived to meet all of her needs? Did she miss the way of life she was used to? Or was she so absorbed in studying the universal “bambino” that it did not matter to her where she was?”**

*(Bhatia, 2019, p. 99)*

During these extremely tough times, Dr. Montessori stayed focused on the child and her work continued. When she told her hosts that she could not train teachers without a school for children where she could observe them, they opened a school for her on the first floor of the Bungalow. She needed time, she said, to study the Indian educational situation,

for her methods must adapt themselves to the needs of different types of children throughout the world. Here she witnessed the effortless absorption of language, the development of movement and independence among children where there was no distinction of class or religion.

She addressed the audience for her first training course in India:

**“I feel as I stand facing you that this is one of the greatest moments in my life. For many decades of years, the child has helped and revealed to me something which lay in the depths of its soul. And my work has been the work of a follower, a follower who has discovered something and followed that child, followed that something which had been discovered in the soul of the child. But how much lack of comprehension, how much misunderstanding, have I not met in so many countries, because the people thought I was talking about a method of education, while I was speaking of a revelation given to me by the soul.”**

*(2009, p. 26)*

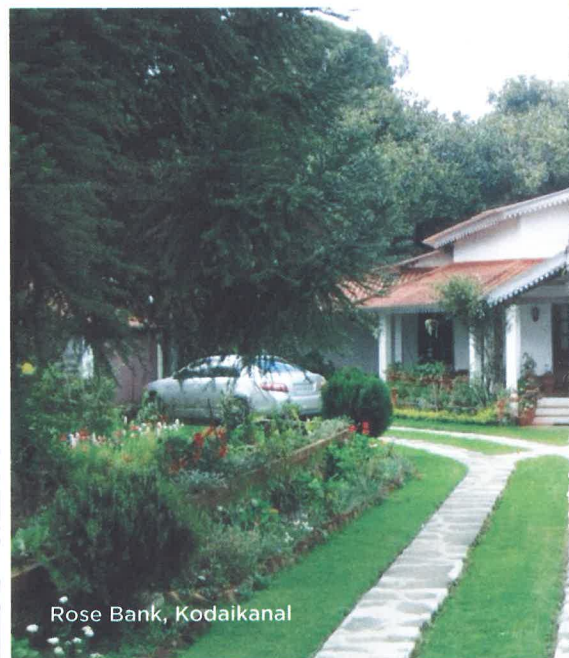
Montessori found this deep and clear understanding of what she had been trying to do in India, where, as she describes it, she found “the awakened spirit and soul”. She goes on to say,

**“I will not talk about a method of educating children, but about something which has been revealed by the children, which had come forth from the Child’s soul.” (2009, p. 27) (2009, p. 27)**

It is important to reflect on this quote as we decide what best to do for the child in the novel circumstances in which we presently find ourselves. We are without our tool kit, and suddenly those albums we created with so much detail are not standing us in good stead. We are scrambling to recreate the didactic apparatus in virtual form. Have we stopped to think if this is what the child needs and is this what following the child means? The child is our treasure and in the process of cultivating them, we as their teacher must be transformed too. A method implies something set in stone and this is one thing that the Montessori way is not. We could have a knitting method when someone tells you exactly what to do



Olcott Bungalow, Chennai



Rose Bank, Kodaikanal

to create a sweater. It refers to a prescribed experience – someone has done it before and tells you exactly what needs to be done to create this product. As we are scrambling to give children the prescribed Montessori experiences which we think make up the method, we have forgotten that is not what Montessori is. Montessori pedagogy is not limited to our teaching materials, but is really a vision of the child and how best to meet their needs and this can be done with or without the Montessori didactic apparatus.

Things got harder for Dr. Montessori even though she was reunited with her son, Mario. Mahatma Gandhi, thinking this was the best birthday present he could give her, had Mario released from prison. However, now England had joined the war, and with India under British rule, the Montessoris were considered to be “enemy aliens”. The grounds of the Theosophical Society were converted into an army base and it was no longer safe to have them in Chennai. Also, with Montessori’s failing health it was thought that Chennai was too hot for her and they were moved to the hill station of Kodaikanal. The house there was very simple, something that met their

needs, but Montessori was very depressed. She missed the cultural and political bustle of a big city, and now she had no teachers to train or children to observe. She often asked, “What can I do here?”

However, it was here, during this period, and under these circumstances that something beautiful was born. In the absence of their didactic materials, Dr. Montessori and Mario used nature as their teaching tools. They built aquariums and terrariums and let the children see the collaboration between plants and animals. They studied trees and cultivated plants and saw purpose in everything that existed. It was in the beautiful and peaceful Kodaikanal that the theosophical vision of universal unity and the interdependency that exists in nature was generated. Despite the very difficult circumstances, Montessori did not give up. Her work for the child continued as she laid the foundation for cosmic education. As Mario Montessori writes,

**“We had made a new discovery which was special and long-lasting, and it all came about in the hills of Kodaikanal, where practice and ideas met – and a better vision emerged.”** (Bhatia, 2019, p. 104)

It was here that so many of the materials that we teach today – botany, the story of the universe, geography charts – were created. I am filled with awe as I imagine what Montessori did, using a resource that was plentiful around her – nature – and writing a curriculum that has no boundaries and is still relevant today. It arouses the child’s interest and intensifies his sense of belonging through time and space, “giving him a vision of the whole universe” (1989, pp. 5-6)

Nothing was lost as Montessori found out on her return to Europe. As a matter of fact, so much was gained. The spiritual dimension to her teacher training originated in India as well, and as we all know, sets us apart from all other teachers. The aims

of the Theosophical Society have many similarities with Montessori philosophy: respect for all things, freedom of thought, and development of latent potentialities in individuals.

Just like Montessori was, we are in a war now too. The only difference being that the enemy is invisible. There is so much uncertainty and tons of insecurity that is causing us much stress and anxiety. We do not know if our schools will survive. Montessori did not know either. What we can learn from her and what kept her strong through it all was her focus on the child. She did not let anything come in the way of studying the child. Neither should we. Let her inspire us at a time when we all need it most:

**“I assure you that were I not absolutely certain that mankind can be bettered, I should not have had the strength to battle for fifty years, having so frequently had to begin again when my work was destroyed by others. I would not have had the strength, at my age, to travel the world, proclaiming the truth.”** (Bhatia, 2019, p. xii)

Staying authentic to the philosophy, adapting to the circumstances, providing the children with meaningful activities, and finding every opportunity to deepen connections are what we at Montessori Casa International (MCI) focused on as we maneuvered these unprecedented times. As a teaching body, we reflected a lot, met often, and constantly asked ourselves what we can do to better meet the needs of the children. This definitely kept us strong – just as we know it kept Montessori strong during her exile in India.

As the “stay-at-home” orders were lifted and childcare centers were allowed to open, we planned the reopening of our school. There were a lot of restrictions imposed upon us to keep everyone safe and healthy, and initially we wondered how we were going to maintain the basic



principles of Montessori pedagogy while at the same time being compliant with the guidelines. They seemed to be incompatible in many ways! As I prepared our policies and procedures, I found myself leaning on Dr. Montessori again. This time for courage. She was always so brave and handled all the adversities in her life with so much strength. She truly was mighty, fighting all odds for the child. I knew I had to do it, too.

On the first day back, we thought we would give the children a lot of time on the playground. We were told that nothing heals better than the outdoors. They played in the sandpit, made some pies in the mud kitchen, planted new seeds, and watered the Peace Garden. The teachers played "Simon Says," hopscotch, and other games that they remembered from their childhood.

That was nice for a while, but soon after, they asked to come inside the classroom and work. They gravitated

toward Practical Life, and we felt the familiarity of the materials provided them with comfort and joy. The classroom had been rearranged to meet social distancing requirements, and many of the materials had been put away. It did not matter to them in the least. They took what they knew to do from the shelves and proceeded to work with them. It was truly a miracle that we were witnessing. They engaged with the materials in a purposeful manner and showed deep concentration when working with them – all signs of true normalization.

Soon after, they started to look for specific materials. For example, one boy asked for a particular reading box. On checking his records, we were amazed to find that this was where he had stopped before we went into lockdown. He was keen and eager to get back on track and worked with numerous reading materials that day. Without anyone telling him, he started to set targets for himself. It was as though he



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had a hunger for work and that it provided him with the satisfaction and the motivation to keep going. The children are secure in their environment and parents report that temper tantrums, outbursts, aggression toward siblings, nightmares, and anxiety have almost all disappeared since they have returned to school.

Seeing how successful Montessori is in building a child's character, it is perhaps time for all educational systems to take note and ask some hard questions. Is the purpose of education to create good test takers and memorizers? Or are we in need of critical thinkers and entrepreneurs? We have seen with the children who have returned to school after two months at home that they are confident and propelled by the gift of a passion for learning. They respect each other and their environment and accept the limits of their freedom, for theirs is a community to which they belong. As Montessori says:

**“The only social life the children get in the ordinary schools is during playtime or on excursions. Ours live always in an active community.”** (1988, p. 205)

The world is rapidly changing, and it is my hope that we look at Montessori for answers. This is true education for life.

We eagerly look forward to the time when the limitations forced upon us due to COVID-19 are lifted because they are most definitely corroding the freedom of the children and their relationships with others. We cannot only look at the physical well-being of the child but also take their emotional and psychological needs into consideration. Like Dr. Montessori, we, as educators, must champion the rights of the child in society. **imc**

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Inspired by Dr. Maria Montessori's philosophy, **Punum Bhatia, PhD** has dedicated her life to Montessori education as a parent, teacher, and teacher educator for over thirty years. She completed her Bachelor's degree in English Literature; earned Masters' degrees in English Literature and Education from the University of Calcutta, and completed a certificate diploma in Montessori Pedagogy. She earned her Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Colorado Denver in 2012 for her work on the Self-Efficacy of Montessori teachers. In her efforts to understand children and the environments necessary for them to grow and flourish, Punum focuses on Maria Montessori's original philosophy and techniques. After teaching the Montessori method to cohorts all around the world, she is now the proud owner of her very own bilingual preschool, Montessori Casa International in Denver, Colorado. She is the author of *Cultivator of the Human Spirit: Revisiting Maria Montessori's Journey*, *A Montessori Workbook*, Volumes 1, 2, 3 and *The Inspired Child* ([www.mcidenver.edu/](http://www.mcidenver.edu/) [www.punumbhatia.com](http://www.punumbhatia.com)).



Watering plants in the Peace Garden



# Purposeful Leadership

## PART 3: *What Followers Need from Leaders*

BY DR. BRENDA BERNSTORF

