

# Are Montessori Kindergartens Really Suitable for Chinese Students?

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## Abstract

Since its inception, the Montessori method has been highly regarded as an advanced, scientific and sound method of preschool education in Europe and the U.S. At the beginning of the 21st century, a wave of "Montessori" boom also emerged in China, with a large number of Montessori kindergartens springing up. As a young child born in the new century, I was also sent to a Montessori kindergarten by my parents. Although Montessori kindergartens are guided by excellent educational ideas, is the range of practices carried out in the kindergartens really suitable for the Chinese context and for Chinese children? This is a highly controversial issue and has been debated by scholars for a long time. In this article, however, the author incorporates the perspective of those who have experienced it, and reviews the operational model of Montessori kindergartens in China at the beginning of the 21st century, in order to provide some insights into the healthy development of kindergartens in the new era.

## Keywords

Montessori; Kindergarten; Early childhood education ideas.

## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, China's pre-school education system was in its infancy, with a certain immaturity in terms of curriculum aims and curriculum content setting, and the Montessori method of education introduced from Japan was an immensely valuable resource for people. As a result, China's educational academic community was the first to translate and publish Montessori writings and to attempt to produce and promote Montessori-style teaching aids. In addition, provinces such as Jiangsu were the first to establish research societies on Montessori educational methods, exploring the possibility of incorporating Montessori educational ideas into our early childhood education system.

Influenced by scientific and democratic thinking, after the May Fourth Movement, educators in China further introduced the advanced ideas of foreign educators, creating trends in society such as education for the common people, career education, scientific education and pragmatic education. However, due to the conditions of the times, the primary aim of education was still to save the country, and it was no exception in the early childhood education stage. Therefore, the pragmatic ideas represented by Dewey prevailed and had a great impact on early childhood education in China at that time, while the ideas of educators such as Montessori were "left out" due to their more idealistic nature.

After the reform and opening up, China's academic exchanges on a global scale have increased, and the education sector in China has fused the international curriculum ideas of Piaget and Montessori with those of Chen Hechen and Tao Xingchi in China, gradually forming new concepts of early childhood education in practice and setting off a wave of curriculum reform. It is against this background that Montessori educational thinking has received renewed attention from all sectors of society.

In the 21st century, the Kindergarten Education Guideline (for Trial Implementation) was officially promulgated, forming a more complete system of early childhood education regulations together with local early childhood education regulations, significantly promoting the scientific and legalisation of early childhood education in China.[1] Montessori kindergartens have also taken advantage of the reform of early childhood education in the new century and have proliferated throughout the country. The author herself has become a member of the many Montessori kindergarten students.

## **2. Characteristics of the Chineseisation of Montessori Kindergartens at the Beginning of The 21st Century**

### **2.1. Purpose**

In the context of the new curriculum reform for early childhood education, the student-centred connotations of Montessori's educational philosophy have enabled educators from all walks of life across the country to see new possibilities for the construction of kindergarten models, and Montessori kindergartens have taken root in the soil of China amidst much anticipation. The purpose of the Montessori model of education in China is not only to ensure that the children who are educated can receive a better education in an environment where they can take more initiative, but also to explore new teaching models and lay the foundation for the formation of an early childhood education model with national characteristics.

### **2.2. Teaching content**

The content of Montessori's teaching is systematic and is divided into six major areas: life, sensory, mathematics, science, language and art.[2] In fact, this is closely related to the five main areas of teaching in China and is an extension of the original five areas of teaching. However, in the context of China and its corresponding cultural environment, we still need to carefully consider the path of Chineseisation of the six domains.

The Montessori kindergarten I attended, for example, not only organised sensory, mathematical and language education according to Montessori's educational philosophy, but also supplemented it with teaching aids suitable for the language development of our young children and knowledge of Chinese culture and science and cutting-edge technology adapted to our national context. In addition, the moral elements of the educational content have been filtered to remove religious elements and content that is not suitable for the current state of development in China due to historical limitations. The teacher often shared a series of short stories with teaching aids that embodied traditional Chinese virtues and asked us, the students, to come up to the podium and act out different roles. It is evident that designing moral education content that is in line with the direction of socialist development with Chinese characteristics is an important way to Chineseise Montessori teaching ideas.

### **2.3. Class organisation**

The Montessori model of education emphasises the need for 'vertical' mixed-age classes in kindergartens.[3] At the beginning of the 21st century, when China had a 'one-child' policy, mixed-age classes were scientifically positive for children's development. However, because of the widespread acceptance of the same-age class model, the mixed-age education model has been widely questioned. On the one hand, parents in the upper grades worry that their children are lagging behind in their studies, while parents in the lower grades are concerned that their children will be bullied by others. On the other hand, teaching in mixed-age classes required teachers to be able to accurately identify students of different ages and developmental levels and to tailor their teaching to their needs as much as possible. At the time, there was a shortage of such teachers, and the demand for them was very high. The Montessori model of education was new, and the concept of mixed-age education is worth studying and learning from.

### **3. Key Misconceptions About Operating A Montessori Kindergarten at The Beginning of The 21st Century**

#### **3.1. Chasing fame and fortune, blindly following the trend**

Like all other models of education, the Montessori method is a product of national culture. Originally born in Italy, the Montessori method has undergone a long or short process of 'localisation' since its introduction to other countries.

In the United States, for example, the Montessori method has gone from strength to strength and back again.[4] A major reason for this decline is that when Montessori education was introduced to a region as an advanced teaching method, local people did not consider it carefully or combine it with local conditions. Instead, they chose to blindly admire and adapt it for various reasons. This process of 'localisation' is brutal and is bound to run out of steam in a short period of time.

The same is true in China, where the Montessori method was introduced at the beginning of the 21st century and was highly regarded, with Montessori kindergartens springing up in droves. In reality, however, some Montessori kindergartens did not really understand the essence of the Montessori method, but merely tried to use it as a "selling point" to advertise to parents in order to charge higher tuition fees. Parents who are keen on their children can easily be tempted to invest a lot of money in such kindergartens due to consumerism and other trends. Parents and some of the shady Montessori kindergartens have reached a certain consensus out of different interests, yet inadvertently sacrificing the most valuable spirit of Montessori.

#### **3.2. Insufficient grasp of Montessori educational thinking**

The real value of the Montessori method lies in its innovative perspective on the child and his or her surroundings. Teachers need to understand the intrinsic needs of children's physical and mental development through observation and meet the diverse needs of children of different ages by providing a prepared environment and setting individualised teaching goals. However, at first, when introducing advanced foreign concepts, our scholars often only went beyond superficial forms, believing that the Montessori method could be implemented as long as complete Montessori teaching aids were made according to its philosophy and corresponding Montessori classrooms were set up.

In fact, the subject of Montessori's own initial research was special children, so part of the educational ideas were also applied to groups of special children with certain learning disabilities.[5] The facilities and activities used in the classrooms of a large number of Montessori kindergartens in China in the early 21st century were oriented towards children with special needs, but their application to normal children can be a serious obstacle to their subjective role. Furthermore, a prepared environment that is not guided by specialist knowledge is likely to isolate children in a passive 'silo'. The ideal prepared environment is one that gives children the right to create and transform their environment so that they can construct and exercise their agency.

In general, Montessori kindergartens at the beginning of the 21st century largely ignored the limitations of the Montessori method itself, had an inadequate grasp of its educational ideology, and carried out educational practices with all their drawbacks.

#### **3.3. Lack of quality teacher resources**

Contrary to the ideas of early childhood educators such as Froebel, teachers in Montessori kindergartens play an important role in education as providers of environment, supporters of enquiry and guides of development, and are multi-functional 'mentors'. [6] It is clear that the requirements for teachers in Montessori kindergartens are very high. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, there were only a handful of Montessori teachers from

internationally accredited professional bodies in China and internationally. It can be seen that most Montessori kindergartens at that time were not equipped with the necessary professional teachers, and it is only natural that the quality of teaching was relatively low.

In the teaching process of many teachers, the so-called prepared environment often ends up being a 'bought and paid for environment' where students are guided by the teacher through mechanical and repetitive tasks. In addition, Montessori teaching aids have become direct props for the teacher to deliver lessons rather than a medium to facilitate interaction and reflection between teacher and student. In general, teachers with little understanding of Montessori education at the beginning of the 21st century have inadvertently affected the learning and learning process of Montessori teaching methods in China.

## **4. Key Ideas for Integrating Montessori Educational Thinking Into Contemporary Chinese Early Childhood Education Practice**

### **4.1. Integrating the national context to "use it for our own benefit"**

In the context of our practice and that of other countries, it is clear that when introducing any advanced educational concept or model, we must not have an absolute admiration for it and copy it as it is. Not only will blind borrowing not bring the expected benefits, but it will also cause a drastic impact on the original local educational model, which will then lose its balance. Therefore, the Montessori method should be adapted to our own use.

Firstly, we should draw on the strengths of Montessori's ideas of 'prepared environment' and 'rich teaching aids', and integrate and develop the ideas, methods and teaching programmes of the Montessori method that we can use to further promote early childhood education reform and improve the overall quality of children. We should integrate and build on the strengths of the Montessori method in order to further promote the reform of early childhood education and improve the overall quality of children. Secondly, we should retain the basic framework of Montessori's educational thinking in the process of its introduction, combine it with our national characteristics and the results of our long-standing research on children, and complete the process of Chineseising Montessori's teaching method. It is only in this way that an excellent educational idea can take root for a long time in this part of China and give its due value to the reform of early childhood education in China.

### **4.2. Solid training and strict attention to teacher quality**

The previous article shows that the number of certified Montessori teachers in China is still very limited, which is closely linked to the fact that the teacher training activities carried out during our initial study of the Montessori method were seriously disconnected from the early childhood education reform and pursued only short-term interests. According to excellent practical experience, the training of scientific Montessori teachers is divided into technical learning, practical learning and emancipatory learning stages. And most of the "Montessori" teachers in China at the beginning of the 21st century even the technical learning stage are only hastily experienced, after listening to a few so-called master class will begin to carry out educational practice. This shows the importance of a disciplined scientific training.

During the technical learning phase, teachers acquire the background of knowledge and practice required to be a Montessori teacher, mainly through learning the curriculum concepts and practices of the Montessori method in real-life contexts. The practical phase, on the other hand, refers to the placement phase in which teachers work in the classroom. During this phase, trainees are guided by professional Montessori teachers to solve a series of puzzles and improve their teaching skills in practice. The final emancipatory learning stage requires teachers to reflect systematically on the Montessori curriculum system in the context of their own practical experiences and learn to develop a sound curriculum plan.

It is only after these three stages of solid training that teachers are initially equipped to work in a formal Montessori kindergarten. In any case, in the face of the future of our country my flowers, we should not be easily driven by economic interests, with their own lack of ability to package beauty decorate themselves. Excellent teachers are never more than a few, but rather fine, for the training of Montessori teachers is also the same. I believe that in the scientific standard of training, a number of high-quality Montessori teachers can go to work, to promote our country my early childhood education reform to contribute their own strength.

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