Early childhood education in America can be traced back to the mid 1800s when adherents of Froebel’s kindergarten methods immigrated to the United States from Germany. But the kindergarten’s roots extend back even further, to the nursery school movement in Europe. Robert Owen, a socialist cotton-mill owner in New Lanark, Scotland, sought to create an idyllic setting for the children of his workers, believing that environment molds the person. By 1813, Owen had created an environment where children from birth through 6 years old played, sang, and ate regularly. Soon after, numerous philanthropic organizations in England and Europe organized along the lines of New Lanark. Infant schools spread to Germany, coinciding with the development of Froebel’s kindergarten, a separate movement, similar but unconnected to New Lanark. By the 1830s in Germany, Kleinkinderbewahranstalten (public institutions for the care of the poor) were established for young children, focusing specifically on the physical aspects of their well being (Forest, 1935).

In the United States, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the nursery school movement (generally considered to include children 4 years old and younger) represented a variety of formulating interests: the research-
center nursery school, the cooperative nursery school, the private-school nursery school, the philanthropic nursery school, and the teacher-training nursery school (Forest, 1935, pp. 43–61).

Research-center nursery schools arose as an integral part of university research programs inquiring into the concept of normal development. Theorists became convinced that abnormalities in adolescence and adulthood originated in childhood. Psychologists, such as Yale University’s Dr. Arnold Gesell, sought to observe children in natural settings to determine normal social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Researchers, who originally set up child observations on a casual basis, quickly realized that trained adults could facilitate the children’s groups. By the turn of the 20th century, the universities of Yale and Columbia sponsored just two of the many elaborately funded and equipped university nursery schools in America.

Cooperative nursery schools arose out of the need of young mothers to provide care for their children as the mothers sought work outside the home during World War I. Nursemaids were too expensive and mothers taking turns caring for the children often proved complicated. Again, trained care providers solved the problem and soon the little cooperative nursery school had evolved into the private nursery school movement, sanctioned by pediatricians as adequate for the needs of young children.

Philanthropic nursery schools were an integral part of settlement houses and churches in which the needs of poor children were served within their own communities. Generally, in all-day facilities, children were tended to by caregivers who lived in the same community as the children. These inner-city sites provided meals, hygiene, and a sanctuary for the children who might otherwise be on the street.

Teacher-training nursery schools filled a need created by the increased demand for trained care-providers. These nursery schools were on-site at teacher training colleges and sought to bring about standards of care consistent with new theories of child development and teacher practices.

As an adjunct to, and growing simultaneously with the nursery school movement in America, the kindergarten movement (usually serving children between the ages of 4½ and 6 years old) spread across the United States in fits and starts during the second half of the 19th century (Vanderwalker, 1971). German immigrants, fleeing the European revolution of 1848, settled in American cities such as New York City, Hoboken, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Louisville, and brought with them the need for bilingual schools. These schools included kindergartens. Coinciding with the establishment of German schools in America, the doctrines of Froebel were presented in lectures in England and America by his disciples. By the 1850s, articles began to appear in professional journals such as the American Journal of Education and the Christian Examiner and other national magazines, bringing the kindergarten movement to the attention of educators. One of the earliest proponents of kindergarten in America was Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who studied Froebel and opened her kindergarten in the 1860s in New England. The sister-in-law of educational pioneer Horace Mann, Peabody promoted kindergarten among leaders of the educational movement at large. Froebel’s idealistic philosophy that the universe is spiritual and that nature and mankind are but expressions of God appealed to the New England Transcendentalists, Peabody among them. She wrote articles such as “The Moral Culture of Infancy” and “What is Kindergarten?” for the Atlantic Monthly in 1862 and later published a monthly magazine, The Kindergarten Messenger, which included theoretical articles along with informational content. The Messenger later became part of The New England Journal of Education (Vanderwalker, 1908, pp. 28–35).

Although Froebel’s kindergartens appeared in America as early as the 1850s, the widespread acceptance of education for young children depended upon Americans embracing the concept that the child develops continuously over time, and develops earlier than previously recognized. In the second half of the 19th century, educational theorists began to acknowledge that learning begins much earlier than age 7, the legal age set as the time for admission to school. Even though education for the young child began to be accepted in theory, the curriculum was not clearly defined. Should a child’s kindergarten experience be just a watered-down version of what is presented at the elementary grades? Child development experts said no. Based on the psychological work of William James and G. Stanley Hall, the proponents of the kindergarten model asserted that young children learn differently from older children, therefore unique environments must be set up to meet those needs.

G. Stanley Hall, a widely influential American psychologist and educator schooled in German science, felt that the school should fit the child, not the other way around. Hall’s work brought about the enormous pedagogical shift away from the teaching of ideas and toward child-focused teaching in which the teacher adapts to the individual needs of the child. Hall’s ideas created a torrent of pedagogical studies, including those by Freud, whom Hall brought to America in 1909, and Arnold Gesell, both of whose theories proceeded from the Hegelian ideal that education can and should be a vehicle for providing a better world (Gutke, 1986). One of the
S P O T L I G H T : 1 0 0 Y E A R S O F M O N T E S S O R I E D U C A T I O N

major proponents of progressive education, the psychologist and philosopher William James, rejected absolute truth and values in favor of changing values and hypotheses: The litmus test of any idea was its utility. For James, success could be measured if the ideas were workable “for satisfying human needs and resolving human problems” (Gutek, 1986, pp. 205–206). Most reformers emphasized the role that science and systems management should play in education. To produce the necessary research, academic experts poured into the schools to study the myriad social problems found there and proposed solutions couched in the vocabulary of systems theory.

An understanding of a psychological framework for education emerged in the early 1860s in Oswego, NY. There, Dr. E. A. Sheldon began training teachers on the Pestalozzian principles of child development. The Oswego Normal School held that teachers should teach young children objectively and concentrate on self-expression rather than the language arts, which was the focus for the education of older children. Oswego Normal School was the first institution teaching that education for young children was just as valid as, yet different in its formulation from, education for older children. This early childhood education concept spread rapidly, and teachers who trained at Oswego were eagerly sought after (Vanderwalker, 1971, p. 5).

Another thrust in the theory and practice of education of young children emerged in teacher colleges, at the elementary level: art education and work with the hands. Ironically, these practices were already a part of kindergarten programs. The inclusion of art education at the elementary level originated in Europe as demonstrated at the 1851 London Exhibition and the Paris Exhibition of 1867. The art advocates made their case in America at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876. Education authorities in this country blessed the addition of art education as seen at the Philadelphia Exposition, declaring an art renaissance in the States. As arts and crafts courses were integrated into the curriculum at the elementary level, the kindergartner’s earlier promulgation of them was recognized. Use of hands-on materials was validated because those at the elementary level now applauded the practice (Vanderwalker, 1971, p. 188).

As the stature of the kindergarten rose in the 1870s and 1880s, private schools readily incorporated it into their curriculum, but public schools moved more slowly. By the turn of the century, kindergartens could be found in public elementary schools on a regional basis, but many localities were not convinced the additional cost was warranted. Materials such as paper, glue, scissors, and songbooks cost more per pupil than did materials for older children. Also, kindergartens required more teachers per pupil than did older grades. Further, the individual states mandated the age at which children could begin school. In many states, as authorized by state law, it was indeed 5 years of age, the upper range of desirability for entering kindergarten. Other states designated 6 years as the minimum age requirement. And in Alabama, it was 7 years, in Texas, 8 years (Vanderwalker, 1971, p. 188).

Educational change followed the slow pace of legislation change. By 1912, 9% of American children of kindergarten age were in public school kindergarten, up from 5% in 1900 (U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin, 1914). The increase was also due in part to the formation of the National Kindergarten Association, created specifically to garner national financial support for kindergartens in public schools (Gutek, 1986). Kindergarten educators also formed their own association, The International Kindergarten Union, which focused on curriculum issues.

But just as the public was accepting the idea of kindergarten, Froebel’s kindergarten was coming under intense scrutiny by educational theorists. New discoveries in biological sciences and child development theories, especially at the university-based kindergartens, brought about schisms in the previously homogenous kindergarten movement. Philanthropic kindergartens, which were not a part of research and academic discourse, retained their allegiance to Froebel, whereas university and progressive schools began to question the rigid structure and top-down approach of Froebel. Revisionists attacked the Froebel gifts and occupations for their inadequate size for the young child’s hand, art instructors complained that the occupations were unsatisfactory as a basis for art work, and the physical education instructors did not approve of Froebel’s games for children. All those who disagreed, especially the kindergarten theorists at Columbia, used the new psychology of child development as their reason for dissent.

The revisionists (opposed to the now traditionalist followers of Froebel) were led by the Teachers College at Columbia University, which was now considered the epicenter of educational thought in America (Gutek, 1986 pp. 224–225). The progressives at Teachers College, led by Fatty Smith Hill, John Dewey, and William Heard Kilpatrick, favored emerging trends in psychology and child study such as evolutionary intelligence, and so clashed with conservative Froebellian theories of static intelligence and limited capacities of children younger than 6 years old (Vanderwalker, 1971, p. 188). Regardless of their specific philosophy, they all fretted that the internal dialog among themselves would spill out into public discourse and threaten their hard-fought gains over the past half-century. Montessori’s radical proposals came to light right in the
middle of this educational upheaval (Snyder, 1972).

**The Rise of the American Progressive Movement**

The development of American progressive education reflected the social changes that took place from 1870 to the early 20th century as a response to larger transformations taking place in the society, namely industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. In his 1986 work, *Education in the United States: An Historical Perspective*, historian Gerald L. Gutek places these changes in the broad contexts of culture, politics, and economics.

By 1870, agricultural productivity was on the rise due to farm mechanization, but the nation itself was experiencing wholesale transformation from a rural agricultural base to an urban industrialized one. Between 1880 and 1910, the urban population grew from 15 million to 45 million. By 1920, more people lived in cities than in rural areas (Gutek, 1986).

The profound impact of industrialization on education cannot be overstated. The surge of population into the cities created chronically understaffed schools overcrowded with non-English-speaking children. Further, governing districts hired teachers and administrators based on political, not academic, criteria. Social Darwinism, which preached that competition among individuals would lead to more efficient, industrious workers, was introduced into the schools as an educational ethic. School administration became centralized and curricula focused on preparing children to become members of the new industrialized workforce. The traditional teaching method, which utilized memorization and recitation and expected high morals to be gleaned from the McGuffey Readers (traditional first readers of the era) had been modeled on an earlier rural American child and was now considered hopelessly out of date. The revised view was that the classics should be de-emphasized in favor of more utilitarian subjects such as applied science and economics.

Schools would teach that punctuality, hard work, and diligence would be rewarded by economic improvement while laziness would be punished by unemployment. Truancy laws compelled school attendance and children were organized into classes by ages.

In the economic realm, progressives decried the shift from small, individual businesses to large corporations and they urged the breakup of trusts and monopolies. Yet they patterned the administration of their schools after the corporate model of central control over decision-making. Local schools lost their autonomy and were forced to cede control of curriculum, hiring, student discipline, and parent relations to the school district.

In the social realm, the theories of Jacob Riis and John Dewey, and the establishment of settlement houses, developed as a counter to the fragmentation of communities by industrialization. In particular, Jane Addams supported settlement houses, urging

![Montessori elementary students at work](image-url)
teachers were usually immigrants from the same countries. Thus, immigrant children were being educated but were not assimilating into the American mainstream. A leading educational historian and administrator of the time, Ellwood P. Cubberly, wrote in Changing Conceptions of Education that these new immigrants were “illiterate, docile and lacking in self-reliance and initiative and not possessing the Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order and government” (Gutek, 1986, p. 180). If the dominant culture was to be preserved from dilution, then these children must be assimilated, and Cubberly proposed that the agent for change should be the school. The mandated curriculum would include courses in English, American History, and Civics.

The plight of the immigrant raised the question that reformers of the time, seeking to Americanize the immigrants, were struggling with. Just what was “Americanization”? Reformers settled on a vague mission of uplifting the immigrant’s life through social education. Regardless of the varied progressive impulses, the one thing the reformers all had in common was the assertion that education would be at the heart of their mission.

In 1892, a previously scattershot approach to reform coalesced into a united effort when a muckraking pediatrician, Joseph Mayer Rice, wrote a series of articles for the influential magazine, The Forum, appraising the state of American education (Cremin, 1961). Scant resources, ill-educated teachers, budget uncertainties, and philosophical disagreement, all creating hodgepodge implementation, was the state of affairs that Dr. Rice described. Outraged by the apathy, incompetence, and corruption rampant in city schools, Rice highlighted the rare examples of humanely run private schools and called for public school systems to be severed from pol-

itics. The articles caused a firestorm of controversy (Cremin, 1961). School reform became a national movement, a progressive movement in education, as the press and educational journals took up the cause. But stating the problem was easier than creating a specific, cogent plan for reform. Thus began the pedagogical battles of the 1890s.

The last 25 years of the 19th century was spent in defining the problem of social reform and the schools (Cremin, 1961). Some saw it as the clash between a specialized industrial system and a broadly educative public school system. Cries rang out for more specific, rather than general, education. Vocational schools had proliferated in the 1880s and 1890s, a development supported by businessmen who wanted a work force trained to meet the newly emerging industrial demands. Many saw the traditionalists’ emphasis on thinking skills as a detriment, claiming such emphasis ignored the realities of life, which paid scant attention to the working man. Critics pointed to paltry attendance after the eighth grade as testimony to its failure. Classicists defended their tradition, arguing that vocational training ran counter to the purpose of public education, which was to cultivate the ability to relate, comprehend, and generalize matter to a man’s specific situation (Cremin, 1961, p. 7).

**Progressive Education Proponents**

**John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick**

John Dewey, a Hegelian idealist, represented progressive education in America. A philosophical pragmatist, Dewey tested his theory of instrumentalism or experimentalism in his laboratory schools. The theory of “social learning”—that all learning is interrelated and group-oriented—emanated from his 1916 book, Democracy and Education, which was hailed as the American equal to Rousseau’s *Emile.* Dewey blamed the problems in education on industrialization, theorizing that society itself is the educator and thus society must be refitted for children in order to create an “embryonic community life” in which the child is an active participant in his own training for membership in his community (Gutek, 1986, p. 118). A child’s training should reflect the specific society within which he lives rather than adhering to the broader traditional curriculum, which Dewey viewed as irrelevant. In determining what knowledge is most essential, Dewey proposed that group knowledge (experiences in which the broadest groups share) was vital. He considered the needs and pursuits of specialized groups as less important (Gutek, 1986). Dewey argued that the curriculum should reflect the goals of improving society to make it more “worthy, lovely and harmonious” and further, that there cannot be a “narrowly utilitarian” education for one class and a “broadly liberal” one for the other if democracy is to thrive (Gutek, 1986, p. 118). He called for universal education that emphasized social goals over individual goals.

Dewey’s central tenet of progressive education linked education and social action; the school became the central vehicle for social change, educational theory was synonymous with political theory, and, therefore, the educator and the school became de facto mechanisms of reform.

William Heard Kilpatrick, another influential educational progressive in favor of child-centered expressionist education, advocated problem solving through child-initiated purposeful activity wherein the child would determine the activity, then plan it, execute it, and judge it. Kilpatrick urged a focus on the child rather than on teaching subjects: “Teach children, not subjects” became a rallying cry (Gutek, 1986, p. 218). He sought to translate Dewey’s instrumentalist phi-
losophy into a methodology for instruction. Progressive education shifted from child-centered, experimental private schools into a wide-ranging doctrine of progressivism in the teacher training schools. A student of Dewey’s, Kilpatrick went to Teachers College at Columbia University, the preeminent teachers college in the country, where he received his doctorate and stayed on to teach philosophy and education. During his long tenure here, Kilpatrick influenced thousands of teachers with his progressive doctrine. His project-method approach rejected traditional teaching methods of book learning, which he said were indirect and secondhand, and instead embraced an experiential approach to problem-solving, which he said would foster a “democratic sense of community” (Gutek, 1986, p. 223).

Meanwhile in the classroom, self-expression was king. Harold O. Rigg, an influential educational progressive, wrote in his 1928 work, The Child Centered Classroom, that children are born with the power to create, so they should be immersed in an environment that fosters that creativity. The teacher was left to interpret this mandate and the result was progressivism run wild. Critics had a field day characterizing the free-roaming child wreaking havoc in the classroom. Even Dewey weighed in as a critic of the child-centered education, attacking it for its lack of adult guidance. Indeed, he called for progressive educators to refocus on education and to give less credence to the “isms” of the divisive movement (Gutek, 1986, p. 237).

In sum, Progressivism was a reaction to a rapidly changing America, one now mostly urban and industrial. Although the progressive education movement sprang from a humanist impulse, it was too vague, general and all encompassing. Progressives clearly outlined what they opposed but could not articulate and implement specifics for change. Lawrence Cremin recapitulated the achievements of the progressive movement in education: a more focused attention on the child, the acknowledgment of the importance of the interest of the learner, the need for the child’s free movement in his activities, a new perception of education’s role in character development, and a championing of the rights of the child (Cremin, 1961).

**Emergent Montessori**

Montessori’s radical philosophy shifted away from traditional practices that equated an immobile child with a good child. However, in her proposals to make schools more child-centered, she differentiated herself from other progressives. She held that while an understanding of the needs of the child is the basis for the educational approach, such an understanding is the starting point only, for it is always the teacher who decides what the options are and are not available to the child. In no way did she advocate a free-for-all in which children could follow any whim. The child was free “to do the right thing” (Kramer, 1976, p. 118). The adult, in Montessori’s view, immediately intervenes if the child is doing harm. Montessori also expected parents to follow the same guidelines at home. Kramer (1976) writes that Montessori compared the relationship of the teacher and the student to the doctor and the patient; while it is the child who does the learning and the patient who does the healing, it is the professional, whether it be the doctor or the teacher, who is trained to know what options are available and which are most appropriate. The trained adult in education knows best what the developing child needs.

Montessori theorized that if children were permitted to move about at their discretion, choosing what interested them, they would manifest self-discipline because of their deep interest in the work. She made it very clear, however, that there was a world of difference between freedom and anarchy. Children were free to do what was appropriate under the authority of the adult. Essentially, Montessori was a social revolutionary who believed that

*Montessori captivates her audience*
the individual’s transformation originates in an appropriate environment, and societal transformations originate with the individual.

Reports of Montessori’s work first reached America in 1909. Montessori: 100 Years of Montessori Education

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The Montessori Message Spreads to America

The general American public first encountered the work of Maria Montessori just prior to the outbreak of World War I. The zeitgeist of the prewar era was generally optimistic, prosperous, and reform-minded. Wilbur Wright flew an airplane at Kitty Hawk, the Ford Motor Company produced millions of Model “T” automobiles, Frank Lloyd Wright built prairie-style homes, and Woodrow Wilson, a progressive educator, was in the White House.

The growth of the Montessori movement coincided with the proliferation of print media in America. By 1912, Montessori’s work was reported in educational journals such as American Education, Journal of Educational Psychology, The Kindergarten Review, Pedagogical Seminary, and The American Primary Teacher. Articles appeared in popular magazines such as Ladies’ Home Journal, Dial, Scientific American, the Delineator, and Contemporary Review (Kramer, 1976, p. 158). But it was McClure’s Magazine that made Montessori a household name.

S. S. McClure had made his reputation and magazine with his uncanny ability to understand the American mood and to sense what Americans wanted to read. Montessori was perfect for McClure’s Magazine. When the first articles on Montessori were published in 1911, the response was so overwhelming that McClure immediately commissioned additional articles. Readers wanted to know when her book would be translated into English, wanted to obtain the didactic materials to use with their own children, and wanted to know where they could take the training.

By 1912, interest in Montessori exploded across the country and Americans of influence began to involve themselves in the Montessori movement. Additionally, the didactic materials became available for sale to the public, with a warning that they were not toys and were to be sold only as a set, not individually. The English translation of The Montessori Method was soon published under the auspices of Harvard University. The introduction, written by Henry W. Holmes, professor of Education at Harvard, urged American schools to adopt the Montessori approach. The first edition of 5,000 copies sold out in 4 days, and 6 months later the sixth edition of the book was released. The Montessori Method became the second-largest-selling nonfiction book in the United States in 1912 (Chattin-McNichols, 1981).

The U.S. Bureau of Education published numerous booklets on educational subjects and in 1912, after the publication of The Montessori Method, it published an analysis of the book and the method. Assuming that certain changes could be made to the Montessori method because of different social conditions in America, and that more time could be allowed for American children to acquire the ability to read because of the English language’s more difficult phonetics, the Bureau concluded that the Montessori approach “could be readily integrated into American schools” (U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin, 1912, p. 489). Teacher colleges in several states gave lectures on the Montessori approach, and the number of articles on Montessori mushroomed. Parents grabbed Montessori’s book off the shelves and clamored for more.

The New York Times was not so impressed. An August 1913 article disparaged the popular appeal of Montessori:

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The methods of Maria Montessori have been threatened with complete suffocation at the hands of the dilettante enthusiasts, whose destructive power is as that of the tribes
from the North and who are responsible for the word “fad” being in the dictionaries at all. (The New York Times Review of Books, 1913, p. 425).

More books appeared on the subject, including A Montessori Mother by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, in which the basic Montessori principles were explained in simple terms that encouraged mothers to use Montessori methods in the home. Fisher compared the Montessori approach favorably with the kindergarten: “In the kindergarten the emphasis is laid, consciously or unconsciously, but very practically always, on the fact that the teacher teaches. In the Casa Dei Bambini, the emphasis is all on the fact that the child learns” (Fisher, 1965, p.180).

Fisher wrote another book shortly after the first one, entitled The Montessori Manual for Teachers and Mothers. And in 1912, the Montessori American Committee was organized to promote Montessori education in America.

Maria Montessori was furious with both the creation of American organizations and books written about her method. She insisted that any organization or publication with her name on it must meet with her prior approval and be under her direction. Nevertheless, Montessori societies sprang up all over the world and the need for teachers reached critical proportions.

In January 1913, Montessori conducted an international training course in Rome. It was presented in Italian and translated into English. Students came from all over the world. Montessori, self-possessed on the podium and dressed all in black, spoke of the need for a new kind of teacher, one whose primary concerns were the careful preparation of the environment and the keen observation of the children as they worked. She mesmerized her students, many of whom, as Dorothy Canfield Fisher observed, became devoted followers, like “nuns about an adored Mother Superior” (Kramer, 1976, p. 180). Two Americans who would figure large in Montessori’s life attended this international training: Helen Parkhurst, who would later split from Montessori and create a school called the Dalton Plan, and Adelia McAlpine Pyle, an American heiress who would later translate many Montessori lectures and courses into English.

Montessori received no income from a university; her only source of revenue remained the trainings and lecture fees. Though she tightly controlled the rapidly growing Montessori movement, she did welcome funding from those outside the system who supported her ideas.

Among the contributors were members of the Alexander Graham Bell family who, in 1913, created the Montessori Education Association as an outgrowth of the Montessori American Committee. Mabel Hubbard Bell, wife of Alexander Graham Bell, was the president and board members included Dorothy Canfield Fisher, S .S. McClure, Margaret Woodrow Wilson (the President’s daughter), and the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Philander P. Claxton (Kramer, 1976, p. 180). The purpose of this organization was to promote Montessori in America and to train teachers. Once again, however, Montessori balked at the idea that anyone other than herself could conduct teacher trainings, to the point of stating her objections publicly and in print. In a letter to the editor in the New York Times in August 1913, Montessori wrote:

I feel it would be premature to establish training schools which were not under my direct supervision, so that for the present, no training courses for the preparation of teachers except those held here in Rome, will be authorized by me. (The New York Times, 1913, p. 6)

Critics increased as Montessori’s popularity rose. The American education establishment frowned on her proprietary stance, accusing her of cultivating a church, not education (Kramer, 1976). They charged that allowing children free choice would create egomaniacs. Her defenders answered the criticisms by explaining the difference between anarchy and freedom. All this debate heightened public interest to the point that Montessori’s defenders urged her to come to America. No doubt, S. S. McClure also saw a visit by Montessori to America as a great potential source of revenue. In November 1913, Montessori and McClure set sail for America.

Montessori Visits America

By the time Montessori and McClure landed in New York on December 3, 1913, McClure had done his job; the press was there in force to greet her. Reporters mobbed her hotel suite, where Montessori calmly answered all their questions, often using Anne George as her interpreter. She told them that she was in favor of the vote for women and supported a woman working outside the home. Her patience, forthrightness, and charm won the press over. The New York Tribune quoted her as saying, “Americans are the most intelligent people in the world” (New York Tribune, 1913). All the major New York papers reported on her arrival in posi-

The Montessori Method became the second-largest-selling non-fiction book in the United States in 1912.
tive terms (New York Herald, Dec. 4, 1913; Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Dec. 3, 1913; the Sun, Dec. 4, 1913; New York Tribune, Dec. 4, 1913; and the New York Times, Dec. 7 and Dec. 10, 1913). One reporter called her one of the “half dozen most prominent [women] in the world,” and another said that within a few years her system would “modify all existing educational systems and theories and . . . take their place” (Kramer, 1976, p. 192).

Next, Montessori traveled to Washington, D.C., met the Alexander Graham Bell family, and visited the school they had established in the nation’s capital. Margaret Wilson also greeted her with apologies from her father, the President, who excused himself because of the flu. On December 6th, Montessori gave her first lecture in America at the Masonic Temple in Washington, D.C., during which she also showed films of the children working at the Casa Dei Bambini. After the lecture, she was feted at a lavish reception at the Bell home where she was greeted by leaders of Washington society and politics. The receiving line, in addition to Dr. Montessori and her interpreter, included Mrs. Bell, Margaret Wilson, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, and the wife of the U.S. Secretary of the Interior (Beinn Breagh Recorder, 1914). The Journal of Education weighed in that week with its perspective:

Whatever may be thought of the Montessori method of dealing with children and of Mr. McClure’s method of dealing with the public there can be no question as to the general effect of any group of personalities that can make any educa-

On the following Monday, Montessori returned to New York, where she spoke at Carnegie Hall to one of the largest audiences ever gathered there. Thousands were turned away at the door. John Dewey, who was by now famous at Columbia University and was also the president of the National Kindergarten Association, appeared on the dais with her, and many notable American educators were also in attendance. S. S. McClure introduced her as the “greatest woman educator in history” (Kramer, 1976, p. 194). Montessori spoke for over 2 hours and showed her movies of the children at the Casa. Again the response was overwhelming; press reports the next day reflected admiration and approval.

On Tuesday, Montessori traveled to Philadelphia to meet with Helen Keller. News reports of the meeting flashed all over the world headlining “the four it took for the two to have a conversation” (their talk had to be translated from Italian to English and then spelled into Keller’s hand by Anne Sullivan Macy) (The New York Times, 1913). Their complicated yet engaging discussion revealed that they had a similar goal: the liberation of the oppressed, wherever they may be (Freedom for the Child, 1914).

Montessori filled every day in America with lectures, meetings and interviews. She returned to New York, where she again met with people of influence at the highest levels including the president of Columbia University. Next, she went to Boston to meet with the faculty of Harvard University, and on to New Jersey where she visited Thomas Edison and took a tour of his laboratory. Returning to New York, she gave a final speech at Carnegie Hall to another wildly enthusiastic audience. She then traveled to the Midwest, visiting Pittsburgh and Chicago, where she met with Jane Addams of Hull House, and continued on to J. H. Kellogg’s sanitarium retreat at Battle Creek, MI. She returned to New York for one last reception, then sailed to Europe aboard the Lusitania on Christmas Eve, 1913.

To the reporters who were there to see her off, she made one last statement about America:

Your wonderful country is one of the hopes of the civilized world. The feel of youth is in the air and soil. You will rear here the greatest race the world has ever known. It is in your blood. The mixing of the peoples of the earth will produce a great posterity. No country has the heritage to leave to its children like the heritage of the American people. America is glorious. Glorious because of its achievement, of course, but more than that, glorious because of the thought it has taken for its children. And I must bow with humility to the American mother. She is one of the wonders of your growing men. (Kramer, 1976, p. 202)

After a 3-week visit she was gone. This trip would mark the high point of her popularity in America; the subsequent actions of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick would irreparably affect the way Americans looked at Montessori.

Montessori, Dewey, and Kilpatrick

Montessori’s most ardent critic was William Heard Kilpatrick, the most famous education teacher in America, ensconced in the most prestigious teaching university in America at the time, Columbia University’s
Teachers College. Teachers College, founded in 1887, was by the turn of the century the center of educational study in the United States. Kilpatrick drew students from all over, even internationally, and his classes were always full. He was such a tremendous revenue source that by the 1930s he had been dubbed “the million dollar professor” (Kramer, 1976, p. 227).

Kilpatrick, a Southerner educated in the strict tradition of recitation, repression, and religion, traveled to Baltimore in 1891 for his graduate work at Johns Hopkins. There, in the more electric atmosphere of intellectual inquiry and high academic standards, he encountered the intellectual ferment he found lacking in the South. The cooperative atmosphere, in which professors worked with their students instead of just lecturing at them, inspired Kilpatrick to seek a teaching degree. He studied the educational theorists Page, Spencer, Froebel, and Pestalozzi and concluded that cooperation between adult and student rather than an adversarial relationship was essential to successful education.

Kilpatrick developed the “Project Method” of education, wherein students would learn even without the physical presence of the teacher (Beineke, 1998, p. 22). In his own teaching, he allowed students to move about the room, eliminated corporal punishment, added field trips, and abolished commencement, claiming it was too competitive. He used concrete learning tools in teaching geometry and he eliminated report cards. He believed that the goal of education was to create an internal locus of control in the child, enabling him to become an independent learner. Further, he believed if children were given relevant material and treated with respect, they would behave and respond appropriately. Kilpatrick was personally charming and all his students loved him; he in turn could remember students’ names 60 years later. He believed that teachers should “deny the self and selfish inclinations” and devote themselves to the service of the institution where they taught (Beineke, 1998, p. 28).

Kilpatrick became interested in the field of educational studies that focused on Herbert Spencer and William James, particularly the subject of the relationship between the student’s interest and his level of success. He sat in on a course taught by John Dewey, which also focused on student interest. This course proved to be a turning point in Kilpatrick’s life and was pivotal to his influence in the evolution of American education in the 20th century. Dewey theorized that to be effective, school curriculum should begin with what the student is interested in, rather than with prescribed subject matter (Beineke, 1998, p. 33). In a talk given in 1904, Dewey argued that the future of education would no longer focus on memorization, but rather emotions and feelings would be most important. He was emerging as a staunch proponent of the socialization theory of education (society before individualism):

Some people seem to think—and many more seem to act—as if the individual need consider only himself and his own interest, or only himself and his family and his immediate group (Kilpatrick, 1951, p. 33). Dewey also said, “[E]ducation must be a social process, on the procedural side; and it must aim to bring high quality social living into effect.” (Kilpatrick, 1951, p. 43)

In 1907, Kilpatrick enrolled in Teachers College at Columbia University to earn his PhD, and specifically to work with Dewey, who taught in both the Philosophy Department at Columbia and at Teachers College. The two men connected immediately. Dewey considered Kilpatrick “the best student I ever had” (Beineke, 1998, p. 60). To Kilpatrick, Dewey may have been a brilliant philosopher and theorist, but he certainly was not an eloquent speaker or teacher. During class, Dewey would think out loud and would often pause mid-lecture to consider something new. Kilpatrick decided that Dewey needed an interpreter, because even the brightest students could not comprehend him; and Kilpatrick contrived to fill that role.

Two critical aspects of Dewey’s thinking that intrigued Kilpatrick were interest and effort. To Dewey, “interest” meant an attraction, a quality presented by the student, rather than instilled by the teacher, and “effort” was the student’s self-motivated pursuit of interest. One flowed naturally from the other and they were, there-
Further, Kilpatrick asserted that “A thing is good or evil according to whether it makes life good or evil for all concerned” (Beineke, 1998, p. 61). A new, progressive approach to education was emerging by 1910, with Dewey and Kilpatrick at the helm.

Kilpatrick defended his dissertation in 1911 and became an assistant professor at Teachers College. But he was somewhat depressed at the state of his career. (He wouldn’t be dubbed the “million dollar professor” for another twenty years.) Forty years old, he lamented not having a son or a permanent home; he missed the South, and was dissatisfied with what he perceived as his subordinate position at Columbia (Beineke, 1998, p. 66). He wanted a position with more prestige, influence, and authority, one in which he would be at the center of Teachers College. Kilpatrick sought fame.

At that same time, the Montessori phenomenon had reached the United States. Parents, students, and the general public were clamoring for anything Montessori. The Montessori System Examined, published in 1914. It was the publication of this monograph in addition to his lectures and comments in academic journals that tipped the balance in favor of the academic rejection of Montessori. Although Kilpatrick appreciated Montessori’s concept of giving children more freedom, he dismissed her approach as being behind the times and derided her system as lacking in imaginative play. He disagreed that sense training was a necessary precursor to later learning. He dismissed her enormous popularity and concluded that she contributed nothing to educational theory.

Although Kilpatrick had studied Italian specifically to talk with Montessori, once face to face with her, the translations and interpretations left him dissatisfied with the actual interview. He couldn’t always tell whether Montessori did not understand or if she chose not to answer him. After visiting a few Italian schools implementing the Montessori approach, Kilpatrick noted that many of the children seemed “free, almost to the point of doing nothing” (Beineke, 1998, p. 69). He was also gratified to see children using the didactic materials in ways other than those specifically prescribed by Montessori, which seemed to suggest that her specific prescriptions for their use were too limiting. “The children use the material for all manner of construction not intended by Madam M” (Beineke, 1998, p. 70).

Kilpatrick returned from Rome, and on August 7, 1912, initiated a series of lectures on his observations and opinions of Montessori, which were well attended. Pleased with himself, Kilpatrick wrote in his diary that night, “I felt that I gripped the crowd and from the number of expressions that came to my ears, I judge that I made a good talk” (Beineke, 1998, p. 71). He was also satisfied to learn that his colleagues at Teachers College agreed with his negative evaluation of Montessori’s methods.

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The question of a permanent contribution turns on whether there have been presented original points of view capable of guiding fruitfully educational procedure. What novel and original ideas have we found that could at the same time bear the scrutiny of criticism? The scientific conception of education is certainly valid. Madam Montessori may, in a way, have come upon it herself; but no one could say that the world did not have a fuller conception of it prior to her. The most that can be claimed on this point is that her advocacy and example have proved stimulating. Her doctrine of education as unfolding is neither novel nor correct. In the doctrine of liberty she has made no theoretical contribution; though probably her practice will prove distinctly valuable. Our kindergartens and primary schools must take account of her achievement in this respect. Her doctrine

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of auto-education will at most provoke thought; the term is good, the idea old. Her utilization of “practical life” activities, more specifically her solution of early tenement-house education, must prove distinctly suggestive. It may well turn out that the Casa Dei Bambini is after all her greatest contribution. The sense-training which to her seems most worth while, we decline to accept except in a very modified degree. The didactic apparatus we reject in like degree. Her preparation for the school arts should prove very helpful in Italy. It is possible that her technique of writing will prove useful everywhere. If so, that is a contribution. With this the list closes. We owe no large point of view to Madam Montessori. Distinguishing contribution from service, she is most a contributor in making the Casa Dei Bambini. Her greatest service lies probably in the emphasis on the scientific conception of education, and in the practical utilization of liberty. (Kilpatrick, 1914, pp. 66–67)

In his keynote address at the April 1913 meeting of the International Kindergarten Union, Kilpatrick denounced Montessori as merely derivative of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. He criticized her methods for lacking free play and stories, and her theories for taking too narrow a view of the function of the school (Kramer, 1976). He concluded that “Montessori has then, the spirit, but not the content of modern science” (Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the International Kindergarten Union, Washington, D.C., Apr. 29–May 2, 1913, 118).

In an article for Kindergarten Review, Kilpatrick criticized Montessori for not knowing the doctrine of formal discipline, even though she was practicing it. Formal discipline is a “systematic refinement of a sense organ so that it may be better used whenever that sense may be desired” (Shephard, 1996, p. 268). Not only had she not heard of it, complained Kilpatrick, but she was unaware that it had been rejected by modern psychology. Kilpatrick’s opinions were convincing. In an address to the North Carolina Teachers Assembly in November 1913, he called Montessori’s didactic apparatus “a very expensive and well-nigh useless toy” (Kilpatrick, 1914, p. 70).

Kilpatrick’s attacks devastated the Montessori movement. Educators read his book and his articles, listened to his lectures, and parroted his opinions. Kilpatrick’s dim view of Montessori became the educational establishment’s view as well (Kramer, 1976). After a visit to Rome in 1914, the National Kindergarten Association reported to the U.S. Bureau of Education that Montessori’s emphasis was on the development of the individual rather than “group work” and was notable for its dearth of creative expression (Kramer, 1976, p. 229). The chorus became a litany: the materials were too restrictive in their use, inhibiting the teacher; the approach lacked free play and stifled imagination; and too much emphasis was placed on the individual at the expense of society. In 1915, the magazine Sunset published an article entitled “The Montessori Cult’s Eclipse,” claiming that Montessori education failed because it focused on the individual, who “does not need stimulation; rather he needs to be guided into interwoven patterns of social activity and social discipline” (Sunset, 1915, pp. 657–658). By 1920, the assessment of Montessori in American education read like an epitaph. In Public Education in the United States, E.P. Cubberly, echoing Kilpatrick’s words, wrote that Montessori had been rejected by most American educators because

Although Kilpatrick appreciated Montessori’s concept of giving children more freedom, he dismissed her approach as being behind the times and derided her system as lacking in imaginative play.
Montessori’s prescription for an individual-oriented education intersected with an early 20th-century American optimism fueled by technological and communication advances like the telephone and cheap means of printing. Information was the coin of the realm, and social discourse was the favorite pastime. Daily newspapers were plentiful, magazine subscriptions reached their zenith in the late 19th and early 20th century, and public lectures were a popular source of entertainment as well as education. So Montessori’s rise in popularity was swift and not at all surprising.

Montessori was the progenitor of a revolutionary approach to education. She formulated an auto-education philosophy and methodology encompassing characteristics of rational cognitive development and organic holism that would stand the test of time and endure into the 21st century.

However, Montessori’s messianic perspective prohibited collaborations, and consequently she would not sanction teachers who were not personally trained by her, nor allow any other person or group to speak for her on behalf of her ideas. Years later, Montessori blamed the failure of the American Montessori movement on America’s insistence on trained teachers:

In America, experiments never succeeded because they looked for the best teachers, and a good teacher meant one who had studied all the things that do not help the child, and was full of ideas which were opposed to the child’s freedom. (Montessori, 1989, p. 52)

The negative influence of Kilpatrick and Dewey was substantial and damaging in education circles, but could have been overcome by capitalizing on the groundswell of public endorsement Montessori received in 1913. But Montessori fought poorly in both arenas. She lost the professional education battle because she neither concerned herself with, nor responded to, her opponents’ position. She had long since divorced herself from the university system and thus had no base for publications of her work in scholarly journals, nor any meaningful influence in academic institutions. That Teachers College may have seen her ideas as a threat to their entrenched system did not concern Montessori at all. She neither refuted their objections nor engaged in professional dialog. In explaining why she never responded to their attacks, she said,

If I am going up a ladder . . . and a dog begins to bite at my ankles, I can do one of two things, either turn around and kick at it, or simply go up the ladder. I prefer to go up the ladder. (Campbell, 1970, p. 58)

Thus, the Progressives won the professional educational war with little effort and without sacrificing a casualty of their own. American popular culture initially accepted Montessori, but she needed emissaries to maintain and expand her influence. Instead, she estranged all those who supported her, including professional educators, Henry V. Holmes of Harvard University; U.S. Commissioner of Education Dr. P.P. Claxton, her media champion S.S. McClure; and her organizational champions, the Bells.

As consumers, Americans clamor for a commodity that they perceive will enhance their lives, but if it is not made available to them, they will look for a substitute. American popular opinion accepted Montessori in 1913, but she did not deliver the goods. Her attitude and recalcitrance created the shortage, and that very silence, amplified by her foes’ bellowing, eventually destroyed the first Montessori movement in America. There was nothing to buy and so her idea evaporated into the ether.

Montessori could not have conceived of what it would take to systematically transform American education. Her celebrity status and her brilliant ideas were not enough by themselves to overcome the entrenched educational model in place, nor provide the organization and people needed to meet popular demand. It would be almost a half-century later before another innovator—Nancy McCormick Rambusch—would come along and reinvigorate the Montessori model for a new generation of Americans eager for educational excellence for their children.

References


P. DONOHUE SHORTRIDGE holds AMS credentials at the Infant Toddler and Early Childhood levels. Along with her colleague, Janet Engel, Shortridge is part of the 2006–2007 AMS Traveling Symposium, Revisiting Montessori Philosophy. Contact her at pds@pdonohueshortridge.com.