

**Jarosław Jendza**

<https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2020.48.09>

ORCID: 0000-0001-7598-9085

Uniwersytet Gdański

jaroslaw.jendza@ug.edu.pl

## **The power of authority and the Montessori teachers’ (in)ability to learn – research intervention report**

*An ordinary teacher cannot be transformed into Montessori teacher,  
but must be created anew, having rid herself of pedagogical prejudices.*

Montessori (2014: 65)

### **Summary**

The article concentrates on the issue of Montessori teachers’ attitude towards pedagogical knowledge they develop during different forms of training. The analysis presented in the text is based on quasi-experiment rooted in Critical Realism research paradigm. Eighty-two Montessori teachers participated in a workshop and were asked to comment on eight different quotes. Half of them knew that these extracts had been taken from the publications by Maria Montessori and the other half did not have that knowledge. As a result, the first group of teachers formulated numerous critical remarks whereas the other one concentrated on positive interpretations. This experiment might shed some light on the power of authority and limitations to transform teachers’ implicit pedagogical presuppositions. The teachers that took part in this experiment were provided with the opportunity to problematize their personal teaching theories.

**Keywords:** Montessori teachers, Montessori method, personal theory of teaching, authority, educational cultures

**Słowa kluczowe:** nauczyciele Montessori, metoda Montessori, osobista teoria nauczania, autorytet, kultury edukacyjne

### **Introduction**

A few years ago I was asked to conduct a training workshop for some Montessori teachers during one of the most popular gatherings organized for this group of educators in Poland by one of the most widely recognized association. Initially, I intended to provide the participants with such a self-reflection experience that could have the potential of disclosing and thus problematizing their personal (implicit) teaching theories (Fox 1983: 151–154).

In other words, my primary aim was not scientific thus I did not mean to make this event an occasion to gather data for further analysis, rather I thought of helping the teachers to awaken their emancipatory and critical competences (Hogan 1988: 189) so the workshop had a practice oriented purpose.

Nevertheless, both the process, its results and consequences provoked me to initiate a deeper insight into the matter. The research report summarized in this article was created *a posteriori* and the data that had been gathered promptly after the workshop became the most important input for the analysis presented.

It must be said that the Montessori teachers' personal/implicit theories or ideologies is not a matter or topic that is widely empirically explored by educational researchers both in my local national context as well as in a broader global scale<sup>1</sup> (cf. Marshall 2017). This fact is intriguing, especially if we take into account the abundance of teachers-personal-or-implicit-theory-oriented research conducted with the reference to other various levels and approaches of education (Hatch, Freeman 1988; Spodek 1988; Runco, Johnson 2002; Hoy et al. 2006; Baudson, Preckel 2013; Wallace 2014: 17–31 and many others). Perhaps this aspect of Montessori education is less important for the researchers than its efficiency. For example, the landmark research in Montessori education carried by Angeline Stoll Lillard, attempting to verify most of Montessori's theses, mentions a few times the ideal characteristics of the teacher and their desired actions but explicitly does not address the concept of *teachers beliefs* and *personal knowledge* of education (Lillard 2007: 257–288).

The aforementioned lack of the research of this type might also come as a surprise since Maria Montessori herself underlined many times the importance of the teachers' inner knowledge on education (see for example: Montessori 2009: 11, 71) and also some Montessori enthusiasts write about it (Duffy, Duffy 2012; Fletcher 2012) yet these publications – however inspiring – are not validated scientific research reports with rigid methodologies implemented.

Thus both the literature review as well as the workshop experience provoked me to formulate a research question related to one domain of the implicit teachers theories. The concept of *personal theory* includes presumptions of numerous aspects of education including *inter alia*: aims, methods, desired and undesired goals, relations between different actors etc. (Elbaz 1991: 1–19; Kincheloe 2012: 91–109; Tripp 2012: 28–30).

However, what I am particularly interested in here is the issue of positioning oneself in relation to a given authority. Therefore, the research question can be formulated in this way: how do Montessori teachers conceptualise and perceive their position in relation to: (a) known and appreciated authority and (b) the author that is not known? To put it in a different way – I am interested in the ways in which the participants of the research approach some pedagogical opinions in two situations: (1) when formulated by the author that is important in their teaching career (i.e. M. Montessori) and (2) when the author of opinion is not known.

---

<sup>1</sup> I need to admit that my knowledge related to this matter is limited to the research published in Polish, English and Spanish. It is therefore very likely that there is some research conducted in different languages to which I do not have access.

## Method

### *Approach*

The research procedure described later is deeply rooted in the paradigm referred to as Critical Realism (CR) (Bhaskar 2008: 176–189) which – at least at its initial stage – is not connected with some specific data gathering techniques but rather questions both purely objectivist illusion (Bhaskar 2008: 179) as well as various solipsistic versions of constructivism or methodological anarchism (Bhaskar 2008: 182; cf. Lakatos, Feyerabend 1999). According to Amber J. Fletcher, the most significant tenets of CR is

that ontology [...] is not reducible to epistemology [...]. Human knowledge captures only a small part of a deeper and vaster reality. In this respect, CR deviates from both positivism and constructivism (Fletcher 2012: 182).

CR in this perspective can be treated as a form of synthesis in “constructivist-positivist war” since it names three dimensions of the reality that are sometimes portrayed with the use of ‘iceberg metaphor’ where what is above the surface is related to empirical level whereas what lies beneath are the actual and real levels. The deepest level refers to causal mechanisms or structures that cause events at empirical level to occur (Fletcher 2012: 183).

In this sense, by initiating some ‘quasi-experimental’ (Cook 1987: 74–94) events (empirical level) that can be experienced and/or interpreted by a certain group of people (actual level) the researcher might make an attempt to penetrate possible underlying mechanisms or structures (real level).

### *Procedure and Participants*

The procedure in this ‘exercise’ or ‘experiment’ started with the formulation of the initial hypothesis that can be stated as follows: Montessori teachers treat pedagogical opinions and suggestions in a different way depending on their author. Put another way, Montessori teachers’ critical stance towards pedagogical opinions differ depending on who the author is.

Following this hypothesis the author organised a workshop for Montessori teachers entitled: How to find a way in the garden of forking paths? The workshop had been advertised among the teachers two months in advance and the leaflet contained both a brief description of the workshop as well its main aim that was put in this way: “searching for possible answers in the world of educational complexity”. The teachers “were invited to take part in the intellectual exercise that should help them discover what criteria they use when decide to follow or/and reject some pedagogical recommendations”. I had suspected that the authority of Maria Montessori might have influence on how the teachers would read some quotes by this famous Italian educator.

As a result, eighty-two Montessori teachers enrolled for this ninety-minute workshop. I did not gather data concerning their gender, years of experience, level of education or

any other commonly used variables, however all of them but two were female, most of them working in pre-schools and the first three years of primary education (ECE). The teachers were twice randomly divided. First, they formed two large groups (G1, G2) of forty-two and later each group was again randomly divided into eight subgroups of five or six members (G1.1–G1.8; G2.1–G2.8). G1 and G2 were given each a set of eight quotations by Montessori, however only G2 got them with the signature of the author as well as all bibliographical data. In this way, only half of the teachers (G2) knew that they were supposed to form an opinion about the quote of the authority that is very important in their professional life, and the other half did not realize that they were to discuss quotes by Montessori.

### **Material**

The quotations chosen for this exercise met three criteria:

1. all of them were written by Maria Montessori;
2. they referred to 'hot' and thought-provoking aspects of education;
3. they were 'problematic' in the context of paidocentric model of education.

The teachers were distributed the following quotes:

**Q1:** "(...) take the little children to church with you. Let them accompany you to all religious exercises (...)" (Maria Montessori, *The Child, Society and The World*, p. 38).

**Q2:** "The characteristic of children under 6 years of age is that it is almost impossible to teach them; the children of this age cannot take from the teacher" (Maria Montessori, *The Child, Society and The World*, p. 44).

**Q3:** "If you have given children freedom and good environment and they are still disorderly, then you must pray to God to help you, because then these hurt children cannot be helped without a miracle" (Maria Montessori, *The Child, Society and The World*, p. 80).

**Q4:** "(...) to speak of a democratic school community seems to be asking for misunderstanding. It is community of children, a community of future men and women (...)" (Maria Montessori, *The Child, Society and The World*, p. 104).

**Q5:** "The child who is very poor may suffer physically from lack of food, but he finds himself in natural conditions, and so has inner wealth" (Maria Montessori, *Education for a New World*, p. 49).

**Q6:** "For us adults, prisons, police, soldiers and guns are necessary. Children solve their problems peacefully (...)" (Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, p. 285).

**Q7:** "In brief, the teacher's principal duty in the school may be described as follows: She should explain the use of the material" (Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, p. 150).

**Q8:** "Repetition is the secret of perfection (...)" (Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, p. 92).

It must be clearly stated here that these quotations are not in any way representative to Montessorian pedagogy, neither are they the opinions of Montessori herself. All of them

are deprived of wider context, sometimes they were presented in the cited publications in a critical way or as free associations. They were used as a *workshop material* or *pre-texts* intended to provoke and initiate a certain learning experience in which the participants could hopefully get to know a bit about their own personal teaching ideologies.

As I mentioned earlier, half of the teachers knew the author and the source whereas the other one did not. The exercise had two most important stages: small group work and public justification of the opinion. Each group was asked to take notes about all the stand-points and ideas discussed within the group and then put them on the wall beneath each quote. The aim was not to reveal ‘the trick’ as long as possible.

### ***Ethical constraints***

As mentioned before, this research intervention was created after the workshop (with purely pedagogical aim) had been conducted and therefore participants had not been asked for their consents to take part in the *research* project. In other words, I had been an *educator* at this particular moment caring for the Montessori community and only later “became” a researcher. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that asking for the permission of the participants would address most of the ethical constraints related to this research. However, there are theorists who support the idea that the awareness that one is being observed alters their behaviours and thus the consents is not a methodological imperative as long as the empirical project does not provoke any risk for the participants (Miller, Wertheimer 2010).

Two most important ethical aspects of this research that had to be dealt with are (1) confidentiality, which is sometimes thematised as essential (Gray 2004), and (2) participants’ protection from harm (Fraenkel et. al. 2012). These issues were solved by the anonymisation and modification of some insignificant details of the research.

### **Results**

Before I outline more detailed results of the ‘experiment’ a few general remarks should be made.

First of all, G1 was much more sceptical towards all of the quotations regardless their content and the subgroup. All the subgroups (G1.1–G1.8) formulated some critical comments related to the quotes.

G2 did not find virtually *any* negative possible interpretations/meanings of the quotes. While observing the subgroups at work (G2.1–G2.2) I did spot some doubts, but they were very quickly neutralised and petrified by the other members of the subgroups. As a consequence, in none of the documents gathered in G2 could I find negative interpretations/meanings of the quotes.

Having put their work results on the walls the subgroups were regrouped again in such a way that G1.1 was combined with G2.1, G1.2 with G 2.2 and so on. In this way the

groups of ten to twelve were provided with the opportunity to talk about the experience as well as to explain their motives while interpreting the quotes.

For some of the participants it was, as I was informed later, an important yet difficult lesson but the others did not treat this workshop as an occasion to problematise their personal/tacit knowledge on education and themselves as professionals.

The table below shows some of the teachers' interpretations (quoted directly) in more detail.

Table 1. Teachers' interpretations of Montessori quotes

Quote	Group	
	G1	G2
Q1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– That is nonsense in secular society</li> <li>– Of course not! Some students would feel excluded</li> <li>– That's not the role of the teacher</li> <li>– I am not religious, so it is not possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– True, it is part of our tradition even if you're not a catholic</li> <li>– Yes, children learn by observing the adults</li> <li>– Yes, we must be good models for them, and church is nothing bad</li> </ul>
Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– This is utter nonsense. Teachers are very important at that stage because they serve as models and prepare the learning environment</li> <li>– Complete rubbish! Adult caregivers are essential at this moment of child's life</li> <li>– This person probable has never heard about developmental psychology ☺</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Yes, that's why they need to work a lot by themselves</li> <li>– They don't understand explanation yet, so yes of course we agree ☺</li> </ul>
Q3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– God has nothing to do with our children's success – it is our duty</li> <li>– This opinion is a good excuse for not doing anything</li> <li>– They might behave disorderly if they had not had opportunity to function in the conditions of freedom</li> <li>– Praying to God when something going wrong in my class – come on – you must be joking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– True, really sometimes you try hard and there is nothing you can do</li> <li>– Sometimes I do it and it always helps, the God sees us</li> <li>– Yes, most children cannot live in freedom</li> </ul>
Q4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The more democracy in the school and in the classroom the better</li> <li>– Nonsense! Children must learn democracy through experiencing democracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Montessori school is not democratic, we are not Summerhill</li> <li>– Yes, first they need to learn how to tackle freedom</li> <li>– It is not so popular but yes are not equal</li> <li>– At that stage they need a strong leader, later they will reach independence if they are allowed to work in their own way and pace</li> </ul>

Tabela 1. cont.

Quote	Group	
	G1	G2
Q5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Has she/he forgotten about Maslow?</li> <li>– Never have I seen more stupid opinion. Children are not able to learn if the basic needs are not met</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Yes, now children (for example in my kindergarten) have everything and they are not able to appreciate anything we offer</li> <li>– Money does not bring happiness, sometimes poverty is OK</li> </ul>
Q6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– This is simply not true. Very often children especially boys fight and at times are heartless.</li> <li>– Not in my kindergarten!</li> <li>– It would be great, but children very often do not know yet how to deal with conflicts in a civilised way</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– They are good by nature, only later they are spoiled by the world</li> <li>– This is so much to the point, as if I was looking at my kids, they hardly ever fight</li> <li>– Children don't care about politics and all these instruments have appeared because of politics</li> </ul>
Q7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– If this was true, we would be robots</li> <li>– No! the most important thing is to inspire not to explain, not in Montessori schools but maybe in conventional institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Yes, there are so many materials</li> <li>– I only give presentations and then withdraw</li> <li>– Yes, no traditional teaching</li> </ul>
Q8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– This is the motto of behaviourism – so I am 100% against</li> <li>– Yes, but only if we think about very simple and practical skills, maths does not work in this way</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Yes, before a child understands or can do something they must first repeat and practice a lot</li> <li>– Yes, without repetition there is learning</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

G1 formulated numerous doubts and even severe critique. In this group the number of arguments was twice as large as in G2. Naturally, this quantitative comparison might not serve as some kind of proof, yet it does provoke questions related to the teachers' attitude towards authority. One must also bear in mind that almost all the participants had already completed pricy as well as long-lasting training courses and might have a feeling that they are 'in possession' secret and valuable answers and therefore should not be 'weakened' by questioning (cf. Jendza, Zamojski 2015). This situation may cause two types of reactions. If a given opinion is not associated with Montessori approach, it is immediately rejected but if the teacher knows that the source of some pedagogical claim comes from Montessori publications it is entirely accepted.

The commodification of education and therefore also theory of education (Ball 2012: 17–28) might play an important role here, however there are other possible interpretive tracks which are interrelated and connected with (a) *the power of author(ity)* and (b) the meaning of the phenomenon known as *educational culture*.

It is needless to say that all of us are – to some extent and perhaps in a slightly different conditions – vulnerable to the influence of the deindividualizing authority (Milgram 1963, 1973; cf. Doliński, Grzyb 2019). It does matter who is saying. It does matter what the status of the author is and what their function is in circulating discourses (Foucault 1979: 13–20), especially when the author is treated as an ‘always-right-celebrity’.

If we combine the possible power of the author and a specific educational or school culture we might find ourselves in a vicious circle of uncritical repetition with no way to ‘escape’.

Following Roland S. Barth, I perceive *school culture* as

a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. It is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act (Barth 2002: 6).

Some Montessori teachers when referring to the educational organizations of the dominant, conservative culture use the adjective ‘conventional’ implying (or at times expressing openly) that Montessori is *not* conventional.

However, the results of the ‘experiment’ described in this article show that they might be more ‘conventionalised’ than they think. Some of the teachers realized that during the experience and were emotionally and intellectually moved by what had happened during our session.

It is also important to remember that the participants’ values, patterns of behaviour and norms have been shaped in specific *cultural codes* characteristic for Polish reality (Zamojski 2018: 416–433). By becoming members of the Montessori community they had in a way rejected traditional schooling... yet – as aforementioned Barth observes – this transmitted pattern of thinking and acting through generations is astonishingly strong and durable.

## Discussion and conclusions

The research strategy implemented in the project presented is far from ideal scientific investigation. The sample is not random, the number of participants is insufficient to extrapolate the results onto wider population.

Nevertheless, the results may serve both an inspiration for further, perhaps more rigid research but undoubtedly this ‘experiment’ provokes questions related to a few significant issues or inquiries.

Is it desirable for both educational practice and theory to keep Montessori pedagogy away from serious multi-dimensional public and scientific (and therefore critical) verification?

To what extent is it possible to apply pedagogies originating from specific times and particular educational culture in totally different social context?



How should the education of teachers look like assuming that the power of authority limits their authorship?

The answers to these questions cannot be developed thoroughly in article but undoubtedly some considerations may be formulated. As the reply for the first question seems to be negative, the other two cover complex problems and demand further research investigations. What seems to be of vital importance is the need to (re)think teachers' education both in public and private HE institutions as well as in the training centres. If the authority is so overwhelming even for the teachers searching for alternative forms of education, we – as teachers' educators – must pay much more attention to critical and emancipatory competences and provide the trainees with such programmes that are based on detailed and critical studies of various pedagogical systems as well as challenge them with study-experiences that have the potential to transform their tacit knowledge and therefore modify their cultural scripts of reasoning and acting.

## References

- Ball S.J. (2012), *Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neo-liberal University*. „British Journal of Educational Studies”, 60(1).
- Barth R.S. (2002), *The Culture Builder*. „Beyond Instructional Leadership”, 59(8).
- Baudson T.G., Preckel F. (2013), *Teachers' Implicit Personality Theories About the Gifted: An Experimental Approach*. „School Psychology Quarterly”, 28(1).
- Bhaskar R. (2008), *A Realist Theory of Science*. London–New York, Routledge.
- Cook T.D. (1987), *Quasi-Experimentation: Its Ontology, Epistemology, and Methodology*. In: G. Morgan (ed.), *Beyond Method. Strategies for Social Research*. Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Doliński D., Grzyb T. (2019), *The (doubtful) role of the financial reward in obedience to authority*. „Journal of Social Psychology”, 159(4).
- Duffy M., Duffy N. (2012), *Love of Learning. Supporting Intrinsic Motivation in Montessori Students*, Santa Rosa, CA, Parent Child Press – A Division of Montessori Services.
- Elbaz F. (1991), *Research on teacher's knowledge: the evolution of a discourse*. „Journal of Curriculum Studies”, 23(1).
- Fletcher J. (2012), *Wisdom from the Inner Teacher: Turning Aha!s into OWL Moments – Optimal Wisdom Learning*. North Charleston SC, McClain Productions.
- Foucault M. (1979), *What is an Author?* „Screen”, 20(1).
- Fox D. (1983), *Personal theories of teaching*. „Studies in Higher Education”, 8(2).
- Fraenkel J.R., Wallen N.E., Hyun H.H. (2012), *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Gray D.E. (2004), *Doing Research in the Real World*. London, Sage Publications.
- Hatch J.A., Freeman E.B. (1988), *Kindergarten philosophies and practices: perspectives of teachers, principals and supervisors*. „Early Childhood Research Quarterly”, 3(2).
- Hogan P. (1988), *Communicative Competence and Cultural Emancipation: reviewing the rationale for educational studies in teacher education*. „Oxford Review of Education”, 2(14).

- Hoy A.W., Davis H., Pape S.J. (2006), *Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs*. In: P.A. Alexander, P.H. Winnie (eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology*. Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Jendza J., Zamojski P. (2015), *Privatizing Montessori. The Capitalization of Knowledge and the Inability to Renew Meanings*. „Studia Pedagogiczne”, 28.
- Kincheloe J.K. (2012), *Teachers as Researchers. Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*. London–New York, Routledge.
- Lakatos I., Feyerabend P. (1999), *For and Against Method*, ed., intro. M. Motterlini, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press.
- Lillard A.S. (2007), *Montessori – The Science Behind the Genius*. Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press.
- Marshall Ch. (2017), *Montessori education: a review of the evidence base*, “npj Science of Learning”, DOI: 10.1038/s41539-017-0012-7.
- Milgram S. (1963), *Behavioral study of obedience*. “Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology”, 67(4), DOI: 10.1037/h0040525, 2.12.2019.
- Milgram S. (1973), *The Perils of Obedience*. “Harper’s Magazine”, 247(1483).
- Miller F.G., Wertheimer A. (2010), *The ethics of consent: theory and practice*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Montessori M. (1967), *The Discovery of the Child*. New York, The Random House Publishing Group.
- Montessori M. (1972), *The Secret of Childhood*. New York, Balantine Books.
- Montessori M. (1995), *The Absorbent Mind*. New York, Henry Holt and Company.
- Montessori M. (2009), *The Child, Society and The World. Unpublished Speeches and Writings*. Amsterdam, Montessori – Pierson Publishing Company.
- Montessori M. (2014), *The Child, Education for a New World*. Amsterdam, Montessori – Pierson Publishing Company.
- Runco M.A., Johnson D.J. (2002), *Parents’ and teachers’ implicit theories of children’s creativity: A cross – cultural perspective*. „Creativity Research Journal”, 14.
- Spodek B. (1988), *The implicit theories of early childhood teachers*. „Early Childhood Development and Care”, 38.
- Tripp D. (2012), *Critical Incidents in Teaching – Developing professional judgement*. London–New York, Routledge.
- Wallace C.S. (2014), *Overview of the Role of Teacher Beliefs in Science Education*. In: R. Evans, J. Luft, Ch. Czerniak, C. Pea (eds.), *The Role of Science Teachers’ Beliefs in International Classrooms. From Teacher Actions to Student Learning*. Rotterdam, Sense Publishers.
- Zamojski P. (2018), *Cultural codes and education in Poland – a plea for a new educational imaginary*. „Policy Futures in Education”, 16(4).