



The Beechwood Estate in Scarborough, New York. The first Montessori school in the United States opened in this location in 1911 in the building on the far left.

Right: Nancy McCormick Rambusch and Margaret E. Stephenson addressing a Montessori study group, early 1960s



Montessori in America: t

In the first of two parts, **Dr Keith Whitescarver** explores the history behind the Montessori movement in the United States.

The United States was an early adopter of Montessori education. Maria Montessori opened her first school, the Casa dei Bambini, as part of an urban renewal project in the San Lorenzo district of Rome in 1907. By 1909, additional schools were launched and news of Montessori's academic benefits spread throughout the European continent and then to the rest of the world.

In the United States, news of Montessori education had spread far and wide by 1911. In an article published in the highly popular *McClure's Magazine*, Maria Montessori was described as "an educational wonder-worker" and depicted the students studying in her school as "miracle children" because of their ability to read and write at such a young age. The American response to the article was intense and positive. Latching on to the popularity, S. S. McClure, the owner/publisher of the magazine, assumed the role of American promoter of both the founder and method. To this end, he ran letters from the public commenting on Montessori's ideas and created a column on Montessori education that became a regular feature.

An American Montessori school opened in Scarborough, New York, in the fall of 1911 in the home of Frank Vanderlip, one of the leading bankers in the country. The teacher in this school, Anne George, wrote about the school for *McClure's* at the end of the first academic year:

"Externally, Dr. Montessori's Casa dei

Bambini bore little resemblance to this first American school. She made her first experiments in the model tenements of the San Lorenzo district in Rome – a section which has the same relation to the Eternal City that the East Side has to New York... My children all came from cultured families, whose greatest ambition it was to give their children everything possible in the way of education and rational enjoyment."

In other words, the American version of Montessori differed dramatically from its Italian forerunner. Where Dr. Montessori's educational experiment grew out of a larger social initiative, it was the "miracle children" who captured the attention of wealthy American supporters.

In this dazzling period of favorable publicity, additional Montessori schools opened around the country. Montessori's American backers, including Mabel Bell and her spouse, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, were strong initial supporters. She and her husband opened a school in Nova Scotia in the summer of 1912, and they created a second school in Washington, D. C. later that fall. Other progressive era reformers lauded the new educational approach. In the years 1912–1914, there were 187 English language articles and books on Montessori education; almost all were published in the United States. In the international training course led by Dr. Montessori in Rome in 1913, sixty-seven of the eighty-seven enrollees were from the United States.

Supported, in part, by McClure, Dr. Montessori traveled to the country in



Maria Montessori (left) gives a lecture in Italian to 5,000 teachers in Los Angeles, California in 1915. The English translator is Adelia Pyle.

1913 and 1915 to great acclaim and to packed lecture halls. She taught a training course in San Francisco as part of the Panama Pacific International Exposition in the latter tour. By the 1916-17 school year, there were over 100 Montessori schools in 22 states.

Amazingly, the movement burned out in the United States just as quickly as it had arrived. Language barriers, travel limitations forced by World War I, an anti-immigrant sentiment, and public criticism by a few influential educational leaders, led to the decline. By the 1920s Montessori had all but disappeared.

While Montessori continued to flourish as a global movement for child-centered, peace-oriented learning for the remainder of Dr. Montessori's life, the movement lay dormant on American shores. By 1960, however, a distinctly American version of the system began to take shape.

The leader of the American revival was Nancy McCormick Rambusch. Like the movement's founder, Dr. Rambusch



The first 100 years

was charismatic, well-educated, and a determined advocate. The young Nancy McCormick Rambusch became aware of the writings of Maria Montessori while a student at the University of Toronto in the late 1940s. It was not until marriage and the birth of her first child, however, that she actively sought an alternative to traditional American schooling. In search of answers, she traveled to Paris in 1953 to attend the Tenth International Montessori Congress. There she met the new leader of the international Montessori movement, Mario Montessori. She was urged by Mario to take Montessori training and to bring Montessori education back to the United States.

Taking Montessori's advice, Rambusch completed training in London in 1955. Afterwards she returned home and prepared a Montessori classroom in her Manhattan apartment. Subsequently, the Rambusch family moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, and Nancy, with the collaboration of a group of prominent Roman Catholic families, opened the Whitby School in September, 1958.

In June 1959 Mario Montessori appointed Dr. Rambusch the "representative of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)." Six months later, the American Montessori Society (AMS) was born, becoming the organizational representative of AMI for the United States. The goals of AMS were to support efforts to create schools, develop teacher education programs, and publicize the value of Montessori education.

The last goal got a huge boost in 1961 when the news weekly *Time* published a story about Rambusch, Whitby school, and the American Montessori revival in

Above left: Montessori L&A Wise Memorial Day Care Center.

Above right: Unidentified teacher and students at the Whitby School, 1960

its May 12th issue. For the second time, an article on Montessori education galvanized the American public. Interest was so intense that *Time* printed a special report shortly afterwards, and AMS received numerous requests from parents on how to start schools and begin study groups. Publicity generated by print media, including *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Catholic Reporter*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the publication in 1962 of Rambusch's book, *Learning How to Learn*, led to dramatic growth in schools and students.

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From the beginning Nancy McCormick Rambusch and AMS pursued a “transmuted” rather than “transplanted” version of Montessori in the U. S. Transmutation manifested itself most obviously in teacher education. AMS broadened the curriculum for teachers and attempted to forge inroads into mainstream schooling by running courses in Montessori instruction through traditional university-based teacher preparation programs.

Mario Montessori disagreed with this approach, calling for a deliberate approach to innovation. AMI and AMS parted ways in 1963, largely over disagreements regarding teacher preparation.

After the split, Margaret Elizabeth Stephenson, who had previously worked with Rambusch to establish training courses in the US, replaced

Rambusch as Mario Montessori's personal emissary to the United States. As Montessori schools grew in number, AMI opened a branch office in the United States at Miss Stephenson's request. AMI/USA was founded in 1972 and directed for its first ten years by Karin Salzmann. Currently, Virginia McHugh Goodwin is the Executive Director of the organization. In 2010 there were 180 AMI affiliated schools in the United States.

The American Montessori Society is now the larger of the two organizations with over 1200 affiliated schools in 2010 and over 11,000 members and 90 accredited AMS-affiliated teacher education courses. Richard A. Ungerer is Executive Director.

There are at least four other organizations through which a school may be affiliated. Schools that wish to identify themselves as Montessori schools without any organizational affiliation are free to do so as well. The name Montessori is not protected by copyright or patent.

In recent years increased attention to the public sector has been a priority for both AMS and AMI. Both organizations view the extension of Montessori education to larger numbers of children as a key, mission-based, priority. Today there are more than 240 public Montessori programs in 32 states. The highest concentrations of public

Montessori schools are found in the states of Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas—each with more than fifteen schools identified. The vast majority of these schools report no affiliation with a Montessori professional association (AMI or AMS).

In the last two decades the number of Montessori schools in the United States has grown dramatically in both the public and private sectors. ■

In the second part of this series, Dr. Whitescarver delves into why this resurgence is occurring and provides case examples of successful public Montessori programs and schools.

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