

From the Wonder Worker to the Corporate Kindergarten

Meanings and Changes of the Mediatic Discourse about the Montessori Method (United States, 2000-2015)

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mediatic discourse between the years of 2000 and 2015. He describes how after a spectacular entry into the US school landscape in the early 1910s Montessori education then almost disappeared from the stage for close to fifty years, during which her work was "silenced", how it reappeared in the 1960s and was voiced through different perspectives until, in the beginning of the 21st century, discourses on the Montessori method began to be articulated with economic and entrepreneurial meanings.

The year was 1911, and news about Montessori's work was only beginning to spread in the United States. Barely known in the country up to that moment, the method would be called *revolutionary* and the product of a *wonder worker*.¹ It was the beginning of a long journey, with periods of intense waves of publications and long decades of silence by the media in the United States, leading to interesting changes in meaning and relevant discussions about the contemporary interpretation of the Montessori method.

This article is the result of a five-year doctorate research on the discursive analysis of texts published in United States' media outlets in the twenty-first century. Two thousand texts published during the twentieth century were read and partially analysed, forming a useful archive. A closer analysis was given to seventy texts published between the years of 2000 and 2015. In this article, I will share the most relevant findings.

The research at the basis of this article was a discursive analysis of mediatic texts. When people write and speak, as well as when we read and listen, the meanings of words and phrases depend on who is speaking, when and where,

and it also depends on how the speaker and listener—consciously or unconsciously—see the world.

Discursive analysis is the study of how words and phrases mean what they mean, and how meanings interact with each other, as well as with the human unconscious, history, and ideology.²

The main question we ask in this discipline is 'How do meanings work?' As an example, let's consider the word *work*, and the phrase *child work*. In a broad, non-Montessori context, the phrase does not communicate any positive connotations, being connected to meanings such as poverty, exploitation, oppression and slavery. However, if this exact same phrase were used as the title of an article in this *AMI Journal*, the reader would infer different meanings, connected to others such as concentration, effort, development, interest, and learning. The phrase can be precisely the same, but the way it is used and the context in which it happens completely change the meanings.

One factor that influences the way anything is said, written, and understood is ideology. Ideology can be defined as the



“representation” of the imaginary relationship between the individual and the real conditions of existence of that individual’ (Althusser). This can be appreciated in at least three ways:

- 1 There is a real condition of existence to all of us: the environment, the economic conditions, food, shelter, etc.
- 2 We understand these conditions in a specific way—the environment can be understood, for example, as home, nature, place, creation, or resources.
- 3 The way we understand the relationship between us, individually, and the material conditions around us is demonstrated in how we express and understand what others express.

Concerning our approach to discourse analysis, ideology can be materialized (also) in text form, and all text is also the materialization of ideology. This materialization of ideology in text form is what we call discourse.

In this research, we focused our analysis on mediatic discourse. This is a special kind of discourse that can be described, for the ends we pursue here, as that discourse (text + ideology) which is produced, published, and read in

the context of media outlets, such as popular newspapers, magazines, and websites. For this research, we referred mainly to seventeen media outlets, reading, and analysing pieces from 2000 to 2015.

Mediatic discourse presents a few special patterns, to such an extent that it is possible to say that this kind of discourse is characterized by these patterns. One important pattern of mediatic discourse is how it is recognized (and how it recognizes itself) as truth:

The journalistic discourse [is] a modality of *discourse about*, by ‘putting the world as object’. In the way a *discourse about* organizes the many voices of the *discourses from/of* it stands as a place of authority and acts in a determining way to the institutionalization of meanings, by deciding how to portray the world in its reports.³ (Grigoletto, 2011, p. 305-306)

A second, equally relevant pattern of the mediatic discourse is the repetition of established meanings. Maingueneau (2011, p. 40) would state that mediatic discourse is ‘legitimized in advance.’ In other forms of discourse, we would be more willing to *disagree*, but in the case of

mediatic discourse, readers buy the newspaper, magazine or subscription because there is a tacit anticipation or legitimization of the truth in that discourse. Still, there is the need, for the mediatic discourse, to “fit” in what is already known or understood. In order that others can understand us, we cannot make up words or phrases all the time, we have to repeat, at least a little bit, what has already been said before. Eni Orlandi, a Brazilian discourse analyst, would say, ‘the subject has to insert their “say” on the repeatable [...] so that it can be understood’⁴ (1996, p.48).

Among all forms of discourse, media is especially concerned with being understood; it makes a special effort to help the reader identify what they read as the truth, and to aid in a process of identification between the one who reads and what is being read. As Marisa Grigoletto (2011, p. 306) states: ‘The media discourse works by the repetition of certain enunciations. This reiterative mode acts over the subject-reader in the sense of creating an *effect of shared knowledge*, [...] and that produces an effect of identification in reading.’⁵

This being said, we will now look at the history of the mediatic discourse in the United States, from 1911 to 2015. The focus of our analysis will be the period from 2000 to 2015, but for a better understanding it is interesting to see what happened before.

I called this *history*, but this is not our real focus. We are not particularly interested in the sequence of facts, but much

more in how words and phrases interacted in history, in order to create different meanings at different moments. Because this is our interest, we are going to talk not about history, but about movements, about how things changed and how those changes have echoes and consequences up to this day.

A side note: Throughout the text, I have chosen to apply italics to emphasize what I consider to be the most relevant words or phrases of some excerpts. This is not a conventional practice in our discipline, because it can heavily influence reading. This has been done in an effort to make the analysis more understandable and our conversation more fluid.

Movements of Meanings in the US Media about Montessori

When Montessori’s work arrived in the United States’ media, it arrived in a grandiose way, and the first relevant headline about the method and its main developer read, “An Educational Wonder Worker: The Methods of Maria Montessori.”

Commissioned by Sam McClure and published in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1911, this article was written by Josephine Tozier. *McClure’s Magazine* was a popular investigative



publication, which would be later characterized as belonging to muckraker journalism. Some of the most important pieces it published had to do with biographical studies of successful people and their achievements, as well as scandals. The piece on Montessori brought to the readers some of her background studies and previous successes as a researcher and public speaker. It also mentioned the grounding of her work being indebted to Séguin's and Itard's works, as well as a somewhat emphatic description of her work.

The report by Tozier was so attractive to the public, and so extensive and enthusiastic was the public's response, that *McClure's Magazine* featured at least nine other articles on Montessori's work from 1911 to 1914. The publishers even created a special section in the magazine editorial that was dedicated to answering letters about the method. Sam McClure organized live events and lecture tours with Maria Montessori in the United States and these also were considerably popular. During this first period, Montessori was described as a 'wonder worker' and her methods were referred to as 'revolutionary educational work.'

The popularity of the method was to peak in 1913-1914. After that it faded, and the method would not become as popular at least for the next few decades (Thayer-Bacon, 2012, p. 9). With the publication of a booklet that purported to "examine" the method. Professor Kilpatrick, from Columbia University Teacher's College, wrote and published *The Montessori System Examined* in 1914. In less than seventy pages, Kilpatrick analysed the method from the point of view of an American male professor.

Montessori's biographer, Rita Kramer (p. 227) summarizes the ideological basis of Kilpatrick's analysis-criticism: '[...] Montessori was a woman, a foreigner, and a Catholic. She was at the least an outsider, and at the most an anomaly.'

Kilpatrick's booklet starts criticizing those who agree with Montessori's ideas and ends with a clear conclusion on the intended examination of the method. The editor's introduction (Kilpatrick p. ix) reads:

The smaller class of heroic enthusiasts that become the more or less partisan leaders and followers of a new propaganda are not likely to be interested in a critical analysis of the particular theories and practices that constitute their faith. With them the new institutional spirit is the thing! Details may be left to the rectification of time!

And almost as if the book completed a cycle, finishing in the criticism where it started, we read in the last lines: 'We owe no large point of view to Madam Montessori' (Kilpatrick p. 67).

Because Kilpatrick was a reference in the educational field at the time, the reach of the booklet was great, and the persistence of his criticisms in academic circles is perceived to be enduring (Cossentino and Whitescarver, pp. 2579-2580).

After Kilpatrick's critique, there was a five-decades-long period of almost complete silence about the Montessori method in the United States mediatic discourse. Silence is a relevant category in discourse. When silence happens, it is not just the absence of something, but the silenced presence of certain meanings and movements of meanings (Orlandi).

Although we see the influence of Kilpatrick's work over the popular understanding of the method, and the 'irrelevance' the American professor accredited to the Italian educator which was partially responsible for the mediatic silence, there may have been more to Montessori's disappearance from the media.

In 1914, Montessori included a preface in *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook* dedicated to Helen Keller. At the time, Keller was already popular in the media, also for her opinions on feminism and socialism. Although Montessori did not wholly agree with her, she called Keller 'a woman of exceptional culture and a writer' and asked 'who, better than she proves the potency of that method of education which builds on the senses.' (Montessori, 1914/1965 p. 26)

Just a few years before that, in her foundational book *The Montessori Method* (1912, p. 63) Montessori had defended the 'collective ownership of the school' as a 'very beautiful and profoundly educational' idea.

Historian Howard Zinn (p. 354) argues that in the years surrounding the publication of both of those books (from 1910 to 1914), the United States' government begun to exert severe pressure over media to direct the public opinion against socialism, as they were especially in favour of three ideas: 'individual liberty, private property and inviolability of contract.'

Nowadays, *liberty* is one of the most important ways to describe the method in media, as we shall see. However, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the collective ownership of the school was closely accompanied by the ideas of order, structure, discipline, and concentration. Also, in some of her later titles, such as *Education and Peace* or *The Formation of Man*, Montessori would state that:

Order and discipline must be aimed at the attainment of human harmony, and any act that hinders the establishment of a *genuine community of all mankind*⁶ must be regarded as immoral and a threat to the life of society. (*Education and Peace*, p.xiii)

Or that:

The master [owner] is mysterious. The tyrant is omnipotent, like a god. It is the environment that swallows and crushes man. (*Formazione dell'uomo*, p. 20)

Montessori's praise of famous socialist intellectual Helen Keller, the label of an 'outsider/anomaly' together with opposition to socialist ideas in the media could well have been another reason for the silencing of Montessori's ideas in the US.

This long period of silence was occasionally interrupted, as in 1930 when Maria Montessori was featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine; in the first few lines of the article she was described as a 'plump little woman in rusty black clothes.'

If this sounds demeaning, it might be related to the fact that the article also described the relationship between Montessori and the fascist movement in Italy. Even if most of the core content of the article is actually positive and complimentary of Montessori's work, this was the frame in which this was included and that determined the interpretation of this core text to direct the reader to a certain path of understanding. The first few lines construct a demeaning description of her person and the last two paragraphs come under the subtitle of 'Criticism', emphasizing (fifteen years after Kilpatrick) the closer and fairer relevance of John Dewey's ideas and the creative potential of Dewey's method: 'Under the Dewey method, the child has opportunity for creative expression which the less plastic Montessori equipment does not allow.'⁷

The construction of negative interpretations of Montessori's work was primarily present during the five decades of silence about her work, in sharp contrast to the 1911-1914 era, or after the 1960s. The role of ideology in reading is a curious one: Those who considered previously known and accepted notions to be superior have historically read Montessori's lines as ideas to be scrutinized, chosen from, and modified. All the while, so many who agreed with the approach from Montessori have, indeed, found it interestingly challenging to consider other notions as valid contributions and ideas that deserved prolonged analysis and attention. The exaggerated perception of this phenomena has been part of much of the contention we find in mediatic movements of meanings about the Montessori approach.

From the 1960s to the 1970s, we find a shift from the negative to the contradictory. There is a flow of texts, constituting a discursive formation indicating doubts, uncertainty, and indecision about how to constitute meanings about the Montessori method, and so we read the following headline in *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1967: "There is no middle ground for Montessori" indicating that the opinions on the Montessori approach were, at the time, quite polarized.

Then, in *The New York Times* (July 7, 1968) the following year, the headline of "The Montessori Method—Pro and Con" again, trying to construct a more neutral text but still recognizing the presence of two poles of ideas. At the time when the method was described, the emphasis was on order, structure, and discipline. We could find this to be negative or positive.

A negative example would be as found on April 12, 1965, in *The New York Times*:

Critics of the Montessori method [...] point to [...] the lack of creativity in using materials that have one right answer and only one correct method to arrive at it.

Or positively, in the same publication, just a few years later, on June 12, 1971:

It does not advocate laissez-faire in the classroom but rather encourages orderly study habits, and systematic solution of problems.'

By 1975, the contradiction, or dispute, was less intense, and most of what we have identified from this time on has a variety of positive connotations. The work of Nancy Rambusch towards the stabilization of those meanings is certainly important. While Rambusch revised some of Montessori's ideas and adapted other aspects of it, it is also true that through her rhetoric and action, media had, again, a Montessorian reference in the contemporary world, and her discursive (and even ideological) influence should be mentioned. As a brief example of this force and influence, Povell (pp. 116-117) writes about Rambusch's style and effect:

As noted, the first article that Nancy wrote appeared in *Jubilee*, a Catholic magazine. It brought a flood of letters from parents who wanted to know if this system could be used in the United States. The article, similar in tone to the Josephine Tozier article in *McClure's Magazine*, described the rich, prepared environment for learning in a Montessori school [...]

The article continues to detail the emphasis Nancy Rambusch put on the religious education in Montessori schools, in a marked difference from *McClure's Magazine* publications, decades earlier.

From 1975 on, most of what we have found does not suggest any marked change or movement of meanings, and from now on, we will direct our attention towards the analysis of the contemporary (2000-2015) mediatic discourse about the Montessori method in United States' media.

Contemporary Mediatic Discourse about Montessori in the United States

Broadly speaking, the main meaning connected to Montessori in contemporary mediatic discourse is the meaning of *choice*. This is understood often as *freedom of choice*, and generally written as *freedom of choice among previously available options*. Sometimes the choices children have in Montessori schools were described in texts, at other moments, metaphors were used. The most interesting metaphor we found for this in recent years is the following, published on February 27, 2013:

[Professor] Mitra's⁸ model reminds me of my Montessori education. From kindergarten through sixth grade, every day I chose what I wanted to do, and held it and touched it. *School was a cafeteria.*
(*Huffington Post*, December 6, 2017)

Other excerpts also point to choice as a relevant meaning connected to Montessori:

This method stresses small group instruction that allows children to choose their own developmentally appropriate activities and learn at their own pace. There is no testing and no grading.
(September 28, 2006 - *Fox News*)

The students here have been raised with a Montessori-like system of *free choice learning*, where they can go to class barefoot and make their own decisions about when and how they study.
(June 18, 2000 - *The New York Times*).

It is interesting to note that in all instances, choice happens among a selection of possibilities: a cafeteria (especially the typical American school one) is a place where there is a definite number of possibilities for choice. More specifically, the child can choose any of a number of 'developmentally appropriate activities' or 'when and how they study'. There is no indication, for example, that a child might choose to rest—in spite of the fact that Montessori would indicate that to be an option in some of her writings: 'Respect anyone who is resting and anyone who is watching the others work without disturbing him, without calling him or making him return to his own task' (*The Child, Society and the World*, p. 19).

In this sense, we promptly notice that the mediatic description of the Montessori method, regardless of positive or negative connotations, does not necessarily portray the approach as it was communicated by Montessori, but emphasizes different aspects of it.

Work and Fun

From one point of view, resting is not mentioned. This happens above all because in order to cause the sensation of identification in readers, it is necessary to reproduce previously legitimated meanings, and “rest at school” could be considered as a not-often repeated or legitimated meaning.

On the other hand, the new meanings Montessori attributed to work are also avoided.

When describing the Montessori method, often there is a juxtaposition and even a substitution of the Montessorian concept/meaning of work, and the more general concept/meaning of play and fun. This, again, happens precisely because media constructs its discourse and its meanings based on previously legitimated meanings and inserting mediatic saying in the repeatable.

The repeatable is, of course, ideological, in the sense that it represents the hegemonic way in which discourse materializes ideology in text, including the perception that children should not work—more broadly, that work is defined in a certain, limited, sense, as suggested by Raymond Williams (1983, p. 335):

the basic sense of the word, to indicate activity and effort or achievement, has thus been modified, though unevenly and incompletely, by a definition of its imposed conditions, such as ‘steady’ or timed work, or working for a wage or salary: being hired.

Williams, then, shows us that the more recent interpretation of the word *work* does not bend towards effort or achievement (and, we could understand, towards the complex understanding of the subject constructed by Montessori), but that this word means something else now. Naturally, something that should not be connected to childhood. Considering the necessity to distance the present meaning of work from those of childhood, we find passages such as the ones below:

Maria Montessori, the educational theorist who believed *work could be both play* and a rich learning experience. (New York Times, January 28, 2001)

I know. You’re probably thinking, “Any kid who attends one of those *free-for-all Montessori schools* is going to think *school is fun*. But I want my kids to learn” (Huffington Post, January 1, 2013)

We find, in the excerpts above, a school where there is no effort, and a child who is always having fun or playing. Before, we saw phrases that indicated a continuous choice of activity by the child. By this contradiction, the child is put in a place of never making any kind of effort, but still always choosing something to do. There is much activity, but most of it is identified with play and fun. Curiously, Montessori herself wrote:

Freedom and work are problems which find no solution if considered only in the adult [we would add: ideological] world, without the help and delight [we would add: and the meaningful changes] which the child can give. (Montessori, 2020, p. 71)

The ‘adult world’ is an ideological world, of course, by which I mean only that it is the same world the child inhabits but interpreted from the point of view of the adult. This passage from Montessori helps us in understanding that the adults, in an ideologically adult world, writing about the work of the child, might have trouble understanding it in a way that is contradictory to those meanings previously considered by them as valid and correct. When the mediatic discourse describes the Montessori approach, it is often described much more by what it does not have, such as in Huffington Post’s 2013 article ‘A Montessori School with No Tests or Homework’, than by what it does have.

The effort of the child, their concentration and order, structure and repetition, are not mentioned—in a marked contrast to the beginning of the century and in a manner very congruous with what is called ‘liquid modernity’, an idea by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, which among other things explains that in contemporaneity, hegemonic ideology points towards change, fluidity, and freedom much more than what is traditional, fixed, or structured. Because discourse is the materialization of ideology in text, it follows that the discourse about Montessori in media is coherent with the hegemonic ideology of our times.

Academic Outcomes

Mediatic discourse, as we have already perceived, is not free of contradictions. One of them is the simultaneous existence of a denial of effort and *work*, and the focus on strong academic outcomes.

From the beginning of the twenty-first century, strong academic outcomes have been highlighted as a characteristic of the Montessori method, echoing in some way, what was also emphasized in the beginning of the previous century. We can see this in some excerpts below:

Montessori's emphasis on helping kids achieve independence attracts parents, and generally *high test scores don't hurt*.' (*The Denver Post*, November 12, 2012)

A recent study of the magnets showed that the *Montessori program has boosted academic achievement over the years*, while most of the other magnets have not. (*The Washington Post*, June 10, 2004).

One century before, in 1911, we could find a similar movement of meanings:

The results she attained were considered miraculous. Idiots sent to her from the public asylum she taught to read and write so that they could pass the same examinations that normal children of their age were expected to pass at the public schools. (*McClure's Magazine*, May, 1911)

Much more recently in 2006, Angeline Lillard, professor and researcher in the field of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia, published "The Early Years: Evaluating Montessori Education" in the journal *Science*, one of the most prestigious scientific publications in the world. In the article, Lillard argued that 'At least when strictly implemented, *Montessori education fosters social and academic skills that are equal or superior* to those fostered by a pool of other types of schools.' (Lillard, Else-Quest) The publication of Angeline Lillard's article in *Science* acted, in mediatic discourse, as a reinforcement of the ideas relating Montessori to strong academic outcomes:

For all their lack of orthodoxy, *Montessori schools are achieving success*, according to a study published in the September edition of the journal *Science*. Researchers from the University of Virginia and the University of Wisconsin-Madison found *Montessori kindergarten students outperformed those in a control group in reading, math and social skills*.' (January 25, 2007, *USA Today*)

Before developing here any kind of analytical reflection, we need to consider a few more excerpts that are also related to strong academic outcomes, but that bring a new layer of contradiction to our readings.

It is interesting to note that frequently the same excerpts that construct Montessori as an education that leads to high scores, also include a caveat expression, such as 'despite', 'in spite of', or 'for all', as if the method itself, and, above all, its differences in relation to the more conventional approach to education, could not be the *reason* for its success, but would really be obstacles.

Constructing the idea that its success comes *notwithstanding* the existence of so much in the method that would go against it. Please consider the following excerpts:

Denison gets *strong CSAP⁹ scores* despite ignoring almost everything the education bureaucracy says about how to run a school. (*The Denver Post*, January 3, 2002)

Also in *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2007: 'They are learning how to learn,' said Stephanie Carr, a federal government manager who has three children at the school. *Despite* the free-form nature of lessons, 'they get *very good test scores*' Carr said. 'My children are testing above grade level.'

And in *USA Today*, January 25, 2007: '*For all* their lack of orthodoxy, Montessori schools are *achieving success*, according to a study published in the September edition of the journal *Science*.

Raymond Williams, the culture studies scholar whom we have cited before, helps us to understand how meanings are working in this complex combination. When hegemonic [ideological] powers face something new, that does not fit the scheme of things, that brings new meanings to the web of established meanings, and/or that create a possibility for an important change in how things/meanings work, hegemonic powers and ideology react in two different ways.

At first, the reaction is directed towards the destruction of what is new in the forms of silence and denial. If we recall the movements of meanings in the twentieth century, we can understand this is what happened from 1914 up to the 1960s with the Montessori approach in media.

A second, much more complex reaction comes when destruction (in the forms of silence or denial) becomes inviable. About this, we read in Williams (p. 123):

A residual cultural element is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but some part of it, some version of it—and especially if the residue is from some major area of the past—will in most cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas. Moreover, at certain points the dominant culture cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk. It is in the incorporation of the actively residual—by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion—that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident.

And so, in the movements of meanings of mediatic discourse about the Montessori method in the United States, we first saw a number of years when the method enjoyed popularity, followed by a first reaction of the dominant culture (and hegemonic ideology) in the form of the publication of Kilpatrick's book, *The Montessori System Examined*. It worked, for a few decades, and indeed there was silence, and even a certain amount of denial of Montessori's work, as we saw, for example, in the contradictory text about Montessori's work in *TIME magazine*.

Later, with the changes in discourse started by Nancy Rambusch, Montessori was again a complex of meanings that had to be dealt with, and a reality that could not simply exist 'outside of the dominant culture'. And so, there began a long process of selective tradition, through which the mediatic discourse highlighted, diluted, and chose aspects and meanings of the Montessori method that should continue to exist, and others that should be silenced, excluded and denied.

Nowadays, the *strong academic outcomes* part is being emphasized, but the conditions of existence (the structure) that would lead to it is repeatedly denied. What is interpreted as the success of Montessori students gets referred to very often, as well as the fun and play of the Montessori schools, and the specific interpretation of the freedom of choice children have at school. The differences the method presents, however, its specificities, those practices, experiences and meanings that could actually change how discourse (and education) work, are diluted, silenced, and when the outcomes of the method are mentioned, it is, then, *despite* the method itself that the outcomes come to be. The results are selected as what deserves mentioning, while the approach itself is disregarded.

The Montessori Mafia

Through the movements analysed here, it is possible to almost see a shift from a description of the method and its workings, as well as its creator's life and work, to a discussion of its merits, then becoming a discussion of its effects while its workings were disregarded. The next step in the transformation of meanings related to the Montessori method in mediatic discourse came in 2011, when a definitive link was established between Montessori education to children and adolescents, and adult entrepreneurial success.

Throughout the 2000s, movements towards the connection between Montessori and entrepreneurship appeared. Let's take a look at the following four excerpts:

Mayer explains that it is impossible to comprehend Google without knowing a key tidbit about the upbringing of *Google co-founders* Larry Page and Sergey Brin. Specifically, that *both were 'Montessori kids,'* educated in Montessori schools. 'It's really ingrained in their personalities[...]' (4 April 2011, *Huffington Post*).

Bill Gates himself is a product of a private school similar to the Montessori system: the Lakeside School, an exclusive preparatory school. (29 July, 2011, *Forbes*)

Is an Italian pioneer of education, born in the 19th century, behind striking cases of revolutionary innovation like Google and Amazon? (August 6, 2011, *Forbes*).

The apex of this movement seemed to have been reached in April 2011, when the *Wall Street Journal* published 'The Montessori Mafia.' One excerpt of the article reads:

Ironically, *the Montessori educational approach might be the surest route to joining the creative elite*, which are so overrepresented by the school's alumni that one might suspect a Montessori Mafia: Google's founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, videogame pioneer Will Wright, and *Wikipedia* founder Jimmy Wales, not to mention Julia Child and rapper Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs.

It is noticeable that the same names are repeated, to the point of indifference. It almost does not matter anymore who is the person. If he is connected to a giant tech company, he came from a Montessori background (in spite of Gates and Wales' complete lack of connection with the Montessori approach).

The movement represented by the excerpts brought here, including the 2011 one, can be better understood through the lens of a critical perception of the theory of human capital. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (p. 219) said:

I think the interest of this theory of human capital is that it represents two processes, one that we could call the extension of economic analysis into a previously unexplored domain, and second, on the basis of this, the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic.

Considering the functioning of meanings in this situation through the lens of this critique helps us understand that an educational approach that was, at first, directed towards the liberation of an oppressed class, and toward the understanding of and acting upon the laws that govern development—as we can see in the two quotes below—has now been reinterpreted to fit the 'strictly economic interpretation' of the human capital theory and ideology. 'No social problem is as universal as the oppression of the child' (*The Child in the Family*, p. 3).

Directing our action toward mankind means, first and foremost, doing so with regard to the child. The child, that "forgotten citizen", must be appreciated in accordance with his true value. His rights as a human being who shapes all of mankind must become sacred, and the secret laws of his normal psychic development must light the way for civilization.

(*Formazione dell'uomo*, p. 43)

Curiously, the extent of this adaptation has been so vast that even economically successful adults who did not go to Montessori schools were 'reinterpreted' as having being Montessori students, as in the case of Bill Gates (who did not, actually, go to a school similar to Montessori in any relevant way), and Jimmy Wales, who clarified in numerous interviews that he did not go to a Montessori school and even commented on the same article from which we extracted an excerpt above—as we can see in the "tweet" below.

Corporate Kindergarten

From 2011 on, a number of texts quoting, copying or paraphrasing the "Montessori Mafia" were published in various media channels, and the meanings it worked with became considerably established in the mediatic discourse. Through that text and the reactions to it, a rupture happened in the way media constructs the Montessori method.¹⁰

In later years, less attention was given to the method's characteristics and focus shifted to the effects of that education on the adult who had once been a child in a Montessori school. 2015, the year when our analysis of mediatic discourse stops, saw the publication of an article that seemed to evidence a stabilization of the meanings towards the connection between Montessori, adults,



and entrepreneurship. The piece was titled 'Corporate Kindergarten: How A Montessori Mindset Can Transform Your Business' and it was published in *Forbes* (December 16, 2015). One excerpt reads:

How will your organization respond to its next perfect failure and prepare for its next supreme success?
By creating a corporate kindergarten culture where Montessori mindsets are cultivated and rewarded and we can unlock the full potential of each individual in your organization from top to bottom and every level in between. It may just be the answer to propelling America's emerging innovation economy to the moon and beyond.

Here, Montessori is constructed as an answer. The problem it answers was proposed already in the 1980s. In a national report about the state of education titled "A Nation at Risk", the US Government wrote that: 'Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence [...] is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.' From that moment on, it became quite common to find official and mediatic publications 'answering' the problem proposed there. Here, again, an answer is offered: 'creating a corporate kindergarten culture where Montessori mindsets are cultivated and rewarded.'

Nowadays, much of the focus is given to *innovation*, as *Forbes* (December 16, 2015) expresses in the sentence: 'It may just be the answer to propelling America's emerging innovation economy to the moon and beyond.' To the theory of human capital, innovation is supremely relevant, as we can see in Foucault's explanation:

[The neoliberals take up]¹¹ this problem of innovation, and so of the tendency of the falling rate of profit, and they do not take it up as a sort of ethical-psychological characteristic of capitalism, or as an ethical-economic-psychological characteristic of capitalism, [...] but they say: We cannot halt at this problem of innovation and, as it were, trust in the boldness of capitalism or the permanent stimulation of competition to explain this phenomenon of innovation. If there is innovation, that is to say, if we find new things, discover new forms of productivity, and make technological innovations, this is nothing other than the income of a certain capital, of human capital, that is to say, of the set of investments we have made at the level of man himself. (p. 231)

Montessori was announced, one century ago, as a 'revolutionary' method in McClure's Magazine. Now innovation is added to the revolution, slightly changing the meaning from social change to economic improvement. Consider the following two excerpts from *Forbes*, an important business publication which we have read before:

[...]is an Italian pioneer of education, born in the 19th century, behind striking cases of revolutionary innovation like Google and Amazon?' (August 6, 2011)

It may just be the answer to propelling America's emerging innovation economy to the moon and beyond. (December 16, 2015)

Those two phrases make two movements at once: a leap from the past to the future (nineteenth century to Google and Amazon, and then propelling to the moon and beyond), and an important change from the revolution in education to the revolution in economy. Looking to the bigger picture, however, there is a crucial leap from the child to the adult, and from the school to the organization. In the beginning of the twentieth century, we saw a headline in McClure's Magazine that read, "The Revolutionary *Educational Work* of Maria Montessori as Carried Out in Her Own Schools" (1911). A hundred years later (2015), we read in *Forbes*:

How will your *organization* respond to its next perfect failure and prepare for its next supreme success?
By creating a *corporate kindergarten* culture where Montessori mindsets are cultivated and rewarded [...]

Innovation, as well as strong academic and economical outcomes are forms of winning over competition. Foucault (p. 147) explains that competition is the basic form of organization of contemporary society, at least through the ideological lens of a strictly economic analysis, as we can read in the following passage:

The society regulated by reference to the market that the neoliberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should [...be...] the mechanisms of competition. It is these mechanisms that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society.

Perceptions about Official Discourses

One of the most relevant and present materializations of the ideology of competition in contemporary society appears in the word *leader*, the radical *lead* and its variants: *leadership*, *leading* and so on. The leader is often portrayed as someone who 'won' in the competition, or as someone who guides people to winning. Mainly, it often looks as if to be a leader is to be more, and to be a follower is to be less. The notion of leadership was often found in excerpts analysed in this research, as we can see below:



'The students are learning a lot of independent living and leadership skills, in addition to their schoolwork,' said John Parr, whose two daughters went to Denison and Hamilton magnets. (*The Denver Post*).

They are also encouraged to help run their classroom community and develop leadership skills and independence. (*The Washington Post*)

Those are excerpts from mediatic texts, but we will see these meanings are also present elsewhere. I started my research in 2014. While at the 2017 AMI International Congress in Prague, I started to notice that often talks and lectures would move towards the same meanings I was analysing and finding in my research. So, I made a short detour in my analytical course, which I bring in here only to help us reflect about the effects of mediatic discourse over all of us, including the producers of the 'official' discourse about the Montessori method, authors at (or linked to) organizations, associations, and societies.

I compared the 2013 AMI Congress brochure with the one from 2017, looking specifically for meanings related to entrepreneurship, innovation, or leadership. In the 2013

brochure, I found only five excerpts which possibly suggested that there was any kind of relationship to these meanings. In the 2017 brochure, that number was higher. I identified just short of a hundred excerpts in which words or phrases conveyed meanings that often appear in the entrepreneurial discourse, and that were, in the last five years, being reinforced by mediatic discourse as a way to describe and think about the Montessori method. Mostly, those words or phrases included the notion of leadership, as we can see in the four excerpts below from the 2017 brochure:

- 1 What should change in our educational system so that it is equipped to *prepare strong leaders* and motivated potential employees?
- 2 *Montessori nurtures qualities that support leadership*, like strong social skills, executive function and a mastery orientation.
- 3 How are young selves in Montessori contexts developing *characteristics of leaders*?
- 4 The opinion of a young generation of Montessori adolescents: Do they feel ready to be the *new generation of leaders*?

It is, of course, possible to argue that leadership is not only connected to adults, but could also be a characteristic of children and adolescents, totally disconnected from the mechanisms of competition and the human capital theory.

As a person, more than a researcher, that is what I mentally told myself, when I found so many occurrences of the notion of leadership in the brochure. However, in one of the debates with adolescents, announced by the fourth excerpt above, the moderator, who was also a Montessori educator, repeatedly spoke about how little chance the adolescents were getting to answer the questions directed to them.

At a certain moment, one of the adolescents said something that argued against what I was trying to tell myself about the brochure. He stated, 'We are just adolescents.' This, of course, went beyond what I set out to understand, and neither I nor this research went much further than what is brought here in the analysis of the official discourse of the Montessori method. The little that was found, however, provides the possible hypothesis that other discourses, including the official ones, could be influenced by the mediatic way of establishing meanings. That would be congruent with what is known about how media influences the public perception of truth, and would point to a possible contemporary reality in which the multiple discourses about the Montessori method are, if not defined, at least impacted, by the mediatic constructs of meaning, ideology, and real conditions of existence related to the Montessori method.

Final Remarks

Through reading of over two thousand mediatic texts about the Montessori method (1909-2015) and a closer analysis of seventy contemporary publications (2000-2015) through mass media channels in the United States, movements were identified in meanings related to the Montessori method and Montessori's work in general. The first important movement was from the perception of effort, order, and structure, to one of freedom, choice, fun, and play. There was little change in terms of strong outcomes—there were mentions of outcomes in the beginning of the past century, and contemporary discourse still includes this.

A second, gradual change is the shift of focus from the *child* to the *adult*. In the past we would find a complete focus on *children*, and that is valid for the beginning of the twentieth century, but also to the decades of 1960s to 1980s, and even the first years of the 2000s. Nowadays, mediatic discourse about the Montessori method emphasizes at least as much how a Montessori education would benefit adults, in two different ways.

Adults would benefit from Montessori if they had been Montessori students earlier in life and had grown up to become people of economic success, and more often than not, entrepreneurs in the area of technological innovation. Adults would also benefit from Montessori by applying Montessori-like ideas to the management of companies and organizations, potentially finding that it would foster leadership skills, innovation, and economic growth.

The idea that Montessori is a revolution is in some way quite constant throughout the periods we analysed. The marked movement in meanings here is that at first the *revolution* was mainly an educational one, that dealt above all with children. Contemporary mediatic discourse emphasizes the idea that Montessori would be a revolution in business. From these changes, we can discern a movement that propelled the meanings related to Montessori from those related to the child and the school, to those related to adults and organizations. Our analysis indicates, therefore, that through a century-long process of selective tradition, by the use of silence, dilution, inclusion, and exclusion, the Montessori method has been reinterpreted to fit in the web of meanings that work ideologically in accordance with the notion of human capital—a strictly economical interpretation of the real conditions of existence of the contemporary world.

The process of this analysis gave rise to many more questions than this article can attempt to answer. I wonder what the prevailing patterns in the mediatic discourses in other countries would be if this analysis was made for other places, histories, and languages. It would be interesting, as well, to engage in an analytic process contrasting the voices of Montessori teachers and students interviewed by media and the mediatic voice itself. With the growing popularity of blogs and social network pages and channels about Montessori, research to take those discourses into consideration would also contribute greatly to this discussion. Finally, it would be fascinating to see an analysis of the proximities and contrasts among what is communicated in trainings and meetings in the Montessori circle, in the non-Montessori educational circles, and in the media. We might be able to find patterns of influence there that could be most interesting.

It is well accepted that mediatic discourses have an effect of truth, and it is possible to hypothesize that the way in which media constructs Montessori might influence the material realities related to it. With the growing opportunities to "have a voice" and influence the meanings related to Montessori, each of us, individuals and organizations, function inevitably as producers, receivers, and reproducers of voices and meanings. It is impossible to exert full conscious choice over the words and meanings

we produce, and still, as we enter in this third decade of our twenty-first century, we have the chance to, if we so wish, help move meanings towards, and give voice to, children and education once more.

Post-Script ¹²

From 2015 on, so much has happened concerning Montessori education, that it would take a whole new research work to document it, let alone do the proper analysis it entails. Two particular events, however, might deserve mentioning, for the connection they suggest between the corporate context, as well as the main participants of this context, and Montessori education.

From 2018, Elon Musk's company SpaceX has been offering to its employees the possibility of sending their children to an on-campus Montessori childcare unit, administered by another company, Xplor Education, which states on its website:

We partner with America's most innovative companies to provide distinctive Montessori early childhood education that leads to more capable individuals, happier families, healthier organizations, and stronger communities.' (<https://xplor.education>, June 14, 2021)

The site also states:

Confident in their child's education, employee-parents are more engaged, productive, and committed to the company's mission. (<https://xplor.education>, June 14, 2021)

Elon Musk is among the richest people on Earth and is known not only for his achievements in entrepreneurial and innovative circles, but also for his polemic statements, some of them concerning education. Musk has also appeared in the media connected to a project of another school, AdAstra, which whilst promoting its own curriculum, will use the skills of Montessori trained teachers and their values.

In 2018 it was also announced that Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon and also one of the richest people on Earth, had pledged \$2 billion dollars to a network of Montessori inspired schools for underprivileged children. In 2020, the first one began functioning. Reminding us of the human capital in a strictly economic analysis, Bezos declared in 2018, 'The money spent there is going to pay gigantic dividends for decades.'¹³ By 2024, The Bezos academy are running close to fifty schools across the USA, with many more planned.

The material conditions of existence (the real world) and our interpretation of it impacts what we say and write. It might be that what we say and write about the Montessori approach also impacts our future conditions of existence. Daring to step a bit further from the results of this research, we could ask ourselves: Through which lens do we interpret reality? Through which lens do we wish to show reality to others? And, finally, if 'the child [...] stands before us, with his arms held open, beckoning humanity to follow', as Montessori stated almost a hundred years ago, how can we communicate it so that we, if that is our desire, follow the child, and construct a world of meanings that is coherent with what we see as their needs for the future?

Notes

- 1 Both phrases, *revolutionary* and *wonder worker*, are quotes from texts written by Josephine Tozier and others and published in *McClure's Magazine* from 1911 to 1914.
- 2 The approach we take to discursive analysis was started by Michel Pécheux, in France. Since Pécheux and other authors of the first hour discussing this approach were French, it is often called *French discourse analysis*. Nowadays, however, a representative number of authors in the approach are Brazilian, such as Eni Orlandi, Maria José Coracini, and Marisa Grigoletto. For this reason, we will not call it *French discourse analysis*, but will refer to it as *an approach to discourse analysis connected to history, ideology, and the unconscious*.
- 3 My translation from the Portuguese, the original piece states: 'O discurso jornalístico [é] uma modalidade de discurso sobre, ao 'coloca[r] o mundo como objeto'. Na forma como um discurso sobre organiza as várias vozes dos discursos de, ele erige-se como um lugar de autoridade e atua de forma determinante na institucionalização social dos sentidos, ao decidir como retratar o mundo em seus relatos.'
- 4 My translation from the Portuguese, the original piece states: 'o sujeito tem de inserir seu dizer no repetível (interdiscurso, memória discursiva) para que seja interpretável.'
- 5 My translation from the Portuguese, the original piece states: 'O discurso da mídia funciona pela reiteração de determinados enunciados [...]. Esse modo reiterativo atua sobre o sujeito-leitor no sentido de criar o efeito de um saber partilhado, [...] e que produz o efeito de identificação na leitura.'
- 6 Throughout this article, every time a word or phrase appears in italics, please be aware that this emphasis by the author, which was not included in the original.
- 7 *TIME magazine*, Feb. 1930, available at: <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,738569-1,00.html>
- 8 Professor Sugata Mitra (born 12 February 1952) is an Indian computer scientist and educational theorist. He is best known for his "Hole in the Wall" experiment, and widely cited in works on literacy and education. (Wikipedia, accessed January 17, 2022)
- 9 CSAP stands for Colorado Student Assessment Program.
- 10 Several websites, blogs, social network pages and channels have since begun listing celebrities who went to Montessori schools. And as it happens to news outlets, many of those lists include names of people who did not, historically, go to Montessori schools.
- 11 The words between brackets are in the original.
- 12 At the suggestion of Paige M. Bray, Ed.D. editor of this article, I have added this small list of events, which I could not yet research further, but which might be relevant to others, who wish to understand more about the impact of media in the 'real world', and even investigate further those questions evoked by this work.
- 13 https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/montessori-long-a-favorite-of-wealthy-families-struggles-to-expand-its-reach/2018/11/05/51a5ae02-ccc9-11e8-920f-dd52e1ae4570_story.html, June 14, 2021.

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