

IN SEARCH OF 21st CENTURY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AVENUES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE MONTESSORI METHOD

W.M.K.M. Sumanasinghe^{1,*}, S.M.P.W.K. Sethunga²

¹*PGIHS, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

²*Department of Education, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

*wmk.muditha@gmail.com

Based on the revolutionary notion that “the most important period of life is not the age of University studies but the period from birth to age six”, the Montessori philosophy and the subsequent method of education introduced in 1907 by Italy’s first female physician Dr. Maria Montessori is one of most prominent in the area of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Though developed a century ago, the method is rooted in observation and experiment based discoveries of a child’s mind and soul. It is designed to facilitate the development of the whole child-physical, intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual. Designed around the revelation that a child is fully capable of educating him/herself if given the freedom to do so within clearly specified and mutually agreed-upon boundaries, an authentic Montessori program is characterized by many traits such as prepared environment, multi-aged grouping, freedom of choice in activities and materials, the passive role of the teacher, and respect for the child through policies and actions, all aimed at developing certain core skills in learners which have now been rediscovered as key determinants of success in modern times and aptly called “21st Century Skills” (21stCS). While abundant research has long existed on the effectiveness of the Montessori Method (MM) in such areas as special education, or language and mathematics learning, following the more recent identification of these core skills as valuable human capital in modern economies, a new thread of studies on the effectiveness of the MM in such skills development is fast emerging across the globe. Yet rather than focusing on studying how specific concepts/methods/traits/practices lead to the development of specific skills, the findings of which would be practically applicable in numerous contexts, the majority of them are focused on comparing Montessori children with non-Montessori children in terms of the possession of isolated skills with nothing further to derive from the findings. Also most of them suffer from methodological limitations such as poor randomization and unestablished program fidelity which lead to low credibility. Following an extent literature review on MM, ECE, and 21stCS, this paper attempts to establish a research gap the closing of which could be achieved through an in-depth exploration of the MM spanning Montessori’s own writing and the program as currently practiced and aimed at mapping out 21stCS development avenues for early learners. The findings of such a study would be useful to the states in developing 21st Century human capital, and to individuals, parties, and/or bodies interested in furthering ECE, fostering the MM, and/or incorporating 21stCS into the learning process.

Keywords: 21st Century Skills, Early Childhood Education, Montessori Method