

**Why parents choose to send their children to private Montessori Schools in  
Dublin.**

Evie Reilly

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Supervisor: Dr. Niall Hanlon

Head of Department: Dr Bernadette Quinn

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Department of Social Science  
DBS School of Arts

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**Title**

Why parents choose to send their children to private Montessori Schools in Dublin.

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative research project carried out as to why parents choose to send their children to private Montessori schools in Dublin. It includes five interviews that were recorded using a dictaphone. The women who were interviewed had sent either all their children to registered Irish Montessori Education Board (I.M.E.B.) schools in South County Dublin, or only some of their children. Some of the women also had experience of not sending one of their children to an I.M.E.B. school. These interviews were analysed and certain themes were found to be recurring in them all such as (1) the advantages of sending a child to a Montessori school, (2) the reasons for choosing certain Montessori schools and (3) the parents' knowledge of Montessori. The main results which were found to be true from this research is that these women had no real idea of the Montessori Method of education and that they send their children to a Montessori school primarily as it is now seen as the norm. All ethical criteria were adhered to.

## Introduction

### Montessori Education

#### The History of the Montessori Method

The Montessori Method of education stemmed from the teachings of Maria Montessori (1870-1952). She was an Italian woman who was the first ever female to graduate with a degree in medicine in Italy. Once Maria Montessori was a qualified doctor she took up the post of assistant doctor in a Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Rome. This led to her working with disadvantaged children. This work enabled her to work with what were known as 'idiot children'. E.M. Standing worked with Maria Montessori for much of her life and in his book – *Maria Montessori Her Life and Work*, he writes of how in one lunatic asylum which Montessori visited she observed that the woman who was looking after the children was disgusted by them and when Montessori questioned her on this, she replied that it was because once the children had finished their meal they got down on the ground to search for crumbs. Montessori discovered that this was because these children had no toys to play with in the room. The room was completely bare. Maria Montessori:

came to believe that, with special educational treatment, their mental condition could be immensely ameliorated, a view she found to be shared by the French doctors Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin and a few others (Standing,1984, p.28)

It was from this work and her constant observations that she began to realise that children had many needs which need to be met in an interactive environment and one where their needs are met when they are in a sensitive period for any given thing, such as language, movement, writing and many other areas. It is mentioned in *The Secret of Childhood*, that:

A sensitive period refers to a special sensibility which a creature acquires in its infantile state, while it is still in a process of evolution. It is a transient disposition and limited to the acquisition of a particular trait. (Montessori, 1972, p.38)

In a Montessori School the teacher is known as the Directress because he/she is directed by the child. Each child works at their own pace and so in the Montessori environment the Directress is guided by the child's needs as apposed to the Directress leading the child. The first Montessori school was opened in Rome in 1907.

There are 47 Montessori schools in Dublin which are registered with the Irish Montessori Education Board (I.M.E.B.) and these are all private schools. Therefore parents sending their children to these schools pay yearly fees. Schools which are registered with the I.M.E.B. have to meet certain regulations. In order to become registered with the I.M.E.B. the directresses in the school must have a teaching diploma either from the Association Montessori Internationale (A.M.I.) or the Saint Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland. There are assessors approved by each of these two training colleges. The I.M.E.B. has outlined the requirements which a Montessori School must meet in order to be approved by the Associations Assessors. These assessors carry out on site evaluations of the schools and "*successful applicants will receive a certificate of Accreditation from their association and a Certificate of Registration will be issued by IMEB*" (I.M.E.B., 2011). If a school is granted accreditation, this accreditation only lasts for three years and following this it must be renewed. In order for this accreditation to be renewed the school must be reassessed. The Montessori Method of education was never patented and so there is no official standard which any school has to meet. The International Montessori Index outlines that:

The name *Montessori* is not legally protected, and can be used by anyone, for any purpose; it is vital that anyone searching for a good Montessori school or

teacher-training center be aware of this.(The International Montessori Index, 2011).

Many crèches have what they call a Montessori Room yet these rooms often have very little of the Montessori materials. In order to have a fully functioning Montessori environment it is necessary to have all the Montessori materials. It is very costly to buy all these materials and they must be fully complete. Within a crèche setting the children are usually there all day and would not be doing Montessori work all day and so perhaps the crèche could not justify the outlay of the Montessori materials.

### **Montessori Teachers in Ireland**

Within Ireland there are numerous places where one can study to become a Montessori directress. However, there are two main institutions; the first of these is the A.M.I., which is a training centre, affiliated with the Association that Maria Montessori herself set up, and secondly there is the St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland, both of these are situated in Dublin. In addition to these two institutions there are many other places which run Montessori teacher training courses for differing lengths of time. For those who did their training in either the A.M.I or St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland there is an association that was set up in November 1997 known as the I.M.E.B. This allows both the graduates from these educational institutes and the institutions themselves “*to unite and speak with one voice on behalf of Montessori education in Ireland*”, because members of this association have had to pass certain criteria which have been laid down by the I.M.E.B. There are 116 registered schools registered with the I.M.E.B. They are inspected every three years and there are very strict criteria which these schools must meet in regard to having the exact Montessori materials and of course they must all be

fully complete. The A.M.I. also has schools registered which are part of the A.M.I. association and the directresses in these schools must be A.M.I. trained and have to do a two day refresher course every year. These strict policies and procedures which have to be followed and adhered to show that any school registered with the I.M.E.B. or the A.M.I. are schools which are run to a very high standard, but there is no way of knowing what standard Montessori schools or rooms are at if they are not registered with either of the above.

### **The Montessori Method**

There are four main areas within the Montessori Method; - practical life, sensorial, mathematics and language which also branches out into cultural activities, for example those areas which include “*history, geography, biology, literature and the beginnings of geometry and algebra*” (Standing, 1984, p.363).

1) The first of these is the area of practical life. Before entering the Montessori Environment the child will be familiar with many of the practical life activities:

these activities in daily living help the children become independent in the environment, in personal care and in social skills... they develop an ability to concentrate, to become independent and give a sense of enjoyment and achievement. (imebtrust.org)

Within this area the children will acquire the skills that they need in everyday life, such as pouring, carrying, polishing, table washing, hand washing, preparing vegetables, sweeping the floor, learn how to close zips, ties etc. and clothes folding.

Wolf suggests that:

For the young child there is something special about tasks that an adult considers ordinary - washing dishes, cutting celery, and polishing shoes. They are exciting to the child because they allow him to imitate adults. Imitation is one of the child’s strongest urges during his early years (Wolf, 2009p. 12).

2) The next area within the Montessori classroom involves the senses. These materials known as the sensorial materials as their name suggests help the child to further develop, heighten and create an awareness of their senses and this can be achieved:

Through exploration and discovery with the sensorial materials the children learn about the qualities of things in the world around them such as colour, size, shape, texture, sound and their interconnection. (imebtrust.org)

Each of the different sensorial materials that are presented to the child highlights only one of the senses. Polk Lillard speaks of this when she outlines the different senses that are being refined:

The aim of these materials is the education and refinement of the senses: visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, thermic, baric, stereognostic and chromatic (Polk Lillard, 1972, p. 71).

The child very much enjoys using these materials and if the child has a difficulty with any of the senses it will become evident to the directress at an early stage and so they can speak to the parent and try to arrange for the child to be assessed.

3) There is a whole section in the Montessori classroom dedicated to the area of mathematics or arithmetic. As the name suggests when the children are ready to have these materials presented to them they are then about to embark on the adventure of learning the concept of mathematics. Within the area of mathematics the children in the Montessori Classroom are introduced to the numerals 1 – 10, the decimal system and the operations associated with arithmetic.

Through use of concrete materials the children are involved in activities that guide them in mathematical concepts. Working with concrete materials the children are led to abstract thinking. (imebtrust.org)

The very first exercise within this area focuses on their ability to count and so the material used for this is known as the number rods. There are ten rods which vary in

length from 10cm to 1 metre increasing in size by 10cm each time. On each rod there are 10cm blocks painted in alternating colours red and blue.

The rod of 5, for example, is all one piece representing the number 5, but the five units are distinguishable by the different colours on it (Montessori, 1998, p. 264)

The children then count each segment and from this the directress can observe whether the child can count in sequence or not. If they can count in sequence then they can progress to learning the corresponding symbol for each numeral. From here the child can progress right through the arithmetic materials to the formation of numbers, the decimal system, multiplication and division.

4) Within a Montessori classroom there is constant development resulting from the freedom to converse. Polk Lillard outlines in her book that:

Through this freedom language becomes an integral part of the life of the classroom, and there is a continuous encouragement of self-expression and communication, child to child and child to adult (Polk Lillard, 1972, p.125).

Within the area of language the emphasis is placed on self-expression and communication which also leads to the enrichment of the child's vocabulary. *"The phonetic alphabet sounds are learned individually by sight and touch and are then combined to make words leading to writing and total reading"*.

Finally there is the cultural area of the Montessori Method of Education which includes many other areas such as:

- geography, including maps and flags of the world, land and water forms
- science, which encompasses the planets and the solar system
- culture, where the children learn about the great composers and artists
- nature, including learning about the sea, sea shore and shells, the life cycle of various animals and botany

- history and many other areas

Maria Montessori said about the acquisition of culture in her book *The*

*Formation of Man* that:

in our schools where this educational experience has continued its progress, certain natural tendencies to extend culture and increase knowledge have become evident in practice. This seems, indeed, to follow the path of Nature (Montessori, 1996, p. 38).

### **Work cycle in the Montessori environment**

Montessori schools should have a constant work period of three hours without any interruption in the children's work. Within this period of time the children are free to pick and choose pieces of work that they have been shown. Also during this work cycle the directress should introduce a new piece of material or reintroduce something which the child was previously shown. In Stoll Lillard's book *Montessori The Science Behind the Genius* she outlines that:

Children who are regularly interrupted might be unable to develop concentration on their work. This concentration, according to Dr. Montessori, is necessary for children to tune into the postulated inner guides that help them to make good choices. Every adult-imposed interruption at which children are removed from their freely chosen work during three-hour morning and afternoon work periods diminishes the quality of concentration children can achieve during these periods (Stoll Lillard, 2007, p. 108).

During this work period the children should be free to have a snack if they so wish.

They will be able to work either on their own or in a small group.

### **Early Education Policy in Ireland**

In Ireland there is little social policy linked with early education. The main piece of policy is that which was written in 1999. It is a white paper on Early Childhood Education. In this paper there is significant emphasis placed on those children who are disadvantaged, either by means of a learning difficulty or are socially

disadvantaged. The report outlines that the *“Implementation of the White Paper proposals will ensure that quality becomes and remains the hallmark of early childhood education”*. For a long time it was thought that education started once a child entered primary school and finished once they left the education system, this however is now recognised as not being true and that people learn from their earliest moments and all through their lives. This paper outlines that early childhood education concerns those aged between 3 and 6 years and so the policies in The White Paper place emphasis on this age group. The White Paper (1.4), states that there are many gains to the individual and to society on a whole if there is high quality early education provided.

These include initial gains in IQ, enhanced capacity to learn, longer-term improvements in educational performance, private returns to individuals (both financial and developmental), economic returns and wider benefits to society. Social and economic returns are additional important benefits which the State must, as guardian of the common good, take into account when considering the extent to which it should become involved in the process.

In Ireland parents are not legally obliged by the State to send their children to primary school until their sixth birthday. Even though this is the case the Citizens Information Centre states that *“almost all 5-year-olds and about half of 4-year-olds actually attend primary”*. It is also estimated that about four percent of three year olds attend some form of education. In 2006 the O.E.C.D. stated that *“access for three to six year olds is estimated at 56 per cent, which is one of the lowest rates in Europe”*. The ‘Convention of the Rights of the Child’ in 1989 outlined four main human rights that children have and the one most specific towards this area of study is that all children have the right *“to develop to their fullest potential”* and so this leads one to believe that they should be receiving some form education from a young age. In Ireland children are allowed attend primary school once they are four years old and

so according to the *Report of the Primary Education Review Body*, (1990, p. 72) “*much of what is considered pre-schooling in other countries is already incorporated in the primary school system*”

When looking to the area of social policy when dealing with children before they attend primary school there has been little change over the last few years. In the budget in 2009, as a cost cutting measure the government decided to do away with the thousand euro payment for the first five years of the child’s life instead of this the government decided to offer each child under the age of five one years free pre-primary education. This is known as the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (E.C.C.E.). This scheme:

provides 3 hours per day, 5 days a week over a 38-week year for children enrolled in participating playschools. Children enrolled in childcare services receive 2 hours and 15 minutes per day over a 50-week period

Much of the social policy with regard to children at this stage of their lives is limited and it is more concerned with disadvantaged children and those with special needs. In recent decades there has been much media coverage of differing forms of child abuse. In 1991 the Child Care Act was passed and this was to be extremely significant in childcare policy in Ireland. Quin et al. summarise that this act:

Clairifies and sets out the functions and duties of the health boards and deals with three areas of childcare: child protection, alternative care for children who cannot remain at home, and family support. (Quinn, Kennedy, Matthews and Kiely, 2005, p.165)

This in itself further proves that childcare policy is more concerned with the rights of the child as apposed to his/her education. Following from this there was a new ministerial position in the government introduced and so in 1994 there was a Minister of State for Children appointed. In 1997 the Department of Health became the Department of Health and Children. Even though there have been attempts made to

ensure that Irish policy surrounding the needs of children are being met there are still some areas which have been overseen, and one of these is the availability of childcare and preschool services. This has meant that there is little input from the State when it comes to dealing with childcare, Considine and Dukelow (2009, p.379) further reiterate this point:

Investment in, childcare and early childhood services and associated supports do not have a long history in Ireland. As Rush et al. (2006, p. 155) suggest, 'Ireland has traditionally subscribed to the "maximum private responsibility" model of childcare'.

As a result of the increased levels of female participation in the labour force it has lead to a greater need for the provision of childcare. The level of social policy surrounding this is limited and there have been few initiatives developed. Since the mid 1990s there has been focus on the area of childhood care and education but as has already been stated much of this is private.

When assessing social policy within the context of children it is important to note that this age group not only includes those in childcare but also those in some sort of formal education. When discussing education within the realms of social policy in Ireland it outlines that there should be equality of opportunity, everyone should be entitled to the opportunity to realise their potential. Many critics argue that there is much inequality within the educational system. When focusing on the aspects of children's lives before they enter primary school it is widely accepted that there is not equality of opportunity or equality of access to early education. Any of the private pre-primary schools are very expensive and therefore it is not possible for those on lower incomes to send their children and therefore this makes this early stage of education unfair to some. This is further highlighted in *Irish Social Policy A Critical Introduction*:

Access to these can be difficult for low-income families because of the fees charged, and low-income families tend to pay a greater proportion of their income on lesser quality services compared to middle class families (Hayes, 2008). (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p.316)

### **Pre-primary education options available in Dublin**

There are a number of options other than Montessori schools available to parents if they wish to send their child to some form of pre-primary education. Most of these are also private, though there are a few state run facilities:

Just over one per cent of 3 year olds were classified as in full-time education on 1 January 1998, and the majority (64%) of these were enrolled in private (non-State-funded) primary schools, with the rest split between ordinary classes and special schools or classes

The state provides a small number of programmes which are available to three year olds with specific needs such as those from the travelling community, children who have a special need or those children who come from an economically disadvantaged background or those who are socially disadvantaged. The Citizens Information centre outlines that there are:

45 pre-schools for Traveller children which prepare them for primary school. The State provides 98% of the tuition costs for a maximum of 3 hours' tuition per day for the regular school year. Transport costs, where necessary, are also almost fully funded by the State, while additional support is provided for the purchase of equipment. Some Traveller children also attend Early Start, community childcare or private pre-schools.

The 'Early Start' programme is the most common. It was first introduced in October 1994. It is a programme designed to run over the course of one year for three year old children. The Department of Education states that "*it aims to provide children who are most at risk of educational disadvantage with an educational programme that will enhance their development and prevent failure at school*". Early education can help to prevent poverty in later life. It is meant to be a preventative intervention scheme as apposed to anything else and it is run in some schools in disadvantaged areas. This

sort of intervention is hugely important because there is huge inequality in early education in Ireland and this needs to be improved upon. The O.E.C.D. reiterates this and says “*inequality at the starting gates of education remains a critical challenge for Ireland*”.

Another option available to parents is to send their child to a crèche or a nursery school. A child can usually attend either of these services for either part of a day or for the full working day. Generally children can attend either a nursery or a crèche from a few months up to six years of age. These services are also private, although they may in part be subsidized by a company, for example in Dublin there is the E.S.B. work place crèche which is part subsidized for employees of the company.

Another facility available to parents is to send their child to a play group. Like Montessori schools these often offer playgroups and some form of education on a sessional basis. Children attending playgroups range in age from three to five years of age. There is also a second form of playgroup and this type is organized by ‘An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaíochta Teo’. These playgroups otherwise known as ‘*Naíonraí*’ are funded by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This form of playgroup also operates on a sessional basis and either operates with a mixture of both the Irish and English languages or communication can solely be through Irish.

There are only three Steiner kindergartens in the greater Dublin area, one is located in Dublin 3, another in Dublin 8 and the last one is in Tallaght. These schools are non-profit making organizations. They calculate their fees on a sliding scale basis depending on the socio economic status of the parents of those children who are attending the kindergarten.

Finally the last option available to parents is to send their child to a child minder. It is extremely difficult to monitor this, as people can care for children in their own homes. This is a private agreement between the parents/guardians and the child minder. Child minders can either charge an hourly rate, a daily rate or a weekly rate. A child minder can look after up to five children in their own home. If a child minder is looking after three or less children and has an income of €15,000 or less per year they do not have to pay any tax. A child minder at present does not have to have any particular qualifications. The parties involved can sometimes know each other through friends or family, or alternatively the parents may have found the child minder through an agency for example one such agency in Dublin is 'Nanny Solutions'.

As has previously been noted there are links to social policy and early education. The fact is that there is limited choice in this area for parents or guardians. Hayes outlines that it is likely that there will be less care taken to provide high quality care and education for children when care and education are viewed separately. Hayes states that:

In Ireland the primary policy focus has been on creating childcare spaces; neither supporting the quality of early years provision and pedagogy nor addressing issues of access, affordability and sustainability has been central. (Hayes, 2010)

Quality and reliability are hugely important in this area as they can influence the families the children and the wider social arena.

## Methodology

### Getting the participants

Initially in order to get my participants, contact was made with the owners of three Montessori schools in South County Dublin. The research project was explained to them. Following this they were asked if they would agree to have some of their parents interviewed and they kindly agreed. Each of the Principals did however say that they would not single out anyone parent and they then suggested that a letter would be written with my contact details on it, explaining what was being done and what was needed and this letter would be placed on the notice boards in each of the three schools. This was done, and no one made any contact.

Following this, another approach had to be taken. Whilst chatting with friends one day, one of them mentioned how a friend of hers sends her children to a Montessori school in a suburb in south county Dublin. She asked if it would be of any help to ask her friend if she would agree to being interviewed. This seemed to be a convenient alternative and thankfully the woman agreed. The rest of my sample was then gathered by a means of snow balling, "*which means that you ask your first participants for the addresses of other potential participants for your study*" (Flick, 2009, p.267). On account of the time limit this appeared to be the best way to obtain my participants. This has both advantages and disadvantages. One clear advantage of this method is that it is easier to get participants as they may do it as a favour to their friend. This however leads to a disadvantage that you may only get like minded people. Hildenbrand (1995) highlights a problem with this kind of sampling stating that:

While it is often assumed that access to the field would be facilitated by studying persons well known to the researcher and accordingly

finding cases from one's own circle of acquaintances, exactly the opposite is true: the stranger the field, the more easily may researchers appear as strangers, whom the people in the study have something to tell which is new for the researcher. (Hildenbrand, 1995, p. 258)

The participants included parents who have either sent their child to a registered Montessori School or who are currently sending their child to a private Montessori School in the greater Dublin area.

### **Qualitative research**

This research will be qualitative in nature and will be thematically analysed. Strauss and Corbin (2008) outline that qualitative analysis is a “*process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge*” (p.1). Therefore, there will be a general research question, and it is ‘why parents in Dublin choose to send their child to a private Montessori School’. This research project will aim to come to some conclusion on this topic, for example that the parents/guardians have no other options available to them, or that they believe in this form of early education. Within this form of qualitative research the researcher is personally involved in collecting the data. With qualitative research authenticity is a necessity. There are many different ways in which a researcher can obtain the relevant information when carrying out a qualitative research project, some of these methods include, focus groups, media analysis, field research, comparative research, discourse and narrative analysis and finally in-depth interviews which will be used in this project. This kind of interview is:

more informal, conversational character, being shaped partly by the interviewer's pre-existing topic guide and partly by concerns that are emergent in the interview...the interviewer sacrifices standardization and repeatability between interviews in order to grasp more fully the social meanings of the respondent's world. (Bloor and Wood, 2006, p.104)

As has been outlined this will be a qualitative research project and will use thematic analysis to study the data gathered in the interviews. There are other forms of qualitative research which include case studies, ethnography, phenomenology and biographies. Grounded theory research encompasses the idea of theory grounded in the data which will be collected through interviews. As has been stated this data will be collected in the format of interviews. Strauss and Corbin highlight the fact that “*each form of research is valuable in its own way*” (p.ix). This project will hopefully add to the description given by the interviewees and create or discover a theory. Strauss and Corbin outlined in 1998, that “*a theory may be needed to explain how people are experiencing a phenomenon*” and in the same publication these two authors outlined that grounded theory research is “*a qualitative research design where the researcher generates a general explanation of a process, action or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants*”.

### **Thematic analysis**

Considering that this project will be qualitative in nature, it will rely on thematic analysis. It is important to note that with this method of analysis there are both positives and negatives associated with it. This form of analysis has a meaningful structure and the information is generally rich and insightful, however, on the flip side, it is very time consuming and is data supportive. This kind of research is carried out on a smaller scale when compared to quantitative research. The purpose of this project is to look for themes and reasons for children attending a Montessori School. This project is micro in structure and there were five participants interviewed. It can also be highlighted that this method of research is more justified within this subject

topic as it aims to produce theories, themes and concepts that are recurring throughout the interviews.

### **The interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured with open ended questions, yet all the questions had the research question as the basis for them. The main aim of the research question was to attempt to come up with a plausible reason as to why people send their children to private Montessori Schools in Dublin, yet these are personal accounts and therefore there is a social meaning attached to them. For this project it would not be possible to obtain the necessary information from a quantitative study because people's opinions are not objective facts and therefore this form of study would not suit. With this kind of research typically there are twenty to thirty interviews but as this project has a word limit and a time limit there will inevitably be limitations and therefore this will affect the number of possible interviews.

Overall, it can be seen that a qualitative approach is most suitable to the type of research that is being undertaken. It was originally thought that the information gathered resulting from the research carried out would be analysed using the computer programme Nvivo, however, once the material came to be analysed it proved to be easier to do it the old fashioned way with paper and pencil. Firstly the interviews were read and reread many times. Next initial codes were generated and from here themes were searched for and finally these themes were named. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and they were then transcribed. With some topics it may be more difficult for the researcher to decide on which avenue of research to follow. Researchers who are more competent and who have more time available to them may do a research project which requires using both methods of research (qualitative and

quantitative). Also, within qualitative research it maybe necessary to use more than one method of research for example “*a theory may be needed to explain how people are experiencing a phenomenon*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1988).

### **Ethics**

When the women were approached and asked if they would partake in this research they were made fully aware of their ethical rights. All ethical issues were adhered to such as protecting the participants. Ensuring that they were made aware of the study and that consent was obtained freely. They were assured they if they so wished they could withdraw at any stage. In order to maintain their dignity and respect all names used in this study are pseudonyms as are the names of the schools mentioned. The women were informed that once the research was compiled they could read the research project if they so wished.

### **Reflexive analysis**

Of course there were limitations surrounding this research project. The very first of these was time constraints. If there had been more time perhaps it would have been possible to interview people who had sent their children to different schools. In this research project there were only five women interviewed and only included five schools. As has already been stated there are 47 Montessori schools registered with the IMEB in Dublin alone. While the data that was collected was very interesting and showed huge similarities, it would be very beneficial to interview people whose children had had negative experiences in Montessori schools. It would also have been advantageous if there could be a comparison made between children who attend a registered Montessori school for two years before entering primary school and those

who go straight into primary school as to whether in the end there is any real difference.

It was very difficult to find women to interview and so snowballing had to be used in order to get the participants. If this research was being conducted again it would be beneficial to interview fathers as well as apposed to just mothers. It was very beneficial that the interviews and the research project was in an area within which I was familiar. It would have been harder to conduct the interviews if I was under time constraints of only being able to interview people outside office hours as all the women chose to be interviewed during the morning or afternoon.

## Results

### Analysis

It is clear to see that sending one's child to a Montessori school appears to be becoming the norm. Claire mentioned the fact that when she was of Montessori going age herself she did not attend anything; in fact she stayed at home with her mother until she started school. Apart from Montessori schools there does not appear to be many other options available to parents. Mary said that "*pretty much every pre-school in this area is Montessori*". When discussing this with Ann she said that most of her friends are working and so their children attend a crèche and "*the natural progression from crèche was now they were moving to the Montessori room*", and she went on further to say that:

I think the reason for people sending their children to a Montessori is more that that is what is done as apposed to it being a choice; it's just kind of what happens.

Sarah further highlighted this by saying "*all my friends went to Montessori so I just thought it was the norm and that was what was done*".

As can be imagined there were many themes that were recurring throughout the interviews. Three themes will be focused on in depth:

- 1) the advantages of sending a child to a Montessori school
- 2) the reasons for choosing certain Montessori schools
- 3) the parents' knowledge of Montessori.

### The advantages of sending a child to a Montessori school

While analysing the data gathered in the interviews it became clear that the interviewees had high opinions of the Montessori Method of education. There

perceives to be many advantages of sending a child to a Montessori school before they go to primary school. The most common advantages were the following:

- 1) the parents were not able to fulfil the child's needs at home
- 2) it nurtured positive characteristics, and assisted with the development of the child's personality
- 3) the parents felt that the Montessori schools were well structured to help with the child's formation.

Throughout the interviews the women spoke of how they noticed that when their children reached the age of two and half to three years of age they had a hunger for learning, Mary reiterated this by saying that "*they really need more, their brain is absolutely charged and ready to go*". Ann, another woman that I interviewed outlined that she feels that children at this age are very "*astute*". Some parents felt that they were not able to meet these needs at home. The reason for this was due to a number of reasons some of which include the fact that there was more than one child at home, and Mary outlined that she did not feel that she could give her children that:

One to one, I would have been you know with Elizabeth and John when I had my first two I'd have done lots of sitting down and painting and jigsaws and all this kind of thing and so when I had the others I found that these children weren't getting the kind of input that I'd like to be giving them.

Another factor that led to parents feeling they could not fulfil these needs at home was that they were not familiar with what the children wanted. Ann spoke of the practical life activities which her child was doing in the Montessori school and how they keep them occupied for a very long time, such as "*picking up chick peas with a tweezers, you wouldn't think to do it with them at home, god it keeps them occupied for hours*". It was interesting to note that those who I interviewed all mentioned that even if there was no one else in the house they would not have had the patience to do the sort of

work that the children were covering in their schools. Perhaps the parents might have managed to work with their children for an hour, but that would have been the most. Jane another one of the women interviewed spoke of the socialisation that her daughter needed and that she was not able to provide this in the home as the little girl needed to be surrounded by other children in a safe setting. Jane also outlined how her daughters Montessori directress was able to explain things such as good feelings and bad feelings:

You know I couldn't articulate those things, I could say you do this or you do that but I wouldn't have been able to sit down and reason with her as to why something wasn't acceptable, she just got so much of that from her Montessori directress.

Another interesting topic that the parents spoke of when discussing the advantages of sending their children to a Montessori School was the fact that it aided the development of the child's personality in a positive manner. The women spoke of how they felt that it was very beneficial to the children that there was only one piece of each material available in the classroom and that they had to wait, in order to do a certain exercise if another child was already using the material.

Those women whose children had already left Montessori School and were now in primary school felt that their children were very self-assured. The participants felt that the Montessori experience gave their children a great grounding and that this grounding in education was fantastic. They felt that the children were confident entering primary school and especially the fact that their children were well capable for the academic side of primary school and therefore felt no pressure from their new teachers. They spoke of all the added elements that children have to deal with when entering primary school for example the yard, the classrooms are much bigger and there is such an array of other children, that they have to be able to cope with and to adapt to.

The women also outlined that there were obviously many benefits to sending their children to a Montessori School but one of these was that when entering primary school the children were also physically capable for the length of the school day. It is also clear to see from this study that when dealing with the development of the child's characteristics the parents felt that in a Montessori room setting the children have *"room for their personalities to develop whereas, later in life they don't have that"* (Jane).

Another factor which was emphasised by all the women was the fact that their children benefitted a lot from the grace and courtesy element which is highlighted in Montessori Schools. Claire mentioned the fact that what she particularly liked about the school that she sent her son to was that:

The directress was there at the door and she shook hands with the child and she got them to have eye contact and shake hands and say hello in the mornings and good bye and thank when they were leaving each day.

As has already been outlined many of the women who were interviewed mentioned the fact that they thought that it was a good idea that the children could work at their own pace. This is not the case in ordinary schools. In primary schools there is only one teacher to about 30 children and he/she is trying to teach all the children the same thing at the same time and therefore all the children learn at the same pace whether they are more or less intelligent than the class average. Claire outlined this very fact as being one of the major benefits which she saw with the Montessori Method of education:

It's the one on one and the fact that they can go at their own pace and the fact that you can help them along at the part that they are struggling with and then that they can move along when they are ready as opposed to just leaving it because you don't have the resources or time.

While analysing the idea that positive characteristics were being formed and nurtured in the Montessori environment it is of interest to note that Claire spoke of her child being very focused and she believed that it is possible that her child's "*love of work may come from his Montessori*". Claire also mentioned the fact that her son was well disciplined and again she attributed this to his time in his Montessori school and even down to the fact that he would always fold his napkin after meals at home.

The final advantage that the women spoke a lot of was the fact that they all thought that the Montessori Method of education was well structured and benefitted their children. In the five interviews it was reiterated that these parents felt that their children never at any time actually realised that they were learning. Going into their Montessori school was not seen as a chore, it was something that they enjoyed, Mary mentioned that her son "*never thought that he was doing a tap*". This point was further highlighted by Sarah, she felt that:

because again I believe that children love structure and structure in a fun kind of way they don't see it as a chore they don't see it as having to do something.

There was a recurring theme throughout and that was the admiration that all the women had for this method of education and the structure that it provides:

I think kids love structure and it's a structured method and it's structured and it's within their own power they have the power to choose. (Mary)

This helps to illustrate the fact that the women have faith in this method of education, and that the children learn better with some structure. Sarah outlined the fact that she believes that children work better in an environment such as a Montessori school as opposed to a playschool setting because they might have a less formulaic approach to teaching there. Jane also spoke of this and said that:

I think they get more socialisation skills in Montessori, you know they have to wait their turn and while they can move around they still have

the structure of tables and chairs and taking turns, some little bit of structure in their own lives.

Ann had experience of two different Montessori schools and when speaking of the school that she preferred she said that:

When I went up to have a look at it initially I felt that it was quite strict, but they just seem to love the structure of it all. They work all day it seems.

As has already been outlined many of the women found that when their child reached about the age of two and a half they were ready for something more. This research found that parents feel that children need to be aware that there are boundaries and that there is also unstructured times in their lives. Jane mentioned that she wanted her daughter to have some structure in her life as there was plenty of time for her to *“to knock about at home considering she finishes school at one o’clock”*. In the interviews it also became clear that with the structure that the children are faced with in the Montessori School, parents felt that it eased them into primary school.

The second theme that became very noticeable was the reason why parents chose the Montessori school which they did. As can be imagined one of the main reasons why parents chose a specific Montessori school was because of the location and the opening hours. As a result of this study being carried out in an urban area many people are within walking distance of the Montessori school that they chose. Mary spoke of how she tried to get her child into a McCabe’s Montessori in Booterstown but she could not get a place for her child there and so then her reasons for choosing St. Helens Montessori which she settled for were that:

I’d phoned McCabe’s Montessori and I’d just gone from recommendations of people and I knew that the directress in McCabe’s had been recommended to me and I couldn’t get them in there and she had said to me to try St. Helens because the lady is AMI approved and you know she’s a very good old fashioned teacher.

It appears that another major reason for people choosing certain Montessori schools is through word of mouth from friends or family. Ann spoke of how her children were in a crèche because she and her husband were working. When she had only one child in the crèche it was financially viable but when she was paying fees for two children it was no longer worth her while to work. Her sister had sent her children to McCabe's Montessori and she always spoke very highly of it and so on that basis alone Ann moved her son to McCabe's Montessori school and took her daughter out of the crèche. In another instance Sarah spoke of how the directress in the school had come "*highly recommended*".

While discussing why people chose a certain Montessori school it is also interesting to see the women views on why they sent their child to a Montessori school instead of keeping them at home with them and not paying huge fees. As has been previously outlined some parents felt that their child needed something more than they could give them. Others also admitted that it was nice to have a couple of hours to themselves in the morning in order to either do things for themselves or get their jobs done. It was interesting to hear Jane mention that she thought that:

when people send their children to Montessori school it can often be the case of lazy parents, and then not having to do any nursery rhymes with their children or the ABCs.

Sarah had in fact herself been to a Montessori school and she said that if she thought about it, that was the driving force behind her sending her children to a Montessori school. Mary said that "*the vast majority of kids have done at least one or two years, the vast majority*". Sarah said that:

It's funny how habits just turn into the norm with regard to Montessori. Now everyone goes to something you know play groups or mother and toddler groups.

Following on from this Jane mentioned that perhaps to send your child to a Montessori School maybe seen to be somewhat elitist and a “*snobby thing*”. In relation to this Sarah spoke of how “*Montessori has become fashionable, I went to playschool and I thought that was how you start off*”.

The final theme which will be discussed surrounds the idea of the parents’ knowledge of the Montessori Method of Education. Early on in the interviews it became clear that the women who I interviewed generally had a limited knowledge of this method of education, Sarah said that “*it wasn’t through any great love of Montessori education that I sent them, I actually didn’t know anything*”. She went on further to say that “*I’d say that I would be in the majority of people not knowing about Montessori*”. However, the women did say that they probably had a better understanding of what Maria Montessori’s Method of education was all about when their children had completed two years in their school.

In both Tivoli Montessori and Percy Montessori the women said that the Montessori directress invited them into the school to be shown around the classroom. The directress explained the different materials and how they benefitted the child and how each material lead on from a previous one and how the children had to be able to master one exercise before moving onto the next. In St. Helen’s Montessori the directress invited the parents to come in one at a time during the children’s work period in school to observe them actually working. Mary said that:

No matter what you can say and you can see the equipment there’s nothing that compares to that classroom setting of sitting there watching them all. You’d wonder how it works until you see it working and it works so brilliantly.

While most women openly admitted to not having much knowledge about Montessori education, they did know that it was a form of education as opposed to the children just playing with toys. Claire believed that:

It's a sort of less of a straight forward way of drilling education into them which I quite liked, and even the little things that they do are so useful in their everyday life and that's how they learn and are teaching them to write.

While they had little knowledge Ann did mention that she knew that it was quite a structured environment where children started to learn their alphabet and some maths, but she knew no more than that.

As has previously been stated Sarah herself had been to a Montessori School and so she did have some working knowledge of the system. She remembered it as “*a happy, colourful, pleasant environment*”. She also had remembered that all the children worked on their own at their own pace and being able to choose different activities when they so wished. Sarah knew that when she was looking for a Montessori School to send her children to, she was aware that there were some that were less reputable and she was very conscious of “*sending mine to a proper Montessori School because of my own experience*”.

Once the analysis of the five different interviews started it soon became apparent that there was a common thread running through them. It was then easy to identify different themes. In general it appeared that on a whole the five women did not have much prior knowledge of the Montessori Method of education. What did become very clear was that it seems to be the general consensus that everyone sends their child to something before they go to primary school and that the only real option available to them is Montessori. If children are attending a crèche, automatically once they reach the age of two and a half or three years they are then moved into the Montessori room. From speaking with the women it appears that basically they send their children to Montessori because that is the done thing. All five women spoke highly of their experience with the Montessori school that they had chosen although it was interesting to note that those who had first hand experience of two different

schools all stated that the bigger ones tended to have “*huge classes, were more business like and more impersonal*” (Claire) whereas the smaller schools were “*run for the love of the children*” (Jane). It was also fascinating to hear that when the participants were questioned on any disadvantages that they thought were associated with sending their child to Montessori the only response that they came up with was that the children knew so much when they were going into primary school and that some of them had a tendency to become bored and lazy.

## Discussion

In each of the five different interviews the women were asked similar questions surrounding the Montessori Method of education and if they knew anything about this form of education. They were also asked as to what were the main reasons behind them choosing to send their children to a Montessori school. Also in line with this, they were questioned as to whether they felt that there was any advantage to sending a child to a Montessori school and did the child suffer at all. It was clear to see when looking at the transcribed interviews that all five women had pretty much the same opinions on Montessori. There were only two women who had a prior knowledge of Montessori and one of these women had a greater understanding than the second. All of the interviews were carried out in the same manner, in their own homes and a time convenient to them.

Throughout the five interviews there were many of the same topics covered with each of the women. One such theme surrounded the idea that children need structure. These women felt that when their children reached the age of two and half to three years they needed more and these women could not provide this. The women in general felt that the Montessori Method of education gives children good structure, *“I think kids love structure and it’s a structured method and it’s structured and it’s within their own power, they have the power to choose”* The women appeared to feel that there was the right balance of structure and order that the children needed and that when the children would then go onto primary school there would be more structure and so the Montessori environment would have somewhat helped prepare them for this. As was seen earlier the materials in the Montessori environment and in particular those within the area of the practical life exercises help to promote order

within the child. The younger child in the classroom works a lot with these materials and it is at this time that the child is going through the sensitive period for order. The direct aim of a lot of the exercises of practical life is to promote order and structure in the child's development.

A key element in the Montessori environment is its structure and order. The underlying structure and order of the universe must be reflected in the classroom if the child is to internalize it and thus build his own mental order and intelligence. (Polk Lillard, 1988, p.56)

The main aim of the research question was to find out why people chose to send their children to private Montessori schools in Dublin. One of the reasons that cropped up many times in the interviews was the fact that it seemed to be the norm to send your child to a Montessori school before they entered primary school. *"I think Montessori is what is happening here in Ireland that a child at the age of three should be in a Montessori School"*. It appeared that perhaps in times past, those higher up in society sent their children to a Montessori school as it was seen to be elitist and now that tradition seems to have become the norm. The other outstanding theme that filtered through all the interviews was the fact that there was really no other form of pre-school education available to them in their area. The interviews highlighted the fact that Montessori appears to be the only form of early education available to parents. Hayes outlines in her report of 2007 that:

The long-standing neglect of early years services has meant that families have limited and costly choices and children are subject to services of variable quality with little guarantee of appropriate developmental care, education and support. (p. 18)

It does not appear right that there seems to be a monopoly within early education and for that to lie in the hands of the Montessori Method.

As was seen earlier in the literature review it is easy to see how there is confusion when discussing the Montessori Method of education. Many of the women

who were interviewed admitted that they did not have much prior knowledge of Maria Montessori's Method of Education. Jane said that "*I didn't have much of an idea of what Montessori was*". It is interesting to see that even though these people are paying a considerable amount of money to the Montessori school and that they have little knowledge of what they are buying into. This perhaps could be as a result of the fact that there is little regulation in this area. Within policies surrounding early childcare there are very blurred lines between early education and childcare. Both of these are sessional and so it is difficult to regulate. Both early education and childcare involve children of the same age, and this includes any child up to the age of six. Noirin Hayes wrote a paper for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (N.C.C.A.) on 'perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood'. This paper outlined that "*there is emerging consensus and understanding in Ireland of the inseparable nature of education and care in early years provision across all settings*" (p.15).

One of the women highlighted the fact that she liked the way the children in a Montessori school were taught more than just academic materials but also those lessons which include grace and courtesy. She felt it important that children are aware of what is the right way to act in society. These life learning lessons were illustrated in one of the Montessori Schools in the way that there was a teacher waiting at the door to greet children by shaking their hands. Children in a Montessori environment are also taught how to wait their turn. As a result of there only being one piece of each material in the Montessori classroom each child has to wait for a certain piece of material to be returned to the shelf before they can take it out. Another factor which leads to children in the Montessori learning to wait their turn is the fact that

they are not allowed to take out any material if they have not already been shown how to do it by the directress.

The materials themselves create limitations on choice in Montessori. There is only one of each material, so children learn to share and resources see a greater variety of work out at any given time. Children are also limited to the materials they have been shown how to use. (Stoll Lillard, 2007, p.97)

Some of the women whose children who had attended a Montessori school for two years and were now in primary school noted that their children were much further ahead than the other children in their class in primary school. The children who had been to a Montessori school had completed academic work which was equivalent to work being done by children in first class. These women felt that in a way this made the children become lazy and bored because they did not have to exert themselves academically. While this was seen to be a disadvantage in some cases some of the women felt that it left these children with an advantage because when children enter primary school there is a lot that they have to learn and these women were of the opinion that at least if the children were ahead academically they would not have to worry about that aspect and they could focus on other areas such as socializing and those activities which are related to games in the yard. Mary further backed this up by saying that:

The other thing is going into school, when you are going into a big old classroom set-up that to have the security of learning behind you already has to be a huge advantage. I don't know what it must be like for children going in with nothing you know trying to cope, but when they have that knowledge it gives them the scope to be able to get on with the socialisation aspect of a big busy classroom that's there.

### **The benefits and or disadvantages of sending a child to a Montessori School**

When looking to the benefits of sending one's child to a Montessori school before attending a primary school it is advised that the children attending a registered Montessori school should go to it for at least two years if not three as it is a three year

cycle. The materials within the Montessori environment are all building on each other, for example when a child is working with some of the sensorial materials, for example, the cylinder blocks, he/she is learning the pincer grip which is needed later for the acquisition of writing and being able to hold a pencil properly, therefore for a child to fully benefit from this method of education it is necessary to complete the programme. Wolf (2009, p.6) outlines in her book, *A Parents' Guide to the Montessori Classroom* the importance of attending a Montessori school for the full length of time.

The entire program of learning is purposefully structured. Therefore, optimum results cannot be expected either for a child who misses the early years of the cycle, or for one who is withdrawn before she finished the basic materials.

Children can attend a Montessori school from the age of two and a half although many schools have the stipulation that the child must be toilet trained.

Children, who attend a Montessori school, will enter a prepared environment where all their needs are met. As is outlined in *Montessori A Modern Approach*, the prepared environment is:

a nourishing place for the child. It is designed to meet his needs for self-construction and to reveal his personality and growth patterns to us. This means that not only must it contain what the child needs in a positive sense, but all obstacles to his growth must be removed from it as well (Polk Lillard, 1972, p.50).

Although there appears to be many benefits of the Montessori Method, there are also some disadvantages. There have been many people who have written critically on this topic, one such person is, William Craine. If the Montessori Method is followed accurately it states that the children within this environment have the freedom to choose their own work. However, Craine points out in his study that if a child takes out a piece of work that they are not ready for, or are doing incorrectly then it is the directresses job to gently remove it from the child. Craine highlights the

fact that this is in complete contradiction to the Montessori Method because this shows that in fact the child does not have complete freedom of choice within this environment.

Overall it can be seen that there are several reasons why parents choose to send their children to private Montessori schools in Dublin. It could be said that one of the most notable reasons is that it appears to be the norm. The women who were interviewed did feel that their children gained from this experience and Claire summed this up by saying *“I think that they’re better have done it than not, I feel that they would miss out hugely if they didn’t go to a Montessori”*.

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