Montessori came to the conclusion that young children had a tremendous potential to learn but the learning needed to be active and involve the senses.

her first nursery, established in Rome in 1907 and called the Children’s House (Casa dei Bambini). From then on she tirelessly promoted her ideas about children and their education.

It is not surprising that, as Montessori was a doctor, her unique approach is based on a biological perspective and committed to the evolution of species. She believed that the child is born innocent, devoid of the original sin so deeply rooted in Catholicism, the religion of her own family. Her beliefs imply that the child’s family and society at large have a strong influence on how the child develops. She promoted specialist education for teachers and saw the child as an agent of social change. Montessori campaigned tirelessly for peace. For this work she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1948. She wanted to be remembered as a citizen of the world.

Janni, what about Rudolf Steiner and his philosophy?

Rudolf Steiner was born in Kraljevec, now in Croatia. He was intensely awake to Nature, and was convinced of the reality of an inner life. Philosophy, science, literature and the arts were his principal interests. The extraordinary originality of Steiner’s mind led him to a philosophy that linked the world of science with that of spirituality: His revolutionary ideas (anthroposophy) took form in a number of enterprises, ranging from art and architecture to biodynamic agriculture, anthroposophical medicine (an extension of orthodox medical practice that includes Weleda medicines and toiletries), curative education (Camphill special schools) and ethical banking.

The first Waldorf School (called Waldorf, Steiner, or Steiner Waldorf in different parts of the world) grew out of the political and social devastation throughout Europe following the First World War. Emil Molt wanted to offer his employees (at the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory) a fully comprehensive, non-selective, non-denominational education that could offer healing to humankind. He invited Steiner to speak to the workers, and out of this impulse the first school began in Stuttgart. The ideas underpinning this new form of education, along with Steiner’s other teachings, roused particular interest in England, where Steiner was invited to lecture. Here, he formed a warm and mutually respectful friendship with Margaret McMillan, who started the English nursery schools. The Steiner Waldorf kindergartens were founded in 1926 by Elizabeth Grunellius, who had trained as a Froebel kindergarten teacher. Out of her careful observation of children and her reflection on her own practice, she developed working principles based on Steiner’s anthroposophical insights and his picture of child development.

Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner are seen as pioneers of early childhood education. Their unique approaches are valued by parents and benefit thousands of children. Barbara Isaacs and Janni Nicol explore the differences and similarities between these two philosophies and champion the importance of childhood as the unique and essential aspect of humanity.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) were contemporaries; their paths were parallel yet diverse. Barbara, could you briefly outline the reasons for the Montessori approach emerging as a powerful pedagogical tool at the start of the 20th century?

Montessori’s early study of medicine (she was one of the first women to become a doctor in Italy in the 1890s) and her deep commitment to women’s rights and to children strongly influenced her early work in the slums of Rome. She was interested in how children learn, and through her studies she came to the conclusion that young children had a tremendous potential to learn but the learning needed to be active and involve the senses. Based on this premise, she observed children and as a result developed a range of activities and materials that prepare the child for later academic learning. Her initial observational studies were carried out in a hospital for children with special needs and developed further in
It appears that both approaches hold a respectful view of the child and consider the important role played by the child’s environment and the role of the adult within it. These are similar to the principles that underpin the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the English regulatory framework for work with children from birth to 5 years old. Barbara, could you elaborate on the principles behind Montessori education?

Our approach is based on the idea that each child is a unique individual with enormous potential and that it is the role of adults and society to nurture this potential. We do this by recognising that the child is an active learner capable of directing his own learning, following an individual yet predetermined path of development. The child’s developmental stages described by Montessori are organised in six-year bands, with the first stage, the Absorbent Mind, being the most important because this is the foundation for the future. The child in the first six years of life has a strong drive to be independent, needs to have freedom to express these desires and needs to be supported by a favourable environment specially prepared by an empathetic and knowledgeable adult. Under these conditions the child will thrive and develop a sense of wellbeing and belonging and the ability to develop self-regulation, initiative and resilience.

**each individual child is viewed by the Steiner kindergarten teacher as a unique human being, born carrying a treasure box of gifts**

The environment is a crucial element of the Montessori approach. The home or the classroom should be prepared for the child, reflecting the stage of development and the culture of the child’s community, interests and what Montessori called ‘sensitive periods’ (windows of opportunity to develop specific skills and aptitudes). The learning environment needs to be beautiful, well organised and accessible, with activities that appeal to the child ready for use. All these qualities are essential if the environment is to facilitate spontaneous learning. In Montessori settings the preparation of the favourable environment reflects the adults’ knowledge of the children, and their commitment, trust and respect for them. It will include the activities initially designed by Montessori, organised into areas of learning, and other materials that are in keeping with the principles of her approach. It is essential that each piece of equipment has a purpose and serves and contributes to the children’s learning. The environment both inside and outside is well thought out and carefully planned and maintained by the adults, in line with the needs of the child.

The adults supporting children in the Montessori classroom must have a sound knowledge and understanding of child development and of their own role, and the role the environment plays in children’s learning and development. They must be committed to the Montessori principle of ‘following the child’. This entails the teacher modelling behaviours, introducing the child to the environment and ensuring that she is well settled into the daily routine of the classroom, facilitating learning using the materials available. The children are learning from the teacher, from other children and also from the environment itself. The adult will be protecting the child, who is engaged with activities enabling repetition, respecting the child’s individual rhythm and giving each child time to be – working and playing on her own, with friends, inside and outside. All this happens during the three-hour work cycle following the children’s spontaneous learning patterns, with some adult engagement and opportunities for small group activities both inside and outside the classroom.

**So what do learning and development look like in a Montessori classroom?**

When the children first come to the nursery they become familiar with the daily routines and activities, which help them settle. They will be introduced to activities of everyday living, which provide them with practical skills and facilitate...
the golden beads, which introduce the decimal system to children who are comfortable and secure in their knowledge of numbers up to 10. It is a pity they are not used more often in Montessori nurseries in Britain today, because most children leave soon after their fourth birthday to attend mainstream reception classes.

Janni, what about the principles underpinning Steiner Waldorf education?

Each individual child is viewed by the Steiner kindergarten teacher as a unique human being, born carrying a treasure box of gifts, some inherited from his parents and some brought with him as part of his individuality. It is our joy and our privilege as educators, together with parents, to help each child unwrap his gifts when he is ready, within a nurturing and enabling environment.

Steiner divided the broad principles of child development, and the educational methodology supporting it, into three seven-year psychological and physiological phases. Although each stage has a precise integrity, processes coming to a certain culmination in one phase transform into faculties in the subsequent stage of development. An example of this is that the forces so strongly at work in building up the physical body in the first seven years become available as the basis for healthy cognitive development in the second seven-year period. The threefold approach holistically supports the development of the all-round human qualities of willing (doing), feeling and thinking – an education of ‘hand, heart and head’.

And what do learning and development look like in a Steiner Waldorf classroom?

A highly trained Steiner practitioner encourages the child’s creative play and self-motivated enquiry, and offers him- or herself as model for imitation rather than instructor. Through free imitation, children naturally develop a sense of their own purposeful doing and creating alongside the working adult. The kindergarten reflects a family environment, where mixed ages (3–7 years) can grow, learn and take care of each other. Whole-group activities meet individual needs. The principle of ‘protection of the senses’ results in a calmly decorated room, with no displays of children’s work. You will find open-ended toys made from natural materials, home corners under draped fabric, a working kitchen and room for movement, indoors and out. The children’s self-initiated, imaginative play is stimulated by this transformable equipment, which encourages invention, creativity and adaptability.

Learning experiences are embedded within the business of daily living, and a great range of domestic and creative (artistic) activities are offered in an informal way, allowing enthusiasm and initiative to flourish. Within the rhythmical structure of the day, week and year, activities are repeated. From Monday baking day to Friday cleaning day, the children are secure in knowing where they are in their environment. Alongside daily and weekly rhythms, seasonal changes are reflected in the environment, stories and songs and by the craft or domestic activity, and the year is highlighted by festivals and celebrations. A sense of familiarity enables the child to learn

> their need for independence; practically this is very much the ‘home corner’ of the Montessori classroom, as the activities enable spontaneous role play. The skills learnt from the activities can be applied to activities in the art area, when gardening outside or getting dressed, participating in cooking or organising the snack or lunch. They also contribute to maintenance of the classroom through activities such as sweeping, raking leaves and washing up after the snack.

Parallel to these activities will be the exploration of the sensorial materials that guide the children’s concept formation and provide the foundation for introducing literacy, numeracy and geometry. Alongside these activities children will be introduced to Nature and geography through real experiences and outings: these areas serve as the basis for learning about the world not only within their own community but also beyond it. The children in Montessori nurseries learn about continents and the children and their families who live there. They are introduced to science and will have daily access to a wide variety of books, storytelling, music, and arts and crafts activities. They will be supported in spontaneous role play both inside and outside the classroom. Water play and sandpits are usually available in the outdoor classroom, as are bikes, trikes, climbing frame and trampolines. Many nurseries also offer yoga or have a gym or dancing teacher visit on a regular basis. Some children are introduced to a second language such as German or French, and some have ventured into Mandarin.

Literacy and numeracy are available to children who express interest and are ready for more academic learning. The unique features of these areas of learning are the large movable alphabet, which enables children to ‘write without physically writing’, using their knowledge of phonics sounds (initially taught with the help of sandpaper letters), an approach used in Montessori classrooms since the very beginning; and
new skills in confidence and security and without undue stress. Children are supported to know and love the world, to experience it with awe and wonder. Life skills are practised in meaningful activity – we bake because we need to eat the bread. Activities such as growing the wheat in our vegetable patch, grinding the grain, weighing, baking, preparing the snack and recycling the leftovers offer the foundation skills for maths, science and ecological understanding.

The foundations for literacy and communication are supported by a rich oral tradition of storytelling, puppetry, music and movement, language rhymes and songs – a feast for imagination and fantasy that supports concentration and memory skills. As children tend to their own needs, those of their friends and the environment, they develop strong and healthy physical bodies, enquiring minds, good social skills and the ability to think broadly. This provides the foundation for future formal learning at age 6+. This is a time for children to experience their childhood in an enabling environment where they can grow in peace and harmony, feeling safe and not under pressure to perform or compete. Here they can slowly weave a rich tapestry of essential lifelong learning experiences.

In your opinion what are the unique features of your approaches that made them of international appeal and enabled them to thrive in the 21st century?

We believe the reason is that both approaches put the child at the heart of their pedagogy. They are based on knowledge of children and their universal characteristics. They recognise the child’s need to play, to engage, to have time to dream and explore and use her imagination. Both approaches value childhood in its own right, as a preparation not for school, but for life – to become responsible, social citizens of a world they respect, care for and cherish. Both Montessori and Steiner Waldorf are worldwide movements, with specialised training courses, schools and settings in over 60 countries.

* All Steiner kindergartens have exemptions from or modifications to some formal mathematical and all literacy and ICT requirements of the EYFS.

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**Resources**

- **Understanding the Montessori Approach: Early Years Education in Practice** by Barbara Isaacs, Routledge
- **Bringing the Montessori Approach to your Early Years Practice** by Barbara Isaacs, Routledge
- **The 1946 London Lectures** by Maria Montessori, Montessori-Pierson
- **Understanding the Steiner Waldorf Approach: Early Years Education in Practice** by Janni Nicol and Jill Taplin, Routledge
- **Bringing the Steiner Waldorf Approach to your Early Years Practice** by Janni Nicol, Routledge
- **Free to Learn: Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Care and Education** by Lynne Oldfield, Hawthorn Press
- **The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood** by Sally Jenkinson, Hawthorn Press

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**Janni Nicol** is a mother, and grandmother, who for many years worked as a Steiner Waldorf kindergarten teacher in South Africa and England. She now works as the Early Childhood Representative for the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, produces and edits KINDLING (Journal for Steiner Waldorf early childhood education and care – see page 32) and is a core tutor on the Steiner teacher training course. Her great love is storytelling and puppetry and she gives shows for children whenever possible.

**Barbara Isaacs** has two grown-up children, both of whom believe that their Montessori beginnings significantly influenced their adult lives. Barbara ran a Montessori nursery school in Wantage, has trained and supported training of Montessori teachers as a Montessori lecturer and Academic Director at Montessori Centre International and is currently Director of National Strategies for Montessori St Nicholas, promoting Montessori Education in the UK and internationally.

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[www.steinerwaldorf.org](http://www.steinerwaldorf.org)

[www.montessori.org.uk](http://www.montessori.org.uk)