DiVA
http://www.diva-portal.org

This is the published version of a paper published in *Nordic Journal of Educational History*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Vikström, E. (2024)
Erica Moretti: The Best Weapon For Peace: Maria Montessori, Education, And Children'S Rights
Nordic Journal of Educational History, 11(1)
https://doi.org/10.36368/njedh.v11i1.1032

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-226756

Nordic Journal of Educational History
Vol. 11, no. 1 (2024)
ISSN (online): 2001-9076
ISSN (print): 2001-7766

Book Review

Erica Moretti
The Best Weapon for Peace: Maria Montessori, Education, and Children's Rights
Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press
2021, 296 pp.

There have been many international publications on the Italian educator, doctor and feminist Maria Montessori (1870–1952) recently. A gem that, sadly enough, deals with a highly current topic in the context of the wars between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Gaza is Erica Moretti's book, *The Best Weapon for Peace: Maria Montessori, Education, and Children's Rights,* which was published in 2021 and granted the ISCHE First Book Award in 2022.

Moretti's transnational history presents a new interpretation of the development of Montessori's pacifism throughout her career. Where previous studies have considered Montessori's thoughts on peace to be secondary to her educational achievements, Moretti's places these ideas at the core of the Montessorian educational enterprise. Thus, Moretti redefines her pedagogy as a mission for global peace that states that children, which Montessori termed "forgotten citizens," are not mere objects that should be cared for but must be seen as political subjects who can change society for the better.

Methodologically, Moretti uses notions from microhistory and feminist biography to write about Montessori's "[…] life as a lens to see how the discourse on peace, humanitarianism, and war prevention took different turns and was adapted to different contexts" (p. 13). The analysis is based on various source materials, such as Montessori's publications, private correspondence, lecture notes and governmental reports in Italian, French and English. Besides the introduction and concluding chapter, the book consists of six chapters, illustrated with photographs. Since Moretti is interested in the development of Montessori's thoughts on peace, the analysis and the chapters are ordered chronologically from the first decade of the twentieth century until Montessori's death in 1952.

In the first chapter, we learn how Montessori's educational method and its relation to pacifism was developed in relation to her encounter with children affected by various mental, physical and economic challenges. Moretti contextualises Montessori's ideas in a time where the role of childhood and education was reconsidered as a way of changing Italian society. Through a close reading of *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica* (1909), Moretti shows how Montessori developed her educational ideas on balance between the mind and body at the San Lorenzo Casa dei Bambini. This balance would foster a greater morality and 'peace from within' that would also have a positive effect on the child's environment and peers.

The second chapter investigates Montessori's wish to establish an organisation called the White Cross, which would help children affected by the atrocities of war. During World War I, she sought support for this association from the Roman Catholic Church, the

Italian state and a socialist organisation named *Società Umanitaria*. The White Cross did not receive the support Montessori had hoped for and thus never materialised, but according to Moretti, it deepened her conceptualisation of the relationship between education and peace.

In the third chapter, Moretti focuses on four peace lectures that Montessori gave as a part of her training course in California, USA, during World War I. By analysing these unpublished lectures, Moretti shows that Montessori's notions on the education of children as agents for peace and war prevention were developed two decades earlier than previously assumed. For Montessori, education was seen as the ultimate weapon for peace and a long-term project that was crucial for future generations.

The fourth chapter examines the period from 1922 to 1934 when Montessori received support from the fascist regime in Italy. By contextualising the relationship between her, Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) and other representatives from the Fascist Party, Moretti points to ambivalences in previous research on Montessori's connection to the fascist regime. Consequently, Moretti provides a nuanced account on how Montessori accepted Mussolini's support in order to develop her educational methodology and paused her public appearances on peace and pacifism for more than a decade.

In the fifth chapter, Moretti focuses on Montessori's public lectures on peace from 1932 to 1939. These lectures were held at numerous congresses on education and peace in Europe and were an attempt by Montessori to make education for peace a social and political question. To strengthen children's rights, Montessori proposed a ministry of the child and a political party for children, which Moretti interprets as a call for public institutions that would foster peace through education.

The sixth chapter deals with the under-examined period of Montessori's time in India during the 1940s. Amongst other topics, Moretti analyses how Montessori took an ecological pedagogical stance in dialogue with Indian nationalist Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948). Furthermore, the chapter investigates Montessori's long interest in theosophy and the notions that contributed to her ideas on 'cosmic education' and the symbiosis between humans and nature.

In the concluding chapter, Moretti focuses on Montessori's work after World War II and her three (unsuccessful) nominations to the Nobel Peace Prize in the years before her death in 1952. Moretti traces Montessori's legacy in political policies regarding children, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989 to the present.

In sum, this book brings a new perspective to Montessori's educational thought as a contribution to the field of history of education and the history of human and children's rights. As shown in the chapter on Montessori's relationship to the Italian fascist regime, Moretti does not fear the complexities of Montessori's struggle for educating children in the mission for global peace. Thus, this book offers a rich analysis of Montessori's work for anyone interested in the transnational history of peace education.

Emma Vikström
Umeå University
emma.vikstrom@umu.se