

## Giving children in Gaza a Fighting Chance through Montessori Education

*‘[Maria] Montessori found that the pupils had experienced “a special form of mental disturbance, which constituted a real mental wound.”’*

*Maria Montessori, ‘The White Cross’ (1917) in Erica Moretti’s ‘The Best Weapon for Peace’ (2021)*

Montessori on Wheels (MoW) has partnered with Heal Palestine and Enriching environments to answer the desperate call for education to be delivered to Gazan children who have been internally displaced and/or forced to be refugees in Egypt and in other host countries. Montessori Gaza is a crucial and timely intervention that centres the needs of children in post-conflict settings, while empowering parents to directly support the educational needs of their children as active participants of the learning process. MoW aspires to restore the notion that families are a child’s first educator and to create learning spaces that are culturally relevant even where children are in unfamiliar settings.

### *A monumental crisis*

Dr Maria Montessori notes in her writings that children are a forgotten citizenry yet being sacred in nature, becoming unto themselves a treasure that remains buried in the sand with no one to unearth it.<sup>1</sup> This is true for the 12,300 children in Gaza who have been killed, injured and displaced by the bombings since October last year.<sup>2</sup> More so, severe food and water insecurity has resulted in major livelihood disasters such as hunger, the destruction of critical infrastructure and large scale displacement. This reality is more pronounced when it comes to the children of Gaza who are bearing witness to the complete destruction of their homes, neighbourhoods, play

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<sup>1</sup> <https://montessori150.org/maria-montessori/forgotten-citizen> (accessed 1 May 2024)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.msnbc.com/top-stories/latest/death-toll-children-gaza-israel-rcna143269> (accessed 1 May 2024)

areas, schools, and their way of life in a grand display of modern-day genocidal intent. The destruction of schools has been described by Gazan writer Amira Ahmed as *scholasticide* – the complete and systematic destruction of the entire education system.<sup>3</sup>

Education remains one of the most steadfast and resilient pillars of society as it promises a positive future for all, and functions as an investment into the lives of learners. Though this is so, those responding to the conflict have not shed enough light on the dire situation of the education sector in Gaza as it has received less attention from the media and the international community as compared to other human rights. To put it into perspective, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported in January 2024 that 378 schools have been destroyed, accounting for 76% of the total number of schools in Gaza. This is an unprecedented crisis.<sup>4</sup>

### *Education in times of conflict*

In times of conflict, education speaks louder than the bombs by bridging the developmental gap often left by warring powers. Montessori education creates an enabling environment for education to be flexible, adaptive, and holistic enough to cater for the needs of children affected by conflict. Thus, education becomes the embodiment of hope, and a way for children to restore their childhood. It serves as a conduit for greater understanding of what has occurred, and a panacea for all that has been lost. Education becomes more than a humanitarian intervention, but a means to re-establish hope and a means to survive. MoW believes in the undying potential of children to reimagine their futures for the better, even in the face of unprecedented calamity.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza> (accessed 1 May 2024)

<sup>4</sup> <https://palestine.un.org/en/260760-gaza-rafaah-invasion-would-be-disaster-%E2%80%98beyond-imagination%E2%80%99-warn-un-medics> (accessed 1 May 2024)

### *The Ultimate Weapon*

Erica Moretti, author of 'The Best Weapon for Peace', wrote extensively about Dr Maria Montessori's life, her education pedagogy and how it intersects with children's rights. In her book she touches on the lingering trauma of children who have been exposed to death, physical toil and disrupted emotional life, and how these experiences required the children to undergo innovative, customised, and unprecedented rehabilitative interventions. Montessori education adheres to that kind of tailored ingenuity that can better respond to the educational and developmental needs of children burdened by conflict.

The end goal is to reintegrate children into a society that makes them functional beings and equal contributors to the social fabric, while supporting their evolving capacities. In the end, true and lasting peace can be attained when children are empowered to live and exist without the difficulties of war, to understand the world around them as they grow, and to have an education that allows them to dream beyond the bullets. Montessori education is the ultimate weapon for peace, and the hope of a better tomorrow for the children of Gaza.