

## Leonor Stjepic – Montessori Group

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:00] This is the Early Link podcast. I'm your host Rafael Otto. Thanks for tuning in. As usual, you can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland metro on Sundays at 4:30pm or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts.

Today, my guest is Leonor Stjepic. She is an award-winning social enterprise entrepreneur, whose career has spanned both the private and non-profit sectors in the UK; and she is currently the chief executive officer for the Montessori Group, an organization that provides training in Montessori education for early years communities in the UK and internationally. Leonor, it's great to have you here today.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:00:37] Well, thank you very much for inviting me. It's a pleasure.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:39] I wanted to start by asking you about the Montessori approach to early education. Why Montessori and what purpose does the Montessori group serve?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:00:49] That's a great question to start off with. So Montessori is an approach. It was developed by Dr. Maria Montessori over a hundred years ago. But what's really fascinating about Montessori is that she really was a real pioneer in that everything she talks about, we now see to be true as much as it was a hundred years ago.

So the approach is something that helps children develop their potential. It treats each child as unique. All these things sound sort of commonplace now, but this was revolutionary at the time and it's very strong on teaching, not only numeracy and literacy. But also on those social-emotional skills that are essential to first of all, develop as a human being, but secondly, are going to become really important as the way that we work changes. And I'm sure we'll talk about that later. The Montessori group is a global organization. We don't own Montessori schools, but we do support Montessori schools, educators, children. At the heart of everything we do is social impact.

Maria Montessori started her first school in the slums of Rome. And we follow that legacy of trying to bring education and particularly early years education to the most underprivileged in our communities. Whether that's disadvantage through economic factors, social factors, whatever. We want to ensure that every child has the opportunity to have an excellent education and actually reach their full potential.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:02:26] Maria Montessori was a pioneer in many ways. One of the things that I read about her recently is that she, more than a hundred years ago or 120 years ago, she fought for equal pay for equal work, which was revolutionary at the time and in some ways, still is today. What else do you want people to know about her?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:02:46] Well, she was, I mean, she spoke in 1896 at the first congress for women's rights in Berlin. Even before she actually developed her pedagogy, she was already

thinking about that. She was one of the first women to actually become a doctor in Italy. Going against what would have been the sort of societal norms at the time where sort of, well, you know, brought up young ladies did not go into work, let alone something like being a doctor.

And there's a story that when she was actually studying medicine, the male students refused her access to the anatomy classes. So she actually had to learn anatomy by going into the morgue late at night. Which is, you have to sort of think that's one very strong woman to sort of say, "Right! Well, I'm going to do that and I'm going to show them that I can actually sort of graduate as a doctor." So she worked with Mahatma Gandhi. They were friends. So her writings on peace, she wrote a series of lectures in 1947, having experienced two world wars, about peace education. She talked about sustainability even before it became fashionable or even recognizable as an issue that we should actually be mindful about.

She really was way ahead of her time. I had a very interesting conversation yesterday with someone who was explaining to me that now neuroscience proves that virtually everything that Maria Montessori said about child development is true. It can now be proved through neuroscience.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:04:17] Right. Well, let's pivot a little to talk about investments in the early years. It's something that obviously we spend a lot of time on here locally in Oregon, in the US there's been a lot of momentum around this. Tell me what that looks like in the UK. I know you've called for more investments in the early years for many of the reasons that you're talking about now, and many of the things that we know, why it's important to invest early. What does that look like in the UK? And my understanding is that government spending is still pretty low in the early years. So talk about why that is.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:04:50] Yeah. I mean it's, it's such a shame. There's a lot of talk about early years, but there is no funding put towards that here. So I'll give you two examples. We had recently, the government allocated a huge amount of money towards education and none of it was for nurseries or early years. And even members of the government's own party were saying, "Well, why is that?" You know, we all understand the early years is important. Why has none of that money been earmarked for early years? But it wasn't. It wasn't earmarked. During the lockdowns that we had in the UK, the only schools that were open were nursery schools, kindergartens that were looking after the children of key workers. And yet, and they had to deal with the challenges of keeping the children safe. Some of the issues that the children are facing around sort of their social and mental wellbeing, and no funding to help them with that.

Even now just even something as simple as... And this isn't even money. There's an issue in the UK around the track and test app, where a lot of people are being asked to self-isolate. And this is causing quite a number of issues and there was an exemption list published by the government just last week saying, "Well, here are key workers that shouldn't have to self-isolate as they get sort of pinged." We call it pinged, "ping-demic," and nursery school teachers weren't on it. So unfortunately, there isn't actually an understanding that this is the most essential time of a child's life.

These are the most important educators and they're not being valued and I think that's such a shame, and I'm quite embarrassed about it on behalf of my country. I think what we're seeing, interestingly enough is in the other countries that we are dealing with, other governments that we're dealing with, there is more of an understanding.

And sometimes the issue for them is financial. Obviously, there are countries that are not as wealthy, but they really want to make a difference. And we are talking to governments, many have never heard of Montessori, but understand that this new way of education is really essential and they want to find a way to work with us and they want to invest in early years.

So that's what gives me hope that there are countries in the world where this is really understood, and want to do something meaningful for their young people.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:07:12] Say more, a little bit more about your international network. And it's encouraging to hear that there's some momentum and I would love to hear more about that is, you know, is there really a growing appetite for public investment in early childhood? And what are you seeing there?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:07:27] Yes, very much so. It is obviously one of the UN's SDG goals four... is target 4.2. So you know, even at that level it's understood and governments have signed up to this. But I think more than that, I think what's been really interesting or what we've seen over the last, what, 16 months, 16, 18 months since um, COVID started is that, this understanding that things have to change; that we have to do different things in a different way. Education has to be done differently. That sort of appetite has increased, it has accelerated. I think obviously there's a lot more coming from parents who have had to homeschool their children.

So they've had a much more hands-on understanding of what happens during the school day. So there's sort of, you know, a little bit of parent power there. This has been a conversation that's been happening ever since I've been CEO of The Montessori Group. I've been talking about it and I've been going to international conferences and talking to governments and big institutions, and they've all understood it. But now I think there's more of an appetite to do something about it. And I think what the pandemic has done is actually helped people realize that we need to better serve young people, our little ones. So I think we're having a lot of conversations.

We're talking to several governments. I'll give you an example: two weeks ago, I gave a sort of round table of 26 ministers of education around the world, who wanted to talk about early years and that's phenomenal. I've never seen that before. So I think there is a real appetite globally.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:09:00] Are you seeing differences between developed and more emerging economies in terms of how things are shaping up?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:09:08] I think that the more emerging economies have more of an appetite. I think they understand and they want to do something. I think there are also economies where perhaps they take a longer view. It's more about not the next four years or next five years, on the next sort of election, but more actually, where this is going to take time.

We have to do this and there's more what I would call cross-party support for this, which I think is really valuable. So I think, yes, there is a little bit, not, not, it's not as marked as that you'd think, but there is a little bit of a trend in that direction

**Rafael Otto:** [00:09:47] When you're talking with people and making the case for investing in the early years, what are you finding to be most effective with decision makers or policymakers? What kind of messages are getting through or what kind of stories are getting through?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:10:00] I think what's getting through is actually the economic argument. Because at that level, with their hearts, they understand the importance of it. But they have to sort of, you know, with their heads sort of create policy. What I'm finding is that when you talk about the future of work, or when I talk about, well, look, this is what McKinsey says about the future of work, this is what OECD says about the future of work, this is what World Bank says about the future of work. And everybody's saying, you know, big business, and everybody's saying the same that as we move further into this digital revolution that we're going through, the skills that we're going to need from our future workforce are those social-emotional skills.

It is about creativity, collaboration. It is about critical thinking. It is the sort of skills that we're very good at encouraging in young people. But it's going to be what's going to be needed. We don't need to retain huge chunks of information anymore. In 30 seconds, I can find out more information that I ever learned in my school years by just Googling.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:11:05] Right, right.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:11:06] You know, we don't need to retain those facts and figures as, you know, I remember doing exams and having to remember dates. When did this battle happen and when did this happen? You know, you don't have to do that anymore. You can look it up. But you need to understand what you're seeing and reading and have the ability to critically think about it.

And that's the difference. Our education system was created in the Industrial Revolution to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution. We're in a digital revolution now and we've not shifted that thinking yet of saying we need a different type of education. I don't know what it's like in the US, but working from home is not going away in the UK. So if you're working from home, how you communicate with your team as a leader has to change. How you build those human relationships around trust and having that emotional intelligence to understand. If that person's not in front of me are they okay, are they not okay, are there issues? All of that emotional intelligence has to come to the fore. It's not about control anymore. You can't, as a leader, you'd go crazy if you try to control what your team member who's working remotely did every minute of the day, that's just crazy. You can't do that. You have to build a different level of leadership. You have to build a different level of dealing with people. You have to think about... and just from a personal level, if you're working within home, your family may be around you all the time. So that's a different dynamic than when you're out all day and come back.

We've just seen it in a sort of snapshot during lockdowns that this shift has happened and it's not going to go away. So we... we're having to think about things differently.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:12:44] There's a lot of discussion and talk about the way in which our education system comes from the Industrial Revolution, that time period. And I don't know if there is a... is it a fear factor of letting go of that way of doing things? Or there's still difficulty in making the shift to a more digital way of doing things in our classrooms and in our workplaces?

What do you think that's about?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:13:11] I think there is an element of fear because it's fear of the unknown. Because we haven't quite defined, in the mainstream, what that looks like. So there's a little bit of fear. I think there's also a lot of misperception about what it would require. So for example, we're talking about Montessori and Montessori is an approach that can be added into any curriculum.

You know, you don't have to retrain and rebuild schools and, you know, you just have to, yes, there's a shift in approach. You have to work with educators differently. I think education policy makers have to trust educators more. I think there has to be that shift about saying, actually, they know best what the child needs.

They're... they're the closest. So, this control mechanism. I mean, you know, you see that in a number of countries around, testing at a very early age and stats and data. Actually, is that really valid anymore? We have a very interesting person coming to join us on our board in September. He is Sugata Mitra, who did work in India, introducing street children to computers by putting... it was called the Hole In The Wall, because he put public computers up there to allow street children to have access to education. He and I have been having a very interesting conversation around assessment and saying somebody passes a PhD because they have a conversation.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:34] Right.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:14:34] Effectively a viva is a conversation.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:36] Exactly.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:14:37] That's what you're doing. So if you're doing it at that level, why can't you do it younger? Why can't you trust that you're going to have a conversation and be able to assess someone through a conversation? And that means then you have to trust the educators who are dealing with the children who are... are going to understand what child needs more or child needs less of something. So there is a certain level of, yes, fear of losing control, because if you lose control, what does that mean? And the reality is actually we've seen what happens, because to a certain extent we've all slightly lost control during the pandemic, and the world has still continued. We're still here. We've managed to actually achieve things and we've managed to shift how we all do things, and we're not all gone to hell in a handcart yet. So, we're okay. We're okay.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:15:21] We'll have to trust the process a little bit more.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:15:23] Yeah.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:15:24] Well, you mentioned assessment. I wanted to ask you about some of the other pieces that you're thinking about. I know workforce development, teacher development and support for teachers is one thing. I know you're interested in funding research and strengthening the role of higher ed and supporting early educators. Can you talk about some of those pieces?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:15:43] Yeah, so this is really very much around raising the status of early years educators. I try to shy away from the word "professionalization" because they are professional. But it's just about having them being viewed as professional and giving them the tools to go out there and feel that they are fully equipped. So we co-created the International Montessori Institute last year, coincidentally on Maria Montessori's 150th birthday. And we are offering as of this September, the world's first Bachelor's in Montessori education. It will be an accelerated two- year degree. It's available online and as blended learning, because we want to attract students from across the world.

We are in the process of just validating the Master's and the PhD's as well. We will have the world's first professor of Montessori education. So it's about moving that perception of Montessori that it's alternative to... yes, it's an alternative and it's an alternative we should be considering. But look, it's within the mainstream as well.

And it also means that we will have young people who hopefully will be able to see that there's some sort of career path for them if they're going to early years. I think that in many countries, as a perception, that early years educators are babysitters and they're not. They're educators and this is a way of actually getting that message across. These are educated people who are educating your young people, and this is an important job.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:17:08] Wonderful to see those developments coming along. Is there anything in terms of what kinds of research that you're interested in funding right now? Do you want to talk about that a little bit? Because I know there's so much that we rely on in the early childhood field in terms of research that's already been done, and I'd love to hear what's coming next.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:17:26] Yes. Well, we're being quite innovative in the research, so it is early years, it's not just Montessori. So, one of those ideas that we are actually talking to professor Sugata Mitra about is assessment, and doing some pilot projects about what happens if you don't assess children the traditional way and following them through.

So it will be a longitudinal study around assessing what works, what doesn't work. We're actually doing a lot of research as well around mental wellbeing. If you allow children to develop skills of confidence, resilience in early years, how does that support them when dealing with mental wellbeing?

And obviously, especially right now, that's an issue that's very much in a lot of people's minds.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:18:20] Right.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:18:21] We're also hoping to do research, with the Kindness Research Foundation, around KQ. So this is something they've trademarked. It's like EQ and IQ. They've done some fascinating work already in adults around measuring... I mean, it's a small organization that was actually set up by a forensic psychologist who, having dealt with the worst of humanity, wanted to sort of see, "Okay, well, what happens if people are very kind, and can you teach kindness and what happens if you can teach kindness in children? Does that perhaps put them on a different path?"

And so they developed this thing called KQ, so it's developed by psychologists. and we're going to do some work on that with younger age groups about, so they're saying, "Well, can you teach kindness and how do you teach kindness?" But there's a lot more. We will be issuing our research in a new review series, which will be published by a very large well-known company.

We're just in the middle of signing contracts with them. So I can't say who they are, but they are very large. The idea being that we will bring the same rigor to the research that we do as if it were a medical journal or a scientific. So we really want to be in a position where we can actually point to that research and say, here we are, rigorous peer reviewed research, all collated in one place, published by a very reputable publisher.

You know, so policy makers, what's your answer now?

**Rafael Otto:** [00:19:53] Yeah, looking forward to that.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:19:55] Well the first issue should be out in June of next year.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:19:58] Okay, great.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:20:00] Yeah.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:20:00] I also want to ask you about some of your partnerships for social impact. I know that's an important part of your work. Can you talk about what those partnerships look like and what you're trying to accomplish with those partnerships?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:20:13] Yeah. Well, some of them are partnerships that are very much on the ground. So they're with smaller organizations where we can give them grant funding or support through expertise, and sometimes just leveraging up brand or name to be able to get them the support that they need. So for example, we've done a project with street children in Pakistan where there is a community group on the ground that is actually bringing education to street children. And what's been really interesting is that one of the byproducts is that often their older members of their family, like their parents or aunts, uncles, oldest brothers and sisters, have now come along and want to learn how to read as well and want to learn how to do maths as well. So it sort of had a knock-on effect which is really lovely. So that's really as it was obviously aimed at very young children.

We've another sort of on-the-ground project is, we're doing a project with the community group in Croatia, which, in an area recently had a very big earthquake and basically there is no infrastructure for the educational activities that they carried out. So we want to support them going through our accreditation scheme to show that actually you can do good quality education regardless of where you are, and even in the most challenging of cases.

So... so those are two of the, sort of on-the-ground projects that we're doing. We are doing work hopefully with some big organizations. A couple I can't name because, as I said, we're just about to make it public in the next couple of weeks.

But big global organizations about having input into some of their educational programs. But we're also doing work, because we're thinking about the bigger picture about what do children need, post -COVID. So we're also doing things, such as work with a mental health charity about developing coping strategies for both parents, but also teachers. We have a situation where in many parts of the world, young children had spent their most formative years, toddler years, isolated. So, they have issues around speech,,around socialization, and so we're trying to sort of work with them, but also looking at the mental health of educators.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:22:29] Yeah.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:22:29] Because you know, it's been quite difficult for them as well and they need support. So that's some work that we've also been doing.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:22:35] So you've touched on a number of these things, I think for this question. But I'm just going to pose it this way: You know, what do you hope to see in terms of how the field develops and evolves in the coming years? What's that future look for you?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:22:50] If we could move the needle so that early years gets the same recognition as tertiary education, that would be amazing.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:23:04] Right, right.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:23:05] You know, I would love to think that we could get it there, but I'm a pragmatist. And given my age, I don't think I may necessarily see that in the years that I'm CEO. Not that I'm leaving anytime soon. I think societal change takes a long time and policy change sometimes takes even longer. But if we can at least shift that perception and have those conversations, and give the young people coming into the sector hope that there is a career for them, that it is something that they should come into.

I have to say my biggest concern is that young people may not be attracted by a sector where there seems to be no recognition of the value of their work; where often it's not paid very well. It is a vocation, we understand that. But at the same time, I think that we run the risk of losing out if we don't encourage young people to come into the sector. And I think that we've got to do something to change that.



**Rafael Otto:** [00:24:13] Yeah, yeah. Well, I have one more question for you, and I know you've worked with young children, so I'm hoping you could share something that inspires you about young children. Is there a moment or something that has inspired you over time that might also serve to inspire us and our listeners?

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:24:33] So I've worked with young children, not just in Montessori, but virtually the whole of my career in the not-for-profit sector. And I will go back, if I may, to actually what inspired me to go into the not-for-profit sector as a professional. I'd done voluntary work before, and this goes back 25 years, which shows how old I am. I'd run my own business, I'd been in the private sector, I was running my own business. I'd finished a very good contract, which meant I didn't have to rush out and get another contract straight away. And I decided that I would volunteer to go and work in the Balkans during the war with children who are refugees. I'd done some of that work prior when I helped set up the amnesty working group for children for children's rights, before it became part of Amnesty's mandate. So I had experience and I went and lived in a refugee camp with refugee children and their mothers, mostly; obviously not many fathers around. And to see those children just blossom when you gave them time, when you gave them attention, the resilience... and I'll tell you one story if I may.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:25:53] Please do.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:25:54] Which absolutely was my wow moment. I was asked... there was a TV camera crew that came and wanted to film within the refugee camp, and I was asked to accompany two little boys. One was ten, one was eight. The ten-year-old spoke some English and I was asked to, if he gets into trouble with the language, perhaps sort of, not that I spoke any Croatian, but you know, try and sort of see what you can do. And this little boy had lost both his parents, had been literally picked up by a neighbor to escape, was... had ended up in this camp with no parents, but his neighbors as his sort of guardian. And the TV anchor woman was trying to get him to say, "Oh, this is terrible," and "Oh, I hate the Serbs for doing this blah, blah, blah." She kept pushing and she kept pushing, and she wasn't getting the answer. And, she sort of ended up saying, but you know, in the end she actually said, "But don't you hate the people who did this to your family?" And he turned around and in absolute perfect English said, "I'm 10 years old. I like football and I hate homework," and that was it. And at that point I said, "Okay, interview over. Thank you very much." And I thought, "Wow. Here is... here is this little 10-year-old boy who's been through things that I couldn't even possibly imagine. And yet had that resilience and that intelligence to say, 'Nope, I'm going to get on with my life.'"

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:29] Right.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:27:30] And that was, to me, that was just inspirational. It really was.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:33] Thank you for sharing that. It's a wonderful story.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:27:37] Thank you.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:37] Leonor, it's been so great to have you on the podcast today. Thanks so much for your time.

**Leonor Stjepic:** [00:27:42] Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure for me too. So thank you very much. I really appreciate it.