

# Where Visions Meet: Ellen Swallow Richards and Maria Montessori

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*Home economics (now called family and consumer sciences [FCS] in the United States) and the Montessori education method were both started by strong women pioneers. American-born Ellen Swallow Richards (home economics founder) graduated from Vassar College (chemistry) the same year that Maria Montessori was born in Italy—1870. Both women were scientists and Richards was the first woman to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (sanitary engineering). Montessori was interested in engineering but completed studies in medicine (pediatrics) and psychology. She was one of the first female doctors in Italy (Association Montessori Internationale, 2020; Kramer, 2017; McGregor, 2020).*

Both women were deeply concerned with the link between environment and learning. Richards focused on the ecology of air, water, land, and sanitation by encouraging scientific education for homemakers. She assumed it was possible to use science to teach how to realize life's necessities (food, water, air, and sanitation). Montessori focused on the optimal learning environment that

would most benefit children in reaching their potential. She assumed that teaching children by using scientific research about human psychology would better prepare them for the practical life experiences they would encounter as adolescents and adults. In their maturity, they would better succeed at meeting their physical and psychological needs (e.g., relations with self, others, and nature) (Longo, 2019; McGregor, 2020).

In effect, both women believed in the value of interdisciplinary and integrative education because it brings ideas together in action. Experiential learning that aids learners in making connections helps people to realize they have an obligation to themselves, others, society, and the environment. Richards suggested achieving this by working through home makers (mostly women at the time) and public-school education. Montessori felt it could be achieved by purposefully creating child-focused learning environments. Richards assumed that the natural sciences could be used to teach people how to apply scientific principles in their daily lives for the good of humanity. Montessori believed that the human sciences (especially psychology) could be used to design learner-centered curricula focused on the social, emotional, and ethical growth of each unique person. That person would then be more inclined to value healthy relations with others and the environment (Longo, 2019; McGregor, 2020).

We, Sue L. T. McGregor, home economics trained, and Gail Longo, Montessori trained, both

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educators for 50 years, believe a powerful synergy would emerge if FCS and the Montessori approach were brought together. Richards' work led to the founding of the home economics discipline and profession in 1909, which focuses on helping individuals and families optimize their well-being and quality of life (McGregor, 2020; Vincenti, 1997). Montessori's work led to the Montessori method of education, which is focused on a child-centered, self-directed, and experiential learning pedagogy (Montessori, 1912, 1948/2004). Both initiatives are in the vanguard of education; they are progressive and boundary pushing, yet they tend not to work in tandem despite coexisting for more than a century. The story shared below (see Longo, 2006) is an exception to the rule and is what inspired this paper and proposed collaboration.

### Inaugural FCS/Montessori Lab School in Washington State (2003–2010)

In 2003, Gail Longo's daughter, Riana, introduced her to her high school FCS instructor and department head (Eileen Knobbs) who was working in the Seattle Public School system (Washington State). Eileen was seeking a partner to operate a childcare program in a specially designed child's early learning environment in the onsite FCS department. In the process of preparing for approval of this partnership, Eileen introduced Gail to Roxanne Trees, program lead for family and consumer sciences in Seattle Public Schools. With her keen interest in experiential learning, Roxanne facilitated the collaborative effort of the first FCS/Montessori Lab School in the United States at Ballard High School in Seattle, Washington. The School Lab environment, which ran for 7 years (2003–2010), included 20 children aged 3–5 and 60 high-school students observing and participating (aged 15–18). Gail recalls all of this as a joyful experience. Those involved experienced an extraordinary opportunity and were privileged to connect and expand mutual horizons for children and young adults. When Eileen retired, Gail continued to work with FCS educator Marcia Lalonde (see photo) until the Seattle School Board reappropriated the space in 2010. Gail

carries on her Montessori work through the Maria Montessori Language and Cultural Center in Seattle, WA, which she founded (<https://www.mmlcc.org>). The American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) awarded Roxanne Trees its 2017 *Lifetime Achievement Award* for her leadership role in Career and Technical Education, which included the FCS/Montessori Lab School initiative.



**Figure 1.** Gail Longo (L) and Marcia Lalonde (R) in front of the FCS/Montessori Lab School in Seattle, Washington. **Photo credit:** Ballard News Tribune

Longo (2006) remarked that when FCS high school students observed children learning in a Montessori environment, they began “to see the value of Practical Life activities that meet the young child’s need for independence, coordination, concentration, self-care and order in their environment” (p. 2). In turn, those same FCS high school students got the opportunity to “apply their learning to concrete, meaningful experiences [by] preparing healthy menus and using food preparation and safety skills” (p. 2). All students (aged 3–18) had fun working and learning together.

The events portrayed in this story helped Gail appreciate how both approaches (FCS and Montessori) have similar philosophies, principles, and practices. When approached by Gail, Sue, who augmented home economics with a side trip in peace and social justice with attendant pedagogy

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(e.g., McGregor, 2001, 2003), also could readily appreciate the potential of integrating the two approaches. FCS and Montessori are committed to the power of doing and making, which Kent and Stewart (2008) viewed as “acts of hope” (p. Preface). Because of their integrative backgrounds, people trained in either FCS or the Montessori method can be called *artisans of hope* who fit things together in new ways. With hope comes a connection to the future, which, in turn, helps people feel less overwhelmed thereby creating a sense that they *can do* something. In effect, the art of discovery and imagination (via integration) opens people’s minds to explore new directions (Kent & Stewart, 2008; Longo, 2019).

**The philosophical and pedagogical fit between home economics and Montessori suggests they were meant to be together.**

Richards’ and Montessori’s genius has not been fully recognized, but it could be if we augmented integrated thinking with integral thinking, which assumes that something is necessary for completeness (McGregor, 2019). A partnership between FCS practitioners (especially educators) and Montessori educators would benefit everyone because it brings us closer to completeness. By acting with conviction about the significance of releasing the gifts within children, educators can transform curricular content and pedagogy so that it helps students find joy in learning and hope in their actions. Working

together, FCS and Montessori educators could form and share a vision that connects their common goals and broadens people’s vision of public education. The philosophical and pedagogical fit between home economics and Montessori suggests they were meant to be together (Longo, 2019).

We wrote this paper to draw attention to the idea of creating a partnership between Montessori education and the FCS pathway. There will be challenges should we travel this road (Lillard, 2019), two of which are (a) educators coming together with a vision of connection and being open to thinking that broadens their ideas about what constitutes education; and (b) the sheer logistics and practical concerns of creating lab schools including licensing requirements, funding, greater depth of observation of children and young adults, and providing experiential learning in meaningful ways. But meeting these and other challenges would be worth it in the long run.

Any FCS practitioners and home economists so intrigued can obtain information about Montessori training centers and university programs in several countries (including the United States, Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and China). Montessori-trained educators can reach out to AAFCS ([www.aafcs.org](http://www.aafcs.org)) and the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) ([www.ifhe.org](http://www.ifhe.org)), for example, to obtain information about the profession and discipline. Increasing mutual connections should help both parties accomplish more of their shared goals, initiate an international change in education around the world, and ultimately better address the profoundly complex problems facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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