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The Montessori-Márquez Connection—With Links!

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Nobel Prize winning author [Gabriel Garcia Márquez died](#) last week, and a wave of tributes has spread through the Montessori world as we recognize Márquez as one of the Celebrity Montessori Alumni, including “the Google Guys” Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, Wikipedia’s Jimmy Wales, the Washington Post’s Katharine Graham, and [many more](#).

But I have to admit, I’m always curious about the people on this list—what was their Montessori experience actually, and how much did it influence their lives? And it’s always hard to dig down and find the source of the claim. When you google “Jeff Bezos Montessori”, you get lots of school websites claiming him, but a direct quote is harder to find.

So I wanted to see if I could piece together the Márquez-Montessori story.



A lot of people quoted Márquez saying that Montessori was like “playing at being alive.” Márquez biographer Martin provides the quote, saying “García Marquez later said “it was like playing at being alive” in [Gabriel García Márquez: A Life: A life](#). Martin reports that Márquez attended a school in Aracataca, Colombia, “named after Maria Montessori, and loosely based on her methods”, and names his teacher, Rosa Elena Fergusson, “graceful, gentle, and pretty”, and Garcia’s “first infant love.” Astonishingly, a picture of Fergusson at the time exists.



But Márquez himself speaks of his Montessori school in more detail in his autobiography [Vivir para contarla](#), in English [Living to Tell the Tale](#), calling it “the little school where I learned to read”. He continues, mentioning practical life and music, and clearly describing Montessori’s “education of the senses”:

The consolation was that during this time the Montessori school had opened in Aracataca, and its teachers stimulated the five senses by means of practical exercises, and taught singing. With the talent and beauty of the director, Rosa Elena Fergusson, studying was something as marvelous as the joy of being alive. I learned to appreciate

my sense of smell, whose power of nostalgic evocation is overwhelming. And taste, which I refined to the point where I have drinks that taste of window, old bread that tastes of trunk, infusions that taste of Mass. In theory it is difficult to comprehend subjective pleasures, but those who have experienced them will understand right away.

There again is the charismatic attraction of the beautiful and talented Rosa. “Joy at being alive” is the line Martin has as “playing at being alive”. In the original, it is “*jugar a estos vivos*”.

Márquez talks about learning to read thanks to Montessori’s phonetic approach:

It was very hard for me to learn how to read. It did not seem logical for the letter m to be called em, and yet with some vowel following it you did not say ema but ma. It was impossible for me to read that way. At last, when I went to the Montessori school, the teacher did not teach me the names of the consonants but the sounds. In this way I could read the first book I found in a dirty chest in the storeroom of the house.

Finally, in another passage widely quoted:

I do not believe there is a method better than the Montessorian for making sensitive to the beauties of the world and awakenig their curiosity regarding the secrets of life. It has been rebuked for encouraging a sense of independence and individualism, and perhaps in my case this was true.



And Rosa Fergusson? The woman who taught nobel prize winner GGM to read and write [passed away](#) in 2005, well remembered in several obituaries for her role in Márquez’ life

Notes:

The photo of the school comes from [Montessori Comunica](#), a Colombian blog associated with the [Colegio Montessori La Calera](#).

A spanish-language video of Márquez speaking about Montessori, [Montessori un sistema de enseñanza que marca vidas](#), can be found on the [MontessoriAcalli YouTube](#) channel, associated with [Acalli Montessori](#) in Mexico.