



A Brief History of Montessori Education¹



Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952)

Maria Montessori was an individual ahead of her time. She was born in 1870 in Chiaravalle, Italy, to an educated but not affluent middle class family. She grew up in a country considered most conservative in its attitude toward women. Despite the considerable opposition of her father and teachers, Dr. Montessori pursued a scientific education and was one of the first women to become a physician in Italy.

As a practicing physician associated with the University of Rome, she was a scientist, not a teacher. It is ironic that she became famous for her contributions in a field that she had rejected as the traditional refuge for women at a time when few professions were open to them other than homemaking, teaching, or the convent. The Montessori method evolved almost by accident from a small experiment that Dr. Montessori carried out on the side. Her genius stems not from her teaching ability, but from her recognition of the importance of what she stumbled upon.

In 1900 Montessori was appointed director of the new orthophrenic school attached to the University of Rome. The children there were probably developmentally delayed or autistic. She initiated a wave of reform in a system that formerly had served merely to confine mentally handicapped youngsters in empty rooms. Recognizing her patients' need for stimulation, purposeful activity, and self-esteem, Montessori insisted that the staff speak to each child with the highest respect. She set up a program to teach her young charges how to care for themselves and their environment.

Montessori refined the idea of a scientific approach to education, based on observation and experimentation. She belongs to the "child study school of thought," and she pursued her work with the careful training and objectivity of the biologist studying the natural behavior of an animal in the forest. She studied children with special learning needs, listening and carefully noting everything that they did and said. Slowly she began to get a sense of who they really were and what methods worked best. Her success was given widespread notice when, two years after she began, many of Montessori's "deficient" adolescents were able to pass the standard sixth grade tests of the Italian public schools. Acclaimed for this "miracle," Montessori responded by suggesting that her results proved only that public schools should be able to get dramatically better results with normal children.

¹ From Tim Seldin and Paul Epstein. *The Montessori Way*.

After several years of study and work at the University of Rome, Montessori accepted an invitation in 1907 to coordinate a day-care center for working-class children who were too young to attend public school. This first Casa dei Bambini “or Children’s House” was located in San Lorenzo, an extremely poor district of Rome. The conditions Montessori faced were appalling. Her first class consisted of fifty children from two through five years of age, taught by one untrained caregiver.

Montessori, not knowing whether her ideas would work under such conditions, began by teaching the older children how to help out with the everyday tasks that needed to be done. She also introduced the manipulative perceptual puzzles that she had used with children with developmental delays. The results surprised her, for unlike her earlier experiences with coaxing children with special learning needs to use the learning materials, the children of San Lorenzo were drawn to the work she introduced. Children who had wandered aimlessly the week before began to settle down to long periods of constructive activity. They were fascinated with the puzzles and perceptual training devices. But, to Montessori’s amazement, children three and four years-old took the greatest delight in learning practical everyday living skills that reinforced their independence and self-respect. Each day they begged her to show them more, even applauding with delight when Montessori taught them the correct use of a handkerchief. Soon the older children were taking care of the school, assisting their teacher with the preparation and serving of meals and the maintenance of a spotless environment, and even learning to write and read. Their behavior as a group changed dramatically from street urchins running wild to models of grace and courtesy. It was little wonder that the press found such a human interest story appealing and promptly broadcast it to the world.

Montessori called her discoveries the “secrets of childhood.” As she opened more schools, she discovered further that these “secrets” were found in children everywhere. As summarized by her student and colleague E. M. Standing, young children prefer

- Work without compulsion;
- Spontaneous repetition;
- Work rather than play;
- Concentration and self-discipline.

Montessori also discovered that two other qualities were necessary for this response from young children: a prepared, transformed teacher and an environment specifically prepared for the learning capabilities found in its children.

Montessori believed that the educator’s job is to serve the child, determining what each one needs to make the greatest progress.

Montessori evolved her method through trial and error, making educated guesses about the underlying meaning of the children’s actions. She was quick to pick up on their cues, and constantly experimented with her methods. The first “Children’s House” received overnight attention, and thousands of visitors came away amazed and enthusiastic. World-wide interest surged as Montessori duplicated her first school in other settings throughout Europe, and then in the United States, with the same results. She made three American tours between 1912 and 1918 with the support of a Washington Montessori Society whose members included Alexander Graham Bell and Woodrow Wilson’s daughter. Montessori gave lectures at the White House, Carnegie Hall,

and numerous universities. She conducted teacher education programs and developed a classroom at an international world's fair.

Dr. Montessori was a brilliant student of child development, and the approach that has evolved out of her research has stood the test for over 100 years in Montessori schools around the world. During her lifetime, Dr. Montessori was acknowledged as one of the world's leading educators.

Dr. Montessori summarized her life's achievement in this way:

Ours was a house for children, rather than a real school. We had prepared a place for children where a diffused culture could be assimilated, without any need for direct instruction...Yet these children learned to read and write before they were five, and no one had given them any lessons. At that time it seemed miraculous that children of four and a half should be able to write, and that they should have learned without the feeling of having been taught....

And so we discovered that education is not something, which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process, which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child.²

Today there is a growing consensus among psychologists and developmental educators that many of her ideas were decades ahead of her time. Only recently, as our understanding of child development has grown, have we rediscovered how clear and sensible her insight was. As the movement gains support and begins to spread into the American public school sector, one can readily say that the Montessori Way is a remarkably modern approach.

Recommended Readings

Lillard, Paula P. (1966). *Montessori Today and Montessori: A Modern Approach*. NY: Random House. These books describe Montessori theory and contemporary American Montessori schools.

Lillard, Angeline Stoll. (2005). *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*. NY: Oxford University Press. Lillard describes the basic ideas of Montessori education and how these are validated by today's scientific findings.

Montessori, Maria. (1948). *To Educate the Human Potential*. Madras, India: Kalakshetra Publications. Describes the needs of the elementary-aged child and how he or she learns history, science, math, and language.

Montessori, Maria. (1956). *The Child in the Family*. Chicago: Henry Regnery. A series of short essays about the child, the family, the school, and the Montessori philosophy.

² Maria Montessori. *The Absorbent Mind*, 1947

Montessori, Maria. (1948). *From Childhood to Adolescence*. Oxford, England: Clio Press, Ltd.
Montessori describes how children learn during their elementary, adolescent years, and university years. She describe curriculum and the optimal learning environments for each age.

Seldin, Tim and Epstein, Paul. (2004). *The Montessori Way*.
The authors present an illustrated guide to Montessori philosophy, history, and the curriculum for infants through high school.