

Maria Montessori

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Maria Tecla Artemesia Montessori (born August 31, 1870, Chiaravalle, near Ancona, Italy – died May 6, 1952, Noordwijk aan Zee, Netherlands) was an Italian educator. She is commonly remembered for the many schools around the globe that bear her name and implement her educational methods, the Montessori system. Maria Montessori was a scientist, educator, activist, and advocate for children.

Montessori was born during the Italian unification to Renilde Stoppani Montessori and Alessandro Montessori. Montessori's mother, Renilde, was the well-educated daughter of a landed family. Her father was a soldier and later a respected civil servant with the Ministry of Finance. Montessori attended a public elementary school in Rome. At the age of thirteen, Montessori entered a secondary technical institute. She continued to Regio Istituto Tecnico Leonardo da Vinci. Montessori graduated in 1890 at the age of 20 with a certificate in physics and mathematics. After graduation, she decided to study medicine, and in 1890 she enrolled at the University of Rome, where she earned her diploma di licenza in 1892. This degree qualified her to enter the medical school at the University of Rome in 1893. Despite resistance and even outright hostility from her instructors and peers, Montessori graduated in 1896 as a doctor of medicine and surgery. She was Italy's first female medical doctor.

After graduation, Montessori opened a medical practice, took positions in three separate hospitals, and continued her research at the psychiatric clinic at the University of Rome. Through

her work at the psychiatric clinic, Montessori visited mental asylums to select patients for treatment at the clinic. Upon witnessing the neglect children with mental disabilities experienced at the city's asylums, Montessori directed her research toward possible solutions. She quickly became convinced that the problem was pedagogical, rather than medical, in origin.

From 1897 to 1898, Montessori studied educational theory and method by auditing courses at the University of Rome and reading the published literature on pedagogical theory. Her ideas about education were influenced by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel. Their work focused on the relationships between sensory stimulation and intellectual development. Edouard Seguin's exercises for sensory and motor development also influenced Montessori's ideas about education. Montessori initially tested her ideas about the education of children with mental disabilities at the psychiatric clinic. She met with unprecedented success. Under her tutelage, children who were thought to be unteachable learned to read and write and even passed examinations given to the student population at large. In 1900, Montessori became the director of a new medical-pedagogical institute for teachers of developmentally disabled children in Rome.

Montessori surmised that if her disabled students were able to perform as well as the general student population, something must be wrong with traditional elementary education. In 1901, she gave up her medical practice and her position as director of the pedagogical institute to pursue a solution. As she immersed herself in the education system, Montessori was perplexed by the disjointed relationship between the writings of educational theorists and researchers and typical classroom instruction. Studies in the effectiveness of various forms of instruction made it clear that children required autonomy to develop and learn. Traditional educators, however, practiced a stifling regimen of rote instruction, which demanded silence and restraint. Montessori

believed, “education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment.” In other words, provided they receive the necessary materials, children flourish when they are allowed to develop on their own, independent of teacher or curriculum. Montessori called her new approach, “scientific pedagogy.”

In 1907, Montessori opened her first Casa dei Bambini or Children’s House in a tenement house in a poor part of Rome. The property had been renovated, and its owners wanted to establish a daycare facility for the children of working parents. The daycare became Montessori’s laboratory, and the children her research subjects. Montessori provided interesting, self-correcting materials like bells along a scale or cylinders of graduated sizes, presented in a logical progression designed to develop the sensory, motor, and intellectual skills of children. The teacher demonstrated the proper use of the materials to a few children, and the children then taught themselves. Child-sized furniture and other materials allowed children to eagerly choose and put away their supplies, prepare their lunches, and wash up. The children progressed into reading and writing through the presentation of a carefully designed series of practice exercises. Montessori demonstrated the non-coercive and self-correcting methodology of scientific pedagogy to be viable. Community involvement was encouraged, and parents were invited to visit the school and confer about their children’s progress.

Montessori’s Children’s House was open to the public as well as to other educators, journalists, and philanthropists. Within a decade, her ideas had begun to spread across the globe. Montessori published many books, articles, and pamphlets during her lifetime, including (English editions): *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in the Children’s Houses* (1912), *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913), *Dr. Montessori’s Own*

Handbook (1914), *The Advanced Montessori Method* (Volumes I and II, 1917), *The Child in the Family* (1929), *The Secret of Childhood* (1936), *From Childhood to Adolescence* (1948), and *Peace and Education* (1949). Montessori spent the last forty years of her life traveling throughout the world. She gave public lectures, trained teachers, and was an invited speaker to the League of Nations. She was awarded the French Cross of the Legion of Honor for her commitment human interdependence. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

Further Reading

Kornfeld, E. (2015). Maria Montessori. *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*. Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press.

Baligadoo, P. D. (2014). Peace Profile: Maria Montessori—Peace Through Education. *Peace Review*, 26(3), 427-433. doi:10.1080/10402659.2014.938003