

Maria Montessori: A Reconsideration of Her Life and Ideas

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Maria Montessori (1870-1952) is known world-wide for the method of education that bears her name. Montessori schools, too, can be found world-wide—in Italy, where they originated, in Spain, the Netherlands, and India, where Montessori lived and worked, and in the United States, the United Kingdom and other nations where her method was implemented. Although primarily an early childhood educator, she was also a pioneer who successfully breached many of the barriers that limited women's opportunities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Maria Montessori was born on August 31, 1870, in Chiaravalle, an Italian hill town overlooking the Adriatic Sea in Ancona province. She was the only child of Alessandro Montessori, a civil servant employed in the state tobacco monopoly, and Renilde Stoppani, a well-educated niece of Father Antonio Stoppani, a recognized natural scientist. Her father, a decorated veteran of the war of 1848, exemplified the conservative style of "an old fashioned gentleman." When Maria made key decisions on her education and career, she broke with tradition and had to challenge her father. When her mother supported Maria's challenges to social and educational conventions, her father grudgingly acquiesced.¹

When Signor Montessori was assigned to Rome in 1875, Maria attended the state primary school on the Via di San Nicolo da Tolentino. She was an able student and her parents, especially her father, encouraged her bent for mathematics.

At twelve, Maria displayed her characteristic independence by announcing her intention to enter a technical secondary school. This marked a departure from the conventional Italian educational pattern in which middle class girls attended a normal or a finishing school, usually conducted by Catholic nuns. In 1883, the thirteen-year-old Maria Montessori enrolled in the Regia Scuola Technica Michelangelo Buonarroti, a state technical school.

Instruction followed the conventional method of attending lectures, memorizing textbooks, and responding to instructors' questions with structured recitations. She would later challenge these formalized pedagogical routines when she developed her own educational method. Montessori graduated from the technical school in 1886, compiling an impressive academic record.² Determined to become an engineer, a male dominated profession, she next entered the Regio Istituto Technico Leonardo da Vinci, where she was a student from 1886 to 1890.

In 1890, Montessori made still another highly significant career choice that broke with tradition. She decided to leave her engineering studies to enter medical school. She prepared by enrolling in pre-medical studies in mathematics and science at the University of Rome in 1890. She passed her examinations and was awarded the *diploma di licenza* in 1892. Though academically eligible to begin medical studies, the medical school faculty refused to admit her. She reapplied and, despite some continued faculty opposition, became the first woman admitted to the University of Rome's Medical College.³ Her admission is attributed to support given by Pope Leo XIII. As the sole woman in the Medical College, she encountered hostile fellow students and faced regulations and practices that discriminated against women. For example, she could not enter a classroom until all the male students were seated. Since dissection of a naked body was considered inappropriate for a woman, her laboratory work in anatomy could only be done in the evenings when the male students were no longer present. At first, her male colleagues shunned and tried to isolate her. Despite these obstacles, Montessori, an academically talented student, won scholarships in surgery, pathology and medicine.⁴

As part of her medical program, Montessori studied pediatrics at the Children's Pediatric Hospital, an experience that moved her toward her life-long preoccupation with early childhood education. She also attended the psychiatric clinic, the Regia Clinica Psichiatrica, researching her thesis, "A Clinical Contribution to the Study of Delusions of Persecution."⁵ Her research on psychological disorders led her to the works of Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard (1774-1838) and Edouard Seguin, (1812-1880) two French physicians who had worked with children with severe mental handicaps. Seguin developed several techniques that Montessori would adapt such as basing instruction on developmental stages, using didactic training materials, and training children to perform practical skills.⁶ Montessori believed that mental deficiency was a problem that required a special kind of education and not only medical treatment.

In 1896, Maria Montessori became the first woman in Italy to receive the degree of Doctor of Medicine. The twenty-six year old physician accepted a position at the University's San Giovanni Hospital and also began private practice.

Because of her work in medicine and education, Montessori was selected as a member of the Italian delegation at the International Women's Congress in Berlin in September 1896. She addressed the Congress on the condition of women, on problems of women's education, and on women's efforts in the literacy campaign in Italy. She sponsored a resolution calling for equal pay for equal work for women.⁷ She also played a role in easing internal tensions between factions of socialist and bourgeois women, urging them to work for the rights of all women and not splinter the cause because of class or political factionalism.

In 1899, Montessori was on the lecture circuit, speaking on the "New Woman," which she, herself, personified. Debunking historical and contemporary theories, which assumed women's inferiority, she challenged several leading social scientists. She especially challenged those male scholars who, while claiming to be scientific, used traditional stereotypes to assert women's biological or sociological inferiority. She challenged Michelet, the historian, who argued that women's constitutional weakness, requiring constant tutelage, made their emancipation pointless; Proudhon, the socialist theorist, who claimed women had only the choice of being a housewife or a prostitute; Lombroso, the anthropologist, who described woman as an incomplete organism in a state of arrested development; and Sergi, the anthropologist, who contended that women's social equality would undermine the family and destabilize society.

Urging women to become scientists themselves, Montessori advised them to use the scientific method to identify the genuine needs of women and children and to solve their real problems. By using science as an instrument of self-study, women could destroy the traditional pseudo-scientific stereotypes used to rationalize their subordination. Science and technology could liberate the woman of the future from the drudgery of domestic work and from ascribed gender restrictions. Feminism, she predicted, would triumph, not because of polemics or propaganda, but because it was a social and technological inevitability. According to Montessori:

Eventually, the woman of the future will have equal rights as well as equal duties. She will have a new self-awareness and will find her true strength in an emancipated maternity. Family life as we know it may change, but it is absurd to think that feminism will destroy maternal feelings. The new woman will marry and have children out of choice, not because matrimony and maternity are imposed on her, and she will exercise control over the health and well being of the next generation and inaugurate a reign of peace, because when she can speak knowledgeably in the name of her children and in behalf of her own rights man will have to listen to her.⁸

In 1900, the Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica, the Orthophrenic School, opened with Montessori and Dr. Giuseppe Montesano as co-directors. The school prepared teachers and administrators to work with severely hearing impaired and mentally handicapped children. Montessori worked at the Orthophrenic School for two years, from 1900-1901, during which time she and Dr. Montesano developed an intimate personal relationship. Montessori bore Montesano's son, Mario in 1901. Montesano's family, especially his mother, opposed a marriage. Maria Montessori apparently agreed to Montesano's insistence that the birth be kept secret. Montesano shortly afterward married another woman. Montessori subsequently left the Orthophrenic School. Her son was raised by others and at seven was enrolled in a boarding school near Florence.⁹ After the death of Montessori's mother, Mario, now age fifteen, came to live with Maria Montessori.¹⁰ Mario Montessori was first publicly presented as her nephew, then as her adopted son, and near the end of her life as her son. Despite the delicacy with which Montessori dealt with the existence of her child, caused perhaps by then existing social norms, Montessori needs to be considered as a single parent. Mario became highly important in Maria's life, accompanying her on international travels to implement her method and in organizing the Montessori International Association.

Between 1904 and 1908, Montessori lectured at the University of Rome's Pedagogic School on anthropology's application to education. Her lectures, published as *L'Antropologia Pedagogica*, *Pedagogical Anthropology*, featured her insights from pediatric medicine, child psychology, and cultural anthropology and applied them to children's development and education.¹¹

Montessori opened her first school, the Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House, which enrolled children from ages three to seven, in a large tenement in Rome's poverty-ridden San Lorenzo district on January 6, 1907. Rome's Good Building Association, a philanthropic society seeking to improve the living conditions of Rome's impoverished underclass, financed her school. Her success at the Casa dei Bambini gave Montessori international prominence in education.

Montessori's Casa dei Bambini anticipated today's concept of an effective school as one that enlists the support of home, family, and community. The Children's House was designed to be a school-home connected to the children's family homes. Montessori wrote, "We have placed the school within the house"... "as the property of the collectivity." The school, in turn, "leads to the socialization of the house, and, in turn, the socialization of the household with the larger community."¹²

Montessori required children attending her school and their parents to follow explicit regulations regarding hygiene, attendance, and involvement. Parents were to visit the school and share in their children's education. She made sure that parents were informed about the curriculum and shared the educational expectations of the school's administrators and teachers.

In 1907, when Montessori's first school opened, much of her educational philosophy was in place but would be reformulated by her actual experience in conducting a school. She based her method on what she identified as important stages of human development. The stage, about which she was most concerned, was the period of the "absorbent mind," a critical and highly formative phase, from birth through age six, when children learned by exploring their environment.

As a physician, she knew the importance of the careful clinical observation of patients in their diagnosis and treatment and transferred that concept to children's education. To truly observe children, she reasoned they had to be free to act on their needs. Conventional schools, imposing adult standards that restricted children's movement, limited the usefulness of clinical observation. Though Montessori proclaimed her careful clinical observation as "scientific pedagogy," the degree to which it is empirically scientific can be questioned. While the observation component may have been scientific, the concepts of a control group, statistical verification, and controlled experimentation appeared absent. A significant element in Montessori's method came from her earlier research on Itard and Seguin,

the French physicians who had worked extensively with children called mental defectives. Seguin had developed didactic materials to train children to use their senses and perform basic practical life tasks. Montessori was impressed with Seguin's work enabling mentally deficient children to perform tasks needed in every day life. She saw similarities in the educational needs of children with mental handicaps and normal children between birth and age six. (Her concentration at the Casa dei Bambini was on children between the ages of three and six.) Among the parallels she saw were: difficulty in sensory precision, unsteadiness in motor coordination, and problems in speech patterns. She had already achieved positive results in her work with children with mental handicaps. She then reasoned that if her didactic materials and methods worked with children with mental handicaps, they would be equally or even more effective with normal children.

A key element at the Casa dei Bambini was the classroom which Montessori called the "prepared environment." It was prepared so that the children had freedom to follow their instincts and needs but structured so that these interests and needs were exercised by correct use of the didactic materials. So that the classroom and its furniture did not limit children's freedom of movement, she made certain that the school's physical arrangements were suited to the children. Tables and chairs were sized according to children's heights and weights; washstands were accessible to younger children; classrooms were lined with low cupboards where children could reach instructional materials and return them to their proper location.

Visitors to Montessori's school were impressed with the order, structure, and discipline that children appeared to create through their own sustained work with materials of their choice. Based on their own interests, children self-selected the material upon which they wanted to work. The Montessori didactic materials, in turn, were self-correcting so that teacher intervention was unneeded. Children would work at a task, repeating an action over and over, until they had mastered it. Then they would go on to another task, usually a higher order activity. Children came to understand that mastering such practical skills as tying a shoelace, buttoning a jacket, and putting on gloves and overshoes without the help of an adult gave independence.

Montessori's success at the initial Casa dei Bambini led to the establishment of three more schools in Rome, one of which was in a middle class area of the city. Her success in Rome gained the attention of the Societa Umanitaria, the Humanitarian Society of Italy, which popularized and pro-

vided financial support for her work. It is interesting to note that Montessori's method was first used with socially and economically disadvantaged children. When it seemed to be effective, it was quickly appropriated by the middle and upper classes.

Though primarily concerned with children's education, Montessori saw her schools as having a larger socio-economic impact on working mothers. Working mothers might safely leave their children and "proceed with a feeling of great relief and freedom to their own work." Mothers, however, in turn, had two obligations: to provide for the physical and moral well being of their own children and to confer with the directress at least once a week on a child's health and education.¹³ According to Montessori:

We can no longer say that the convenience of leaving their children takes away from the mother a natural social duty of first importance; namely, that of caring for and educating her tender offspring. No, for today the social and economic evolution calls the working-women to take her place among wage-earners, and takes away from her by force those duties which would be most dear to her! The mother must, in any event leave her child, and often with the pain of knowing him to be abandoned. The advantages furnished by such institutions are not limited to the labouring classes, but extend also to the general middle-class.¹⁴

We are, then, communising a "maternal function," a feminine duty, within the house. We may see here in this practical act the solving of many of woman's problems which have seemed to many impossible of solution. What then will become of the home, one asks, if the woman goes away from it? The home will be transformed and will assume the functions of the woman.¹⁵

By 1910, Montessori had established a demonstration school and a teacher preparation center and had achieved international prominence as an educator. Interested visitors came to Rome from other countries, including the United States, to attend her lectures, interview her, and observe her work. Ruth French, an American educator, who made the pilgrimage to Rome, ecstatically praised Montessori as a "magical personality that makes her words seem winged messengers of light and the mighty fever of enthusiasm is amazing to the beholder."¹⁶

Among Montessori's earliest American disciples was Anne E. George, an elementary teacher at Chicago's Latin School, who visited Montessori in Rome in the summer of 1909 and returned in 1910 as a student in Montessori's eight month training program. Returning to the United States in 1911, she opened the first Montessori school in America at Tarrytown, New York.¹⁷

Another American popularizer was Dorothy Canfield Fisher, author of *A Montessori Mother*, published in 1912. Other American visitors were the child psychologists, Arnold and Beatrice Gesell, the publisher S.S. McClure, and such professors of education as Howard Warren of Princeton, Arthur Norton of Harvard, Lightner Witmer of the University of Pennsylvania, and William Heard Kilpatrick of Columbia University's Teachers College.¹⁸ Some visitors became disciples; others were journalists writing articles and books about the Italian educator. Still others, like Professor Kilpatrick, became critics.

The United States seemed a country where Montessorianism might flourish. By 1913, more than one hundred Montessori schools were functioning and American supporters had organized a national association, the Montessori Educational System, to promote the method. The association, with Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell as President, included such prominent individuals on its Board of Directors as Margaret Wilson, the President's daughter, Philander P. Claxton, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Samuel S. McClure, publisher of the widely read *McClure's Magazine*, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a well-known writer on education.¹⁹ The publisher, McClure, often overly enthusiastic, suggested that Montessorianism could be promoted through a joint lecture tour with Montessori. He also wanted to establish Montessori schools, a teacher education institute, and a company to manufacture and market didactic materials.²⁰

Montessori came to the United States in 1913 and lectured in Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. She experienced a receptive response from her American audiences and enjoyed complimentary comments in newspapers and magazines. However, several critics, especially kindergarten advocates and progressive educators, questioned the applicability of the Montessori method to American children. Elizabeth Harrison, a respected kindergarten educator, contended that despite some positive features, Montessori overemphasized individual over group work and insufficiently cultivated children's imaginative, dramatic, and poetic potential.²¹

A second category of critics included several leading professors of education, some of whom were Deweyite progressives. University of Omaha professor Walter Hallsey denounced the Montessori method as a “fad promoted and advertised by a shrewd commercial spirit” being sold to the “novelty loving American public. . . .”²² The most serious criticism came from William Heard Kilpatrick, a prominent professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Kilpatrick’s highly critical book, *The Montessori System Examined*, dismissed Montessori as fifty years behind the times, rejected her emphasis on sensory training as the foundation for more general learning. Kilpatrick, who had developed his own group-centered project method, contended that the Montessori method did not encourage children’s socialization, imitative play, and experimental attitudes and skills.²³

In 1916-1917, Montessori returned on a second visit to the United States to speak at the Child Education Foundation in New York, to promote her new book, *Dr. Montessori’s Own Handbook*, and to exhibit her didactic materials.²⁴ Interest in her ideas and method, however, was ebbing. The decline was caused, in part, by Montessori’s determination to keep total control of her method and by her insistence that only she could train Montessori teachers. Internal divisions between Montessori’s more orthodox disciples and revisionists who sought to modify the method weakened the movement. It would not be until the 1950s that a much more substantial wave of Montessorianism would occur in the United States, with the establishment of hundreds of Montessori schools throughout the country.

In Europe, the Montessori approach registered more substantial gains than in the United States. In 1916, municipal officials in Barcelona, supported by the Catalan regional government, invited Montessori to lecture and establish schools in Spain. A school for children, ages three to ten, and an institute for teacher training and research were established and supported by the Catalan government.²⁵ Montessori was involved in implementing her method in Spain until the Spanish Civil War caused her to leave the country in 1936.

Montessori was also involved in education in her native Italy, where Benito Mussolini’s regime had attracted some leading intellectuals as ideological supporters of Fascism. Among them was the distinguished Idealist philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, who became Minister of Education in 1923. Gentile, along with Queen Margherita, wanted to promote Montessorianism in Italy. In 1924, Mussolini and Montessori met and *Il Duce* made a commitment to establish Montessori schools. Mussolini, of course, was not interested in

the freedom of the child to learn but was attracted to a method that instilled discipline and order and in which children learned to read and write at age four. He also saw the possibility of using the various Montessori societies in other countries to popularize and give legitimacy to his Fascist ideology. Montessori, in turn, was looking for official support for her educational ideas. In 1926, Montessori was officially recognized by *Tessera Fascista*, the Fascist women's organization, and was made an honorary party member.²⁶ The Ministry of Education commissioned Montessori to conduct a training course for Italian teachers in Milan. Mussolini, the honorary president of the course, provided a subsidy for its support. A second private meeting in March 1927 between Montessori and Mussolini brought still more cooperation between the educator and the dictator. A monthly publication, *L'Idea Montessori*, was funded as the official organ of the *Opera Nazionale Montessori*, of which Mussolini was honorary president. By 1929, government sponsored Montessori activities included the training college, the Regia Scuola Magistrale di Metodo Montessori in Rome, a training course at Milan, and seventy infant and elementary classes in schools throughout Italy.²⁷

Although enjoying the support of the Fascist government, Montessori was always determined to control her own educational movement. In 1929, Montessori and her son, Mario, then announced as her nephew, founded the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) as a parent body to supervise Montessori activities throughout the world and to supervise teacher training. Montessori was president of the AMI, headquartered in Amsterdam. The Association controlled rights to the publication of Montessori's books, the manufacture and sale of materials, and training course fees. Mario became her agent, protector, and representative. Both she and Mario permitted no deviation from the approved pedagogical line that Montessori had instituted.²⁸

Cooperation between Mussolini's Fascist government and Montessori was uneasy. The regime wanted to use Montessori as a public personage devoted to Fascism. Montessori, however, saw her role to be more truly international. The Italian government, seeking to capture publicity, wanted to name Montessori as Italy's children's ambassador. Montessori refused to accept the appointment unless the Italian government recognized her as the head of the Montessori Internationale. By the early 1930s, the Fascist regime had tightened control over all schools in Italy and had established official control over youth and teachers' organizations. The Fascist government responded to Montessori's intransigence by closing the Montessori schools.²⁹ She, in turn, left Italy as an exile, living in the Netherlands.

Although Montessori made theoretical connections between education and society and had the support of influential politically-connected supporters, she was generally disinterested in politics. She wanted her schools to enjoy government support but would not accept government control or interference. In Barcelona, she was supported by the Catalan regional government but stayed aloof from the politics of regional autonomy. In Italy, for a time, she enjoyed support from the Fascist government and was made an honorary member of the Fascist Party but would not permit Fascist manipulation of her movement. Montessori, who believed her method transcended politics and national boundaries, saw her movement as being truly international.³⁰

In 1939, Montessori, aged sixty-nine went to India to conduct a training program, sponsored by the Theosophical Society at its headquarters at Adyar in Madras. When Italy entered World War II as an ally of the Germans, Italians in the British Isles and colonies were interned. Montessori was not actually interned but was confined to the compound of the Theosophical Society. In August 1940, British authorities permitted Montessori to resume her educational activities in India.³¹ Her work was very well received in India, where she trained over 1,000 Montessori directresses.

When World War II ended, Montessori returned on July 30, 1946, to Amsterdam, the headquarters of her International Association. Assisted by her son, Mario, she continued to direct the Association's activities, lecturing in a number of nations. She died on May 6, 1952, in Noordwijk ann Zee, a small village on the North Sea near the Hague. She was buried in the little cemetery of the Roman Catholic church at Noordwijk.

Today, Montessori's place in the history of education is secure. Her method has been replicated world-wide in thousands of schools that bear her name. Her work, however, was not limited to pedagogy but reflected the important social reforms of the twentieth century that liberated women from Victorian restrictions and children from sterile teaching methods. Importantly, she helped to create a new orientation and attitude to the formative importance of children's earliest years. Programs of early childhood education bear the imprint of her method. By winning the struggle to determine her own career and destiny, Maria Montessori broke new pathways not only for herself but for other women as well.

NOTES

1. Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (Reading, MA.: Perseus Books, 1988), 22-24.
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3. Ibid., 34-35.
4. Lena L. Gitter, *The Montessori Way* (Seattle: Special Child Publications, 1970), 7.
5. Kramer, 48.
6. Kathrina Myers, "Seguin's Principles of Education as Related to the Montessori Method," *Journal of Education* 77 (May 1913): 538-41.
7. Kramer, 55.
8. Ibid., 79-81.
9. Ibid., 92-93.
10. Ibid., 185.
11. Maria Montessori, *Pedagogical Anthropology* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913), 63-65.
12. Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 63-65.
13. Ibid., 60-61.
14. Ibid., 66.
15. Ibid.
16. Ruth M. French, "The Working of the Montessori Method," *Journal of Education* 77 (October 1913), 423.
17. Kramer, 162-63.
18. Ibid., 154.
19. E.M. Standing, *Maria Montessori* (Fresno, CA.: Academy Library Guild, 1957), 42-44.
20. Kramer, 182.
21. Elizabeth Harrison, "The Montessori Method and the Kindergarten", *Bulletin*, 28 (Washington, D.C. U.S. Bureau of Education, 1914).
22. Walter N. Halsey, "A Valuation of the Montessori Experiments," *Journal of Education* 77 (January 1913), 63.
23. William H. Kilpatrick, *The Montessori System Examined* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914).
24. Maria Montessori, *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1914).

25. Kramer, 249.
26. Ibid., 300.
27. Ibid., 302-04.
28. Ibid., 317.
29. Ibid., 326-27.
30. Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1945),
75.
31. Kramer, 343-44.