

### MARIA MONTESSORI (1870- 1952)

*With the school year beginning around this time, I thought it would be interesting to consider the life of an Italian woman, Maria Montessori, who was an important figure, both in Italy and throughout the world, in developing theories and practices for education. Not only was she influential in this field, but she also was an important physician in her day as well. At an early age, she broke gender barriers and expectations when she enrolled in classes at an all-boys technical school, with hopes of becoming an engineer. She soon had a change of heart and began medical school at the Sapienza University of Rome, where she graduated—with honors—in 1896. With her graduation, she became the first Italian woman to receive a medical degree. Her work as a physician, combined with the investigative precision of her engineering training, all helped her develop her unique and important philosophy and methods for educating children. These were based on the belief in the creative potential of children, their drive to learn, and the right of each child to be treated as an individual.*



**Maria Tecla Artemisia Montessori was born on August 31, 1870 in Chiaravalle, (near Ancona), Italy. (This past August 31 would have been her 149th birthday). Her father, Alessandro Montessori, 33 years old at the time, was an official of the Ministry of Finance working in the local state-run tobacco factory. Her mother, Renilde Stoppani, 25 years old, was well educated for the times and was the great-niece of Italian geologist and paleontologist Antonio Stoppani. She was an intelligent, modern-thinking woman from a wealthy family. She taught Maria how to be compassionate by giving her the task of knitting for the poor every day. Maria herself also chose to scrub a portion of the tile floor every day. (Much later, as a teacher, she included such work in her studies for children, calling them “exercises of practical life”). Although Maria never had a particular mentor, her mother helped and encouraged her in her intellectual pursuits. She also had a loving relationship with her father, who was more traditional in his attitudes than her mother about the role of women in society.**

**The Montessori family moved to Florence in 1873 and then to Rome in 1875 because of Alessandro’s work. Maria entered a public elementary school at the age of six in 1876. Her**

early school record was “not particularly noteworthy,” although she was awarded certificates for good behavior in the first grade and for “*lavori donneschi*” (“women’s work”) the following year.

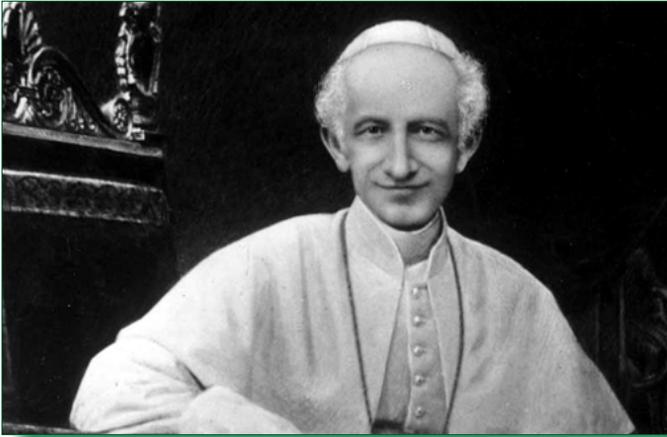
As her elementary education progressed, Maria blossomed. She was average in intelligence, but good at exams, and she led her classmates in many games. She found the classroom set-up and repetitions very boring, yet she continued to learn. When it came time to leave elementary school, she had to ask her parents if she could continue with her education. Maria’s father discouraged her interest in continuing her education toward a professional career. (This mindset reflected that of most Italian fathers of his day, who believed that education beyond the basics was unnecessary for a woman). However, with the encouragement and support of her mother, she prepared herself for her later career.

Having developed an interest in engineering technology and mathematics during her elementary education years, in 1883, at the age of 13, Maria entered an all-boys secondary technical school in Rome, Regia Scuola Tecnica Michelangelo Buonarroti (Michelangelo Buonarroti Royal Technical School), where she studied Italian, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, accounting, history, geography, and sciences. She graduated in 1886 with good grades and examination results. That year, at the age of 16, she continued her education at Regio Istituto Tecnico Leonardo da Vinci (Leonardo da Vinci Royal Technical Institute), studying Italian, mathematics, history, geography, geometric and ornate drawing, physics, chemistry, botany, zoology, and two foreign languages. She did well in the sciences, but she especially excelled in mathematics.



She initially intended to pursue an engineering career upon graduation, which was an unusual aspiration for a woman in her time and place. However, by the time she graduated in 1890 at the age of 20, with a certificate in physics/mathematics, she had decided to study medicine instead, which was an even more unlikely pursuit for a woman given the cultural norms at the time.

She moved forward with her intention to study medicine. She appealed to Guido Baccelli, the professor of clinical medicine at the Sapienza University of Rome, but was strongly



discouraged. Nonetheless, after intervention by Pope Leo XIII (*left*), in 1890 she enrolled in the University in a degree course in natural sciences, passing examinations in botany, zoology, experimental physics, histology, anatomy, as well as general and organic chemistry, and earning her *diploma di licenza* in 1892. This degree, along with additional studies in Italian and Latin, qualified her for entrance into the medical program at the University in 1893.

She was met with hostility and harassment from some medical students and professors because she was a woman. Since her attendance at classes with men in the presence of naked male cadavers was deemed inappropriate, she was required to perform her dissections of cadavers alone, after hours. She resorted to smoking tobacco to mask the offensive odor of formaldehyde. Maria won an academic prize in her first year, and in 1895 secured a position as a hospital assistant, gaining early clinical experience. In her last two years, she studied pediatrics and psychiatry, and worked in the pediatric consulting room and emergency service, becoming an expert in pediatric medicine. She graduated from the Sapienza University of Rome in 1896 as a Doctor of Medicine. (She was the first woman to receive the MD degree from an Italian University). Her thesis was published in 1897 in the journal *Policlinico*.

After her graduation, she continued with her research at the University's psychiatric clinic, and in 1897 she was accepted as a Voluntary Assistant there. As part of her work, she visited asylums in Rome where she observed children with mental disabilities; her observations became fundamental to her future educational work. She also read and studied the works of 19th-century physicians and educators Jean Marc Gaspard Itard and Édouard Séguin, who greatly influenced her. Maria was intrigued by Itard's ideas, and she created a far more specific and organized system for applying those ideas to the everyday education of children with disabilities. These works of Itard and Séguin gave her a new direction in her thinking and influenced her to focus her research and studies on children with learning difficulties. She also started her own private practice as a pediatric psychiatrist. She became known for her high levels of competency in treating patients, but also for the respect she showed to patients from all social classes.



*Sapienza University of Rome*

In 1897 Maria spoke on societal responsibility for juvenile delinquency at the National Congress of Medicine in Turin. In 1898, she wrote several articles and spoke again at the First Pedagogical Conference of Turin, urging the creation of special classes and institutions for mentally disabled children, as well as teacher training programs for their instructors.

Also, in 1898 Maria gave birth to a son, Mario Montesano Montessori, who was born out of her love affair with Giuseppe Montesano, a fellow-doctor in the psychiatric clinic of the university. If she had married Giuseppe, she would have been expected to cease working professionally. So, instead of getting married, Maria decided to continue her work and studies. She wanted to keep the relationship with Giuseppe secret under the condition that neither of them would marry anyone else. When Giuseppe subsequently married, Maria was left feeling betrayed and decided to leave the university hospital and place her son in foster care with a family living in the countryside, choosing to miss the first few years of his life. (She eventually reunited with her son in his teenage years, and for the rest of her life, he proved to be a great assistant in her research and efforts to spread her ideas worldwide).

In 1899 Maria was appointed a councilor to the newly formed National League for the Protection of Retarded Children, and was invited to lecture on special methods of education for retarded children at the teacher training school of the College of Rome. That year she undertook a two-week national lecture tour, speaking to capacity audiences that included prominent public figures.



In 1900 she was appointed co-director, along with Giuseppe Montesano, of the newly established Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica di Roma (Orthophrenic School for Teachers of Rome), where her methods proved extremely successful. The school was a facility to train teachers in educating mentally disabled children, and had an attached laboratory classroom. Sixty-four teachers enrolled in the first class, studying psychology, anatomy and physiology of the nervous system, anthropological measurements, causes and characteristics of mental disability, and special methods of instruction. During her two years at the school, Maria developed methods and materials which she would later adapt to use with mainstream children.

The school was an immediate success, attracting the attention of government officials from the departments of education and health, civic leaders, and prominent figures in the fields of education, psychiatry, and anthropology from the Sapienza University of Rome. The children in the model classroom were drawn from ordinary schools, but were considered “uneducable”

due to their deficiencies. Because of the success of this program, some of these children later passed public examinations given to so-called “normal” children.

From 1896 to 1906 she also held a chair in Hygiene at Women’s College, Rome. From 1900 to 1907 she began her own studies of educational philosophy and anthropology, lecturing and teaching students at the Pedagogic School of Sapienza University of Rome, where she held a chair in anthropology from 1904-08. During these years, she continued her studies of philosophy, psychology, and education, in addition to her pediatric practice.

During the late 1890s to 1910, Rome experienced rapid development and growth—primarily resulting from movement of people from the countryside to the city. However, the speculative nature of this development led to bankruptcies and formation of ghetto districts in the city. One such slum district was San Lorenzo, where children were left to run amok at home while their parents worked in the factories that had sprung up. In an attempt to provide the children with activities during the day to fend off the destruction of property, Maria was offered the opportunity to introduce her materials and techniques to children who were not intellectually disabled. In San Lorenzo in 1907, she opened the first Casa dei Bambini (Children’s House), a preschool for children ages three to six, bringing some of the educational materials she had developed at the Orthophrenic School into practice with children without learning handicaps.

Maria put many different activities and other materials into the children’s environment, deciding to keep only those that engaged the children. At first, the classroom was equipped with a teacher’s table, a blackboard, a stove, small chairs, armchairs, and group tables for the children, and a locked cabinet for the materials she had developed at the Orthophrenic School. Activities for the children included: personal care, such as dressing and undressing; care of the classroom environment, such as dusting and sweeping; and care for the outside garden. The children were also given use of the materials that Maria had developed. She, herself, was occupied with teaching the teacher, doing research, and performing other professional activities. She oversaw and observed the classroom work, but did not teach the children directly. Day-to-day teaching and care were provided, under her guidance, by the daughter of the building porter who had gone through the training at the Orthophrenic School.

In this first classroom, Maria observed behaviors in these young children which formed the foundation of her educational method. She noted episodes of deep attention and concentration, multiple repetitions of activity, and a sensitivity to order in the classroom environment. Given free choice of activity, the children showed more interest in practical activities and Maria’s materials than in toys provided for them, and were surprisingly unmotivated by sweets and other rewards. Over time, she saw a spontaneous self-discipline emerge in her students.

Based on her observations, Maria implemented a number of practices that became hallmarks of her educational philosophy and method. She replaced the heavy furniture with child-sized tables and chairs which were light enough for the children to move, and placed child-sized materials on low, accessible shelves. She expanded the range of practical activities such as sweeping and personal care to include a wide variety of exercises for care of the classroom environment and the personal self, including flower arranging, hand washing, gymnastics, care of pets, and cooking. She also included large open-area sections in the classroom, encouraging children to come and go as they please in the room's different areas and lessons. In her book, she outlined a typical winter's day of lessons, starting at 9:00 am and finishing at 4:00 pm.

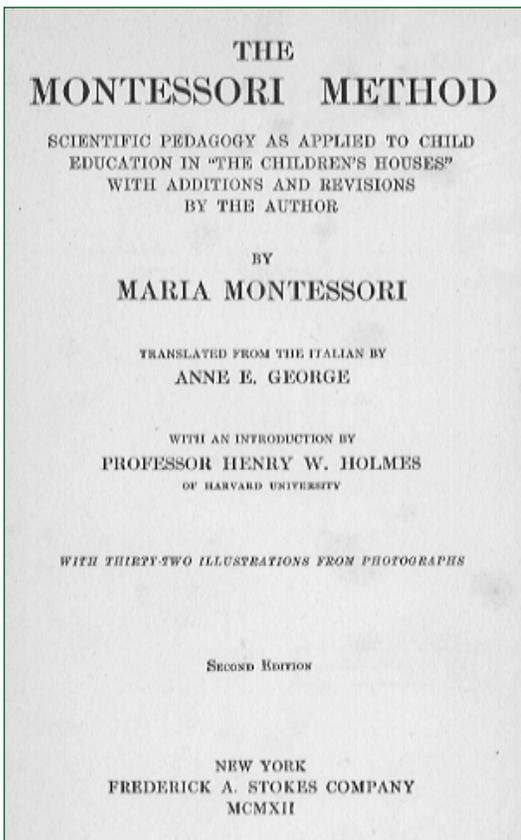
She felt by working independently, children could reach new levels of autonomy and become self-motivated to reach new levels of understanding. She also came to believe that acknowledging each student as



*Modern Montessori classroom (montessoriguide.org)*

an individual and treating each one as such would yield better learning and fulfilled potential in each particular child. She continued to adapt and refine the materials she had developed earlier, altering or removing exercises which were chosen less frequently by the children. Also based on her observations, she experimented with allowing children free choice of the materials, uninterrupted work, and freedom of movement and activity within the limits set by the classroom environment. She began to see independence as the aim of education, and the role of the teacher as an observer and director of children's innate psychological development. She began to realize that children who were placed in an environment where their activities were designed to support their natural development were empowered to educate themselves.

By 1909 Maria gave her first training course in her new approach to around 100 students. Her notes from that period provided the material for her first book published in 1909 in Italy as *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica Applicato all'Educazione Infantile nelle Case dei Bambini* (*The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Young Child Education in Children's Homes*), or simply *Il Metodo* (*The Method*). (It appeared in translation in the United States in 1912 as *The Montessori Method*, and was later translated into 20 languages).



In 1911-12, Maria's work was popular and widely publicized in the United States, especially in a series of articles published in McClure's Magazine. The first North American Montessori school was opened in October, 1911 in the Edward Harden Mansion in Sleepy Hollow, NY (just north of Tarrytown). Alexander Graham Bell and his wife became proponents of the method and a second school was opened in their Canadian home. The Montessori Method sold quickly through six editions. The first International Training Course in Rome in 1913 was sponsored by the American Montessori Committee, and 67 of the 83 student teachers participating were from the United States. By 1913 there were more than 100 Montessori schools in the United States. Maria traveled to the US in December, 1913 on a three-week lecture tour speaking to large, enthusiastic crowds wherever she traveled. Her lectures also included films of her European classrooms.

Maria returned to the United States in 1915, sponsored by the National Education Association, to demonstrate her work at the Panama–Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, and to conduct a third international training course there. A glass-walled classroom was put up at the Exposition, and thousands of observers came to see a class of 21 students. Meanwhile, Maria's father died in November 1915, and so she returned to Italy.

Although Maria and her educational approach were highly popular in the United States, she was not without opposition and controversy. Influential progressive educator William Heard Kilpatrick, a follower of American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, wrote a dismissive and critical book titled *The Montessori Method Examined* (1914), which had a broad impact. The National Kindergarten Association was critical as well. Critics charged that Maria's method was outdated, overly rigid, overly reliant on sense-training, and left too little scope for imagination, social interaction, and play. In addition, Maria's insistence on tight control over the elaboration of her method, the training of teachers, the production and use of materials, and the establishment of schools became a source of conflict and controversy. After she left to return to Italy in 1915, the Montessori movement in the United States fragmented, and Montessori education was a negligible factor in education in the United States until after 1960, when Nancy McCormick Rambusch and Margaret Stephenson, who

each had worked with Maria in Europe, separately came to the US and began establishing Montessori schools and organizations.

In 1917, Maria moved to Barcelona and lived in Spain until 1936. She was joined there by her son Mario and his wife Helen Christy, where they raised their four children: Mario Jr, Rolando, Marilena, and Renilde. During this time, the Montessori approach grew rapidly. Montessori societies, training programs, and schools sprang up all over the world, and a period of travel with public speaking and lecturing occupied Maria, much of it in the US, but also in the UK and throughout Europe. In 1929, mother and son established the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) to support and perpetuate her work.



The rise of fascism in Europe substantially impacted the progress of the Montessori movement. By 1933 the Nazis had closed all the Montessori schools in Germany. In Italy, Mussolini was at first favorably disposed toward the program. He had met with Maria in 1924 and had extended his official support for Montessori education as part of the national educational program. In 1927 Mussolini established a Montessori teacher training college, and by 1929 the Italian government supported a wide range of Montessori institutions. However, from 1930 on, Montessori and the Italian government came into conflict over financial support and ideological issues, especially after Maria's lectures on Peace and Education in Nice and in Geneva. She also held peace conferences in Geneva, Brussels, Copenhagen, and Utrecht. Her speeches were published in Italian as *Educazione e Pace (Education and Peace)*. This activity led to Mario and her being placed under surveillance when they were in Italy. Finally, in 1934 having had enough of Mussolini's authoritarianism, she decided not to return to Italy until after Mussolini was gone. (The Italian government ended Montessori activities in the country in 1936).

Fleeing the Spanish civil war in 1936, Maria and Mario left their home in Barcelona and traveled to England, then to the Netherlands where they stayed with the family of Ada Pierson, who would later become Mario's second wife. A three-month lecture tour of India in 1939 turned into a seven-year stay when World War II began. Mario was interned and Maria was put under house arrest, detained as Italian citizens by the British government. After two months in captivity, her 70th birthday request to free Mario was granted, and Mario was reunited with his mother. They remained in Madras and Kodaikanal until 1946, although the British allowed them to travel to Sri Lanka and to other places in India in connection with lectures and courses. While in India and Sri Lanka, they trained over 1000 teachers.

During their years in India, Maria and Mario continued to develop her educational method. The term “cosmic education” was introduced to describe an approach for children aged 6-12 years that emphasized the interdependence of all the elements of the natural world. Children worked directly with plants and animals in their natural environments, and Maria and Mario developed lessons, illustrations, charts, and models for use with elementary-aged children. Materials for botany, zoology, and geography were created. This work led to two books: *Education for a New World* (1947) and *To Educate the Human Potential* (1947).

While in India, Maria turned to the study of infancy. In 1944 she gave a series of 30 lectures on the first three years of life, and began a government-recognized training course in Sri Lanka. These lectures were collected in the book *What You Should Know about Your Child* (1949). In 1945 Maria attended the first All-India Montessori Conference in Jaipur.

In 1946, at the age of 76 and with the war finished, Maria returned to Amsterdam, but she spent the final six years of her life traveling in Europe, India, and Pakistan giving lectures, developing courses, and establishing training facilities and schools. She also continued publishing books based on her courses. *The Absorbent Mind* (1949) was one of these important later books which described the development of the child according to four planes of development: from birth to six years, from 6 to 12, from 12 to 18, and from 18 to 24. Maria saw different characteristics, learning modes, and developmental imperatives active in each of these planes, and called for educational approaches specific to each period. She also revised once again her *Il Metodo*, which was published in Italian with a new title, *La Scoperta del Bambino* (*The Discovery of the Child*, 1950). The English edition, titled *The Discovery of the Child*, had been published in 1948.

During the last three years of her life, Maria continued to work and was honored with several important awards. In 1949, she gave a course in Pakistan and the Montessori Pakistan Association was founded. She returned from Pakistan to Europe and attended the 8th International Montessori Congress in San Remo, Italy, where she demonstrated a model classroom. The same year, the first training course for birth to three years of age, called the “Scuola Assistenti all’ Infanzia” (“School for Assistants to Infancy”) was established.

As Maria developed her educational theory and practice over the years, she came to believe that education had a role to play in the development of world peace. She felt that children, if they are allowed to develop according to their inner laws of development, would give rise to a more peaceful and enduring civilization. From the 1930s to the end of her life, she gave a number of lectures and addresses on the subject, saying in 1936: “Preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education.” These efforts resulted in Maria’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

She was also awarded the French Legion of Honor, the Officer of the Dutch Order of Orange Nassau, and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Amsterdam. In 1950 she visited Scandinavia and offered more training courses; represented Italy at the UNESCO conference in Florence; made a presentation at the 29th international training course in Perugia; and gave a national training course in Rome. In 1951 she gave a training course in Innsbruck, and participated in the 9th International Montessori Congress in London, which was her last public engagement.

Maria Montessori worked up to the day she died. Her life ended on May 6, 1952, at the age of 81, while she was sitting in the garden of a house owned by friends in Noordwijk an Zee, a village on the Dutch coast, discussing with her son, Mario, whether or not to go to Africa. She had been told that at 81, she was too frail to travel so far and that someone else should go and deliver her lectures for her. She frankly asked him: “Am I no longer of any use then?” An hour later she was dead of a cerebral hemorrhage (stroke). Since she was a devout practicing Catholic, she was interred in the small Roman Catholic cemetery at Noordwijk, having always wanted to be buried wherever she happened to die. She bequeathed the legacy of her work to her son, Mario.

Her tombstone reads: *“Io prego i cari bambini, che possono tutto di unirsi a me per la costruzione della pace negli uomini e nel mondo”* (I pray the dear children, who can do everything, to join me in building peace in men and in the world).



*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Biography.com Website; Encyclopedia Britannica Website; Encyclopedia of World Biography Website; Himetop (The History of Medicine Topographical Database) Website; Montessori Australia Website; Wikipedia Website.*