Maria Montessori and her Educational Philosophy

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician, educator, and innovator, acclaimed for her educational method that builds on the way children learn naturally. She opened the first Montessori school—the Casa dei Bambini, or Children’s House—in Rome on January 6, 1907. Subsequently, she travelled the world and wrote extensively about her approach to education, attracting many devotees. There are now thousands of Montessori schools in various countries all over the world.

Maria Montessori was born on August 31, 1870, in the provincial town of Chiaravalle, Italy. Her father was a financial manager for a state-run industry. Her mother, raised in an educated family, was well schooled and an avid reader—unusual for Italian women of that time. The same thirst for knowledge took root in young Maria, and she immersed herself in many fields of study before creating the educational method that bears her name.

Beginning in early childhood, Maria lived in Rome, growing up in a paradise of libraries, museums, and fine schools.

Breaking Barriers in Education

Maria was a *sterling student, confident, ambitious, and unwilling* to be limited by traditional expectations for women. At age 13 she entered an all-boys technical institute to prepare for a career in engineering. In time, however, she changed her mind, deciding to become a doctor instead. She applied to the University of Rome’s medical program, but was rejected. Maria took additional courses to better prepare her for entrance to the medical school and persevered. With great effort she gained admittance, opening the door a bit wider for future women in the field.

When she graduated from medical school in 1896, Maria was among Italy’s first female physicians. Though she was not the first female medical school graduate, as reported by many of her biographers, it does not detract from her accomplishment. Defying conventions, norms, and expectations to successfully make her way in this rigorous, male-dominated field required tremendous strength, dedication, and perseverance.

Birth of a Movement

Maria’s early medical practice focused on psychiatry. She later developed an interest in education, attending classes on pedagogy and immersing herself in educational theory. Her studies led her to observe, and call into question, the prevailing methods of teaching children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The opportunity to improve on these methods came in 1900, when she was appointed co-director of a new training institute for special education teachers. Maria approached the task scientifically, carefully observing and experimenting to learn which teaching methods worked best. Many of the children made unexpected gains, and the program was proclaimed a success.
In 1907, Maria opened a full-day childcare center in San Lorenzo, a poor inner-city district of Rome. Most of the students were from 3-7 year age group, and belong to working parents. This Casa dei Bambini center, the first of its kind in the nation, which was provided a high-quality learning environment to the children of that locality.

Initially the children were unruly, had no interest in learning and were creating problem in teaching learning process. Maria implemented his pedagogy and soon after they showed great interest in working with puzzles, learning to prepare meals, and manipulating learning materials Maria had designed. She observed how the children absorbed knowledge from their surroundings, essentially teaching themselves.

Using scientific observation and experience gained from her earlier work with young children, Maria designed learning materials and a classroom environment that fostered the children’s natural desire to learn and provided freedom for them to choose their own materials.

To the surprise of many, the children in Maria’s programs thrived, exhibiting concentration, attention, and spontaneous self-discipline. The “Montessori Method” began to attract the attention of prominent educators, journalists, and public figures. By 1910, Montessori schools could be found throughout Western Europe and were being established around the world, including in the United States where the first Montessori school opened in Tarrytown, NY, in 1911.

**Philosophy of Maria Montessori**

Maria Montessori challenged traditional teaching learning environment. She challenged the traditional teacher-student dynamic. She believed the child is not empty bowl which need to be filled by teacher. She also believed that there are individual differences and teacher should not use ‘one size fits all’ approach. The traditional approach is rather homogeneous and lacking in individualistic nuance, so the Montessori Method aims to bring a little more agency to a child’s learning in hopes of facilitating greater understanding.

There is a strict emphasis on learning through interaction with environment, in this philosophy. It encourages what its terms ‘free activity’ within an established ‘prepared environment’. What this activity may be, and even what kind of an environment is required, is up to the individual teacher – and in part, should be inspired by the individual needs of the student.

The philosophy does provide some guidance as to what these environments should look like, and recommends that teachers hit a few key notes:

- An arrangement that facilitates movement and activity
- Beauty and harmony, cleanliness of environment
- Construction in proportion to the child and her/his needs
- Limitation of materials, so that only material that supports the child’s development is included
- Order
What are the ideas behind Montessori childcare?

There are two main ideas:

1. Children create their own sense of ‘self’ through interaction with their environment. Rather than sitting at a desk and being lectured, children are encouraged to do things. Play with a selection of toys, explore a selection of areas; try out new things and see what works for them on an individual level.

2. Children have their own innate path towards healthy psychological development. It is only by following this highly personal path to psychological development that they can reach a healthy end point, and not everyone’s path is the same.

However, Maria Montessori and her son, Mario, did identify a series of universal characteristics which they went on to call ‘human tendencies’. They are as follows:

- Abstraction
- Activity
- Communication
- Exactness
- Exploration
- Manipulation of Environment
- Order
- Orientation
- Repetition
- Self-Perfection
- Work or ‘purposeful activity’

The philosophy instructs that education should be built up around these principles in order to best facilitate a healthy psychological development – ideally with the intention of developing independence in all of the listed areas.

As they are ‘universal’ tendencies, it can be reasonably assumed that education systems established with a healthy respect for these characteristics will find it easier to establish a base or foundation, from which they can build their more individualistic ‘ad hoc’ instructions.

What is Montessori Education?

Montessori is a method of education named after Dr. Maria Montessori. She was the first woman in Italy to obtain the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Because she was a doctor, Maria Montessori looked at education from a scientific level. She believed that education should prepare a person for all aspects of life. She designed materials and techniques that would promote a natural growth of learning in students. They are common to all Montessori classrooms. Working with these materials and
techniques forms a pattern that children carry over naturally to reading, writing, and mathematics. Each skill is developed to interlock with another.

According to the American Montessori Society, The Montessori Method of education, is a child-centred educational approach based on scientific observations of children from birth to adulthood. It is a time-tested method, and widely used by thousands of the schools with over 100 years of success in diverse cultures throughout the world.

A child has natural tendency to learn and are capable to initiate learning in a supportive, thoughtfully prepared learning environment. It is an approach that values the human spirit and his physical, social, emotional, cognitive developments.

Montessori education offers our children opportunities to develop their potential as they step out into the world as engaged, competent, responsible, and respectful citizens with an understanding and appreciation that learning is for life. The major principles of the Maria Montessori School are:

- **Each child is valued as a unique individual.** Montessori education recognizes that children learn in different ways, and accommodates all learning styles. Students are also free to learn at their own pace, each advancing through the curriculum as he is ready, guided by the teacher and an individualized learning plan.

- **Beginning at an early age, Montessori students develop order, coordination, concentration, and independence.** Classroom design, materials, and daily routines support the individual’s emerging “self-regulation” (ability to educate one’s self, and to think about what one is learning), toddlers through adolescents.

- **Students are part of a close, caring community.** The multi-age classroom—typically spanning 3 years—re-creates a family structure. Older students enjoy stature as mentors and role models; younger children feel supported and gain confidence about the challenges ahead. Teachers model respect, loving kindness, and a belief in peaceful conflict resolution.

- **Montessori students enjoy freedom within limits.** Working within parameters set by their teachers, students are active participants in deciding what their focus of learning will be. Montessorians understand that internal satisfaction drives the child’s curiosity and interest and results in joyous learning that is sustainable over a lifetime.

- **Students are supported in becoming active seekers of knowledge.** Teachers provide environments where students have the freedom and the tools to pursue answers to their own questions.

- **Self-correction and self-assessment are an integral part of the Montessori classroom approach.** As they mature, students learn to look critically at their work, and become adept at recognizing, correcting, and learning from their errors.
Given the freedom and support to question, to probe deeply, and to make connections, Montessori students become confident, enthusiastic, self-directed learners. They are able to think critically, work collaboratively, and act boldly—a skill set for the 21st century.

**Teacher’s role in Montessori Method.**

Montessori believed that “it is necessary for the teacher to guide the child without letting him feel her presence too much, so that she may be always ready to supply the desired help, but may never be the obstacle between the child and his experience” (Montessori, 1967). He also stated that the Montessori teacher demonstrates key behaviors to implement this child-centered approach:

1. **Make children the center of learning** because, as Montessori said, “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” (Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook).

2. **Encourage children to learn by providing freedom** for them in the prepared environment. Observe children so as to prepare the best possible environment, recognizing sensitive periods and diverting inappropriate behavior to meaningful tasks.

3. **Prepare the learning environment** by ensuring that learning materials are provided in an orderly format and the materials provide for appropriate experiences for all the children.

4. **Respect each child** and model ongoing respect for all children and their work.
   - **Introduce learning materials**, demonstrate learning materials, and support children’s learning. The teacher introduces learning materials after observing each child.
   - **Intervention of teachers**, teacher should intervene before, not after the disorder has occurred. When a teacher intervene after the disorder occurred, then the child lost his interest in activity. For example, a child is trying to clean a table, but don’t know how to do it. You as a teacher watched it and instructed him how to clean the table. After one or two attempt, the child will lost his interest in cleaning the table. In place of that if you waited, child might have discovered how to clean the table in repeated attempt.