

Chapter 2: Maria Montessori



The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, "The children are now working as if I did not exist."

—Maria Montessori

Biography

MARIA MONTESSORI WAS BORN in Chiaravalle, Italy, in 1870. She was the only daughter of wealthy, well-educated parents. Her mother always encouraged her to think and study and pursue a professional career. Her father, a fairly conservative man, did not like having his daughter break with the traditional expectations for women of her era. He wanted his daughter to become a teacher, the only professional avenue considered appropriate to women at the time. However, he continued to support her when she became a student of science instead. She went on to medical school where she constantly struggled with the resentment of male medical students and her father's disapproval. As time went on, Montessori's scholarship earned the respect of her classmates. She specialized in pediatrics during her last two years, and in 1896 she became the first woman in Italy to graduate from medical school.

Montessori's first job was to visit insane asylums and select patients for treatment. This was where her interest in young children and their needs developed. She noticed that

children who had been diagnosed as “unteachable” responded to her methods. Because she had trained as a scientist, she used observation to determine the needs of the children. She was a brilliant woman and an astute observer. Soon she determined that the problems existed not in the children, but in the adults, in their approaches and in the environments they provided. By this time, Montessori was developing a reputation for her gifts with children and education. She was referred to as “Teacher.” Many forgot that her training was in medicine.

Montessori's first opportunity to work with typically developing children came in 1907, when she opened her first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House) in the slums of Rome. The building was offered to Montessori as an attempt to keep the children of working parents out of the streets. Shop owners thought it would reduce vandalism. Not only did the children come in from the streets but they became avid learners who loved to work and study. Montessori created a school environment to make up for the impoverished conditions of many of the children's homes. She determined that to be comfortable, young children need furnishings their own size and tools that fit their small hands. Because such things were not available at the time, Montessori made many of her own materials learned from her students. She wrote about her observations and theories and developed an international reputation for her work. By 1913 there were almost one hundred schools in the United States following Montessori's methods. In 1922 she was appointed a government inspector of schools in Italy. Her opposition to Mussolini's fascism forced her to leave the country in 1934.

Maria Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times. When she died in Holland in 1952, she left educators of every nation a legacy of ideas and a collection of writings that still affect current practice in programs for

young children. It is this legacy of ideas and how they affect our practices with children that provides the focus for this chapter.

Montessori's Theories

Many of Montessori's ideas are so basic to the ways we think about early childhood today that we take them for granted. Yet in 1907, when Dr. Montessori opened her first school, child-sized furnishings and tools and the idea of children working independently were considered radical. Her research into young children and what they need to learn has affected the fundamental ways early educators think about children. Her work provided a foundation for the work of such later theorists as Piaget and Vygotsky. Many of the ideas held by people who work in early childhood education today can be traced to Montessori.

In the United States, some early childhood programs call themselves Montessori programs. Because there are Montessori schools and Montessori materials, educators and others sometimes forget to separate Dr. Montessori's legacy of ideas about children and learning from specific Montessori programs. There is a wide range of diversity among these programs—some of them hold very firmly to Montessori principles, and some of them would never meet Montessori's own standards. It is important to understand that Montessori's theories about children have influenced the way all early childhood programs are structured today, not just programs that refer to themselves as Montessori programs. Her theories are important to early childhood teachers no matter what types of programs they work in.

Child-Centered Environments

Montessori acknowledged that the emphasis she placed on preparation of the learning environment was probably the main characteristic by which people identified her method. She believed that "environment" includes not only the space the children use and the furnishings and materials within that space but also the adults and the children who share their days with each other, as well as the outdoor environment and other places where children learn. Montessori believed that children learn language and other significant life skills without conscious effort from the environments where they spend their time. For that reason, she thought that environments for children need to be beautiful and orderly so that children can learn order from them. She believed children learn best through sensory experiences. She thought that the teacher has a responsibility to provide wonderful sights, textures, sounds, and smells for children. She also believed that part of sensory experience for children is having tools and utensils that fit their small hands and tables and chairs that match their small bodies. Beautiful, orderly, child-sized environments and sensory play are part of Montessori's legacy.

Most American early childhood programs have child-sized furnishings, equipment, and utensils. What else can teachers learn from Montessori's understanding of good environments for children? Montessori thought that early childhood teachers should

- provide real tools that work, such as sharp knives, good scissors, and woodworking and cleaning tools;
- keep materials and equipment accessible to the children and organized so they can find and put away what they need; and
- create beauty and order in the classroom.

Provide Real Tools That Work

Montessori suggested that the size of furnishings and materials is important. When she opened her schools in Italy, child-sized tools and furnishings were not available. This was why she became so involved in making her own materials. Montessori took this part of environment planning so seriously that even the staircase in her school was custom-designed to fit her students' small feet. When we see classrooms outfitted with child-sized hammers, saws, and workbenches, we are looking at Montessori's influence. Child-sized pitchers for pouring juice and small mixing bowls and pots also demonstrate her influence.

The fact that these child-sized tools really work is also part of Montessori's educational philosophy. She thought children needed real tools if they were to do the real work that interested them. In our preschools, children are often expected to cut paper with scissors that aren't sharp or cut vegetables with butter knives so they won't be hurt. Unfortunately, these dull tools also make these simple tasks very difficult, and in some cases, more dangerous than if children used sharp tools properly. Montessori believed that children could learn to use tools safely, and that giving them tools that didn't really work undermined their competence.

Keep Materials and Equipment Accessible to the Children

In addition to having real tools, Montessori stressed the need for children to be able to reach materials when they needed them in order to help children become responsible for their own learning. Arranging classrooms with low, open shelves means children can see what is available and get what they want without assistance from the teacher. They should not have to interrupt their work to get the attention of the busy teacher or ask permission to use the materials they need.

Often in our preschools, supplies are kept out of the children's reach. For example, teachers plan an art activity and "get the paint out" instead of having paint available all the time for children to use. Teachers following Montessori's lead have ample supplies available for children to access and use. With help from the children, they keep these supplies well organized so that choices and opportunities continually invite the children to be creative.

Often when teachers hesitate to arrange materials in an accessible way, they say it is because the children would make too much mess. Montessori made it clear that it is a serious teaching responsibility to become "the keeper and custodian of the environment" ([1949] 1967, 277). She believed that the teacher should prepare a clean, organized, and orderly environment for the children. If every material has a place that is clearly marked in a child-friendly way, with photographs or drawings as well as the printed name of the material that belongs there, children have the power to get what they need and also to put it away when they are done.

Create Beauty and Order

Montessori used the word *cheerful* to describe well-planned spaces for children. She believed caring for the environment and keeping it bright and orderly should be viewed as

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a teaching skill. Too often, teachers view cleaning and organizing as additional work not in their job description. According to Montessori, knowing how to arrange an interesting, beautiful environment for children is as much a part of teaching as knowing how to select fine children's books for the library. Montessori said, "Our apparatus for educating

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the senses offers the child a key to guide his exploration of the world" ([1949] 1967, 183).

Teachers need to ask themselves what they are providing in the environment to "educate the senses." What sights and sounds do children hear when they enter the room? What is available to touch or taste? What music is playing and when? Are lilies brought in when they are in bloom? Are windows opened to let the fresh air in? Does soft lamp light offer a break from the constant glare and hum of fluorescent lights? Are the displays of children's art carefully hung? Is there a color scheme in the room, or does the purple shelf jostle family donated sit next to the blue shelves that the toddler teachers didn't want anymore? Were fund-raising monies used to buy a lovely and comfortable new sofa, or is the sofa one that was donated because the springs stick through the dirty, dated upholstery and no adult would sit on it?

Adults sometimes act as if children have no interest in the beauty of their surroundings. There is an encouraged stereotype that children like to "mess up" but not "clean up." Observations of young children do not bear this out. Montessori believed that beauty and order are critical to prepared environments for children. That message is echoed today in the work of educators inspired by the teachers of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

For example, if a child's art is matted on colored paper that brings out the child's choice of colors for his painting, and if it is hung in a special display area, the children will learn to appreciate color and design. Another example is bringing in fresh flowers to grace the lunch table or the top of the bookcase. Walking in a field to pick flowers to make the classroom lovely is a fine way to spend a morning.

One Head Start teacher I know hangs a famous still life painting in her studio area each week. (A still life is an arrangement of flowers or vegetables or small household

items.) She sets up her own similar still life nearby. Some children try to draw it. Some children talk about the items included in it. Others don't seem to notice, yet its presence communicates respect for beauty as part of the children's day.

Competence and Responsibility

Montessori believed that children want and need to care for themselves and their surroundings. She believed that adults spent too much time "serving" children. She cautioned teachers to remember that children who are not allowed to do something for themselves do not learn how to do it. Montessori understood that it is sometimes much easier to do something for children than it is to take the time and energy to teach them to do it for themselves. But she also believed that for children to grow and develop skills, the adults in their lives need to make opportunities for children to do things for themselves. Fostering independence is part of Montessori's legacy.

Montessori believed that children learn best by doing and through repetition. She thought they do things over and over to make an experience their own, as well as to develop skills. Montessori urged teachers not to interfere with the child's patterns and pace of learning. She thought it is the teacher's job to prepare the environment, provide appropriate materials, and then step back and allow the children the time and space to experiment. Open-ended scheduling, with large blocks of time for free work and play, is part of Montessori's legacy.

How can early childhood teachers apply Montessori's thinking about competence and responsibility in their programs? Montessori thought teachers should give children responsibility for keeping the community space clean and orderly. She also thought teachers should provide large blocks of time for free work and play and allow children to structure their own time.

Allow Children to Take Responsibility

Montessori was convinced that the more teachers manage for children, the harder the job will be. Children have a passionate interest in real work. They love to watch the cook, the custodian, and the garbage collectors at work. They always want to "help." Montessori believed that children should be able to do everything they are capable of. She believed it is the teacher's responsibility to increase each child's competence whenever possible.

Frequently, early childhood teachers feel frustration that they are unable to do as much cleaning and organizing in their rooms as necessary. They feel frustrated and overwhelmed when the Legos, Unifix cubes, and pattern blocks get all mixed up and out of place. Many teachers plan sorting activities but never think to give the children the task of sorting materials into their proper places in the classroom. Teachers know that water play is calming for children, yet they worry about making time to clean because they are too busy planning activities for the water table! If children were given warm, soapy water and scrub brushes, they could clean the tables and chairs themselves. Montessori claimed that the sense of competence children gain from involvement in such real-life work is extremely beneficial and enhances the child's self-esteem in a way that artificial or contrived activities never could.

Schedule Large Blocks of Open-Ended Time

Montessori's observations led her to believe that children are capable of great concentration when they are surrounded by many interesting things to do and given the time and freedom to do them. She thought that as teachers allow children to choose what they will do and how and when they will do it, the teachers have more time to observe and assist children individually. Today in our early childhood programs, children are often called to circle or story time when they are deeply

engaged in a project of their own. Teachers say they have so much to teach the children in a short amount of time that they are unable to leave the children to their own interests as much as they would like. Some teachers feel that they aren't teaching unless they have planned all the activities. They use plan books in which blocks of time are reserved for writing, stories and music, manipulatives, math games, and snack. Many teachers are afraid to set plan books aside. They may even call reluctant children inside on a beautiful, sunny day because an activity, such as "movement with silk scarves," is on the schedule.

Montessori teachers, on the other hand, are trained to teach little and observe much. Teachers, of course, must plan activities and have materials on hand to support the children's interests, as suggested by Dewey's ideas in chapter 1. However, it is important to recognize the difference between the kind of aimless activity Dewey spoke out against and purposeful, self-directed activity. When children are engaged in serious work and learning, they are not as likely to be disruptive. Montessori's theory about young children tells teachers not to pull children away from projects that interest them unless it's absolutely necessary.

Montessori believed that the only way to know how to schedule the day and manage behavior is through observation. This is also why large blocks of uninterrupted time are so important to both teachers and children in early childhood classrooms. Teachers too often think they don't need to be involved during this time. The time, however, allows the perfect opportunity for teachers to observe both the quality of the group play as well as an individual child's participation in that group play. An example of the difference observation can make to scheduling can be drawn from looking at two teachers working in the same kindergarten program but in separate classrooms.

Janet believes that keeping consistent schedules is important for the children. Every weekend she plans carefully for the coming week. She tries to balance indoor with outdoor time, active with quiet activities, and child-choice with teacher-directed activities. She keeps individual needs in mind. Once the plan is established, she is hesitant to change it. She believes the children are calmed by their consistent routines.

Down the hall, Bonnie agrees with Janet philosophically about what is important for young children. She admits, however, that she doesn't spend as much time planning as Janet does. She relies more heavily on constant, ongoing observation of the kindergarten children. Bonnie claims she wouldn't know how to pace her days without carefully watching the children for signs of interest, fatigue, and needs.

The difference between these two teachers becomes even more pronounced when examining how they manage one simple part of their day: outdoor time. Janet frequently struggles with it. She and her assistant, Laura, find that five or six of their class of eighteen are always too cold or too hot or otherwise unhappy about being outdoors. The two teachers' ability to focus on the children who are invigorated by being outdoors is diminished by the energy spent keeping the five or six stragglers from mutiny. Once they are indoors again, Janet's and Laura's energy is consumed by trying to reel in the children who need a longer period of outdoor play.

Bonnie and her assistant, Mark, have found an easier way. When possible, they offer children choices about how long they spend outdoors. When Bonnie and Mark observe that five or six children are getting tired, one of them takes the small group indoors. Their careful observation and flexibility allows both scheduling and behavior management to go more smoothly.

Observation

Since Montessori trained as a doctor, she brought the skills of a scientist to the classroom. When she turned her energies toward the education of young children, it seemed only natural to use her scientific skills. She believed that if you are

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going to teach, you need to know all you can about those you hope to educate. She believed that the way to get to know children is to watch them. Careful observation, to Montessori, is the key to determining what the children are interested in or need to learn. She believed every child could learn. She was convinced that if children are not learning, adults are not listening carefully enough or watching closely enough. Careful observation is part of her legacy. Take time for careful observation and reflection, and use these observations to guide your environment and curriculum planning.

Many early childhood programs don't take time for careful observation and reflection. "We are too busy," some teachers say. Yet in the same conversation one might hear, "What can we do about these kids? They don't listen. They don't focus. There is too much running around and hitting in this classroom. How can I do observations when these kids have such demanding needs? I can't fit it in!" Montessori suggested that if we watch children carefully and then reflect on those observations, we can figure out what the children need that they are not presently getting from the environment.

For example, I remember observing in a classroom where children's physical aggression was taking much of the teachers' time. I noticed that they were using a wonderful wood-working bench as a science table. "Do you have tools?" I asked.

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Both teachers rolled their eyes and said, "Look around this room. These children don't go five minutes without hurting each other. Are you suggesting we should hand an already out-of-control group of children a bunch of hammers? Then we would really have problems!"

I asked why they thought the children acted this way. The teachers said they thought the children were not interested in doing any activities.

"Are there times when they are not as aggressive?" I asked. The answer won't surprise you. The teachers said that when they walked to the park, the children were able to run and climb and did not use their physical energy on each other. I asked if the teachers would be willing to try putting out the tools to see what would happen. They agreed.

Both teachers were surprised at the outcome. The children became very involved with the hammers and nails. The children started hammering just for the sake of pounding nails, and they stopped hitting each other. The teachers had a little respite and were able to talk with each other about how to do more with the children's obvious need for physical release. Montessori viewed observation in this way as a jumping-off point that helped teachers know what children needed and wanted to be doing.

The teachers described above learned something new from their observations: the children needed more physical activity. They also learned that the activities offered previously had not captivated the children. The high energy level and the lack of solid curriculum to engage that energy had resulted in challenging behavior. After considerable discussion and reflection on these observations, the teachers decided that they needed to change the physical environment as well as the curriculum. They put some furnishings in storage and provided more space for gross-motor activities. They went to a workshop on movement and started experimenting more

creatively with different kinds of music in the classroom. They increased the use of jazz and rock for children's dance experiences. The more the children moved, the less inappropriate physical aggression occurred.

Initially, these teachers were not convinced of Montessori's premise that observing children will give teachers clues to their curriculum needs. They were working hard to provide appropriate activities and experiences, but the ideas were coming from curriculum manuals, not from the children. Allowing children to provide the ideas for curriculum made their classroom a more peaceful and also a more exciting place to be.

Montessori in the Twenty-First Century

The teachers described above were struggling to meet the needs of young children to move and get physical activity. They learned that observing can teach us a great deal about what the children need. Unfortunately, after all the progress made in the United States in terms of developmentally appropriate practices, many early educators report that in their post-No Child Left Behind preschool and kindergarten classrooms they no longer have time or "permission" to allow children to play or pursue their own interests. Some kindergarten children no longer have outdoor playtime. There are times when we can easily get discouraged and feel that trends are moving backward, not progressing. This is a time, once again, when knowing the theoretical foundations of our discipline well is essential. It is essential so we can give good reasons why we do what we do with children when challenged by well-intentioned parents, administrators, or school board members. It is clear that Montessori had strong feelings about the tendency of adults to undermine children's competence by doing too much for them. She used the word *servicing* in her discussions and cautioned teachers that children remain

incompetent if adults do for them what they are capable of doing themselves. Today we see a frightening return to this kind of thinking. Teachers frequently complain to me of parents who carry their five-year-olds because they are in a hurry. We often see overwhelmed and tired parents at the end of the day who are trying to carry not only their child but also the child's lunch box, backpack, and teddy bear out to the car, rather than asking the five-year-old to walk and carry half of the equipment. Walking is a basic skill for most of us, but this is a good example of a twenty-first-century tendency to spare children (usually middle-class children) any effort, inconvenience, or stress. Polly Young-Eisendrath, in her 2008 book, *The Self-Esteem Trap: Raising Confident and Compassionate Kids in an Age of Self-Importance*, echoes Montessori's concerns of a century ago: she describes the parents who are serving their children in a way that is detrimental to their children's growth and development.

Another contemporary writer, Diana West, goes so far as to warn that this tendency is a threat to western civilization. Her book *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* is a "must read" for today's concerned parents and teachers. She describes the ways in which many thirty-year-olds in the United States are still functional adolescents. It is a frightening trend. Just as a century ago when Montessori urged teachers to organize environments for children and then make the time for children to manage on their own, young children today need teachers who will heed this warning and stand up for children's rights to do all that they are capable of doing. This does not mean we can't tie shoes or help with a jacket when a child is

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tired or irritable just because we know she can do it herself. But it does mean that there is a well-documented trend, once again, to deprive children of the satisfaction and competence that independence nurtures. Montessori's legacy is as important today as it was when she first shared her brilliant understanding of the needs of young children.

Discussion Questions

1. Last week you had a big cleaning day in your program. The children took their chairs and toys outside and scrubbed them down with soapy water and brushes. Today a dad came in with a complaint that he does not pay tuition for his children to do your cleaning. Basing your response on Montessori's ideas about real jobs and responsibility, what would you say?
2. How would you use Montessori's ideas to approach the idea of early literacy in preschool programs? What kinds of materials and equipment would you use in the classroom, and what kinds of activities would you plan? Describe how Montessori's theory supports your plan.
3. Your coteacher has complained that plants take up too much space in the classroom and create additional work. You suggest that the children take over all responsibility for the plants. He complains that they don't have enough time now and that would be wasting their valuable time. Using Montessori's ideas on independence and environment, how could you convince your coteacher that this is a good investment of the children's time?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Hainstock, Elizabeth G. 1997. *The Essential Montessori: An Introduction to the Woman, the Writings, the Method, and the Movement*. New York: Plume.
- Lillard, Angeline Stoll. 2005. *Montessori: The Science behind the Genius*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Montessori, Maria. 1965. *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook: A Short Guide to Her Ideas and Materials*. New York: Schocken Books.