

## **Maria Montessori: A Radical Approach to Learning**

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Few educational theorists have permeated mainstream consciousness to the extent of Maria Montessori (1870-1952). Rooted in the conviction that education has the power to change society, her vision of education put children at the centre, encouraging them to learn, and fail, autonomously. Her legacy is a global educational phenomenon.

*This article is part of the series “Schools for Thought” – a collection of reflections on the contributions of four thinkers to our understanding of education today and its potential: Maria Montessori, Pierre Bourdieu, Simone Weil, and Benedict Anderson.*

After the disaster of World War I, there was a strong push for a change in the delivery of education as part of a broader social and political reform movement. In 1921, a large group of teachers and school reformers met in Calais, France, and created a movement known as the New Education Fellowship (NEF) with branches in several European countries. The NEF grew to become the most influential, and largest, of the organisations that came out of the progressive educational reform movement in the early 20th century. Maria Montessori was invited as a guest of honour but – too busy with her own work – she refused the invitation and sent one of her disciples instead. A century later, the names of those who took part in this international movement for a “new education” have been forgotten by all except pedagogical experts. Who remembers Beatrice Ensor, John Dewey, Ovide Decroly, Elisabeth Rotten, or Adolphe Ferrière? Yet the name Maria Montessori has become almost universally known.

Why is Montessori still a worldwide brand in education after all these years? There are two key reasons for this. One is intellectual, the other practical. Maria Montessori was not a simple school reformer: she did not want to ameliorate, amend, or change elements of the school system. She wanted to create something entirely new. Her vision was radical, which is why she remains a source of inspiration today. Yet Montessori was also a businesswoman. She created a patented method with registered didactic materials and a centralised teacher training system. The movement she founded in 1929, the Association Montessori Internationale, is still active today.

To understand Montessori’s ideas, it is important to remember that she was not a trained teacher. In fact, she was a physician who had carried out research in paediatric psychiatry. In studying children’s brains, she understood that they worked differently to adult brains. Her intuition was new and revolutionary. The child is born to learn – possessing a powerful brain and a deep innate drive for self-education – and does not need an adult to do so. On the contrary, when an adult tries to help, their presence is often disruptive to the process of self-education. As a result of this insight, Montessori set out to create a new, entirely

different type of school. With specially adapted environments (in which children can move freely), tailored didactic materials (that children can handle alone, learning by themselves and self-correcting), and trained teachers (interfering as little as possible with the child's cognitive process), the new school was built around children and not adults. As Montessori put it, back in 1907, this would be a *Casa dei Bambini*, a Children's House.

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Montessori first developed her ideas while working with children with intellectual disabilities in a psychiatric institution in Rome, studying and further developing the special educational materials devised half a century earlier by a brilliant French doctor called Édouard Séguin. She decided to test the impact of Séguin's approach on children without disabilities at a public preschool set up in the poor San Lorenzo district of Rome. The results were extraordinary. Three- to four- year-old children – who worked in silence, self- focused and self-disciplined – were able to read and write within weeks. Montessori soon gained the attention of foreign educators and became a worldwide phenomenon. The elites, determined to provide their children with the best education available, began to support and finance Montessori, with the result that a pedagogical method born in the slums of Rome was soon being applied in private schools in the United States and the United Kingdom.

But is the person of Maria Montessori relevant to thinking on education today? Yes, and for a number of reasons. First of all, Montessori's contribution as a pioneering female figure must be recognised. Born in 1870, Montessori attended university and became a medical doctor at a time when it was very rare for a woman to do so. Furthermore, she was a visionary with a deeply modern outlook. Through the simple exercise of her capacity for observation, combined with her intuition and medical training, Montessori made major discoveries on the functioning of the child's brain that have since been confirmed by neuroscience. She was a great observer, spending time among children as if she were in a scientific experiment; she tested every didactic concept; and she built on and refined the method devised by Séguin, developing it to reach the adult life of the student.

Last but not least, she was a profoundly radical woman. In her youth, Montessori worked as a volunteer doctor in the slums of Rome and in the countryside, where malaria was ravaging poor families. She was a feminist and a campaigner for women's suffrage who attended the first strikes for International Workers' Day at a time when this was an open and potentially dangerous sign of socialism. As an older woman, she did not give up on her ambitions to change society. Rather, she simply decided to work towards this aim at a much deeper level, through the education of the child: the future of the world.

While more than a century has passed since she created her first experiments, Montessori's ideas are neither obsolete nor dated, and she continues to inspire education policy today. In many countries, there is great parental demand for the integration of Montessori methodologies and approaches in schools. Resistance often comes from schools themselves: Montessori classes require appropriate staff training, access to the right – often quite specific – materials, and, most of all, a complete overhaul of the school experience

and the role of the teacher. Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to introduce the approach into public education. In particular, many schools are trying to incorporate Montessori classes into the regular curriculum. Particularly relevant for primary schools and preschools, these classes focus on the development of the basic cognitive processes of the child's brain.

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Montessori hoped to go beyond pedagogy and education to try and change society as a whole. Implementing Montessori ideas in our schools could be a way to move towards a more peaceful society, something which is much needed today. A Montessori approach does not mean teaching "peace" in an abstract sense but rather educating "in peace". Children work in an environment that fosters freedom – to move, choose, and socially interact – without competition. The aim is to understand purely for the pleasure of understanding instead of competing with classmates over who gets the best grades.

We live in a time of great challenges, with climate change foremost among them. To respond effectively, we need creative people who are not afraid to think out of the box and dare to imagine a different world; people who are not afraid of trying and of failing. The Montessori approach teaches children that every mistake provides an opportunity to gain a better understanding of a subject matter. Today we are very much in need of more peaceful, balanced, and creative adults. However, they seem unable to rise to the task. So let us turn instead to the children. For they, as Montessori so aptly put it, are the parents of humankind.

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