Montessori: Life and works

Maria Montessori was a change-maker, a pioneer and a true humanitarian. She developed a philosophy of “follow the child,” that changed the way many people view and value education and children. She could have settled for a comfortable life but chose a noble one. Perhaps because of the discrimination she experienced, Maria Montessori became a major advocate for women, motivating them to fight for their rights. Perhaps her need to study medicine against the established norm gave her an insight into how children feel when they are constrained trying to follow their dreams or perhaps she witnessed confrontations in her early life through the socialist reforms in Italy and these things drove her to pursue education for peace, not as an ideal but as a result of her observations and understanding of universal laws. Whatever it was that inspired Maria Montessori to devote her life to educating children, there were clearly many aspects in her life that influenced the way she developed such philosophy and pedagogy as the need for careful, scientific observation, education as the means of true peace, movement as a natural part of learning, didactic and concrete materials for conceptual development and the importance of a prepared environment.

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| Maria was born in Chiaravalle, Italy, on August 31st 1870, into a time of great change, the transformismo - a rebirth in which education was seen as a key to the changes needed for reformation (Kramer, R. 1976). She was the only child of middle-class parents, supporters of the social reform. Initially considered an average student (Kramer, 1976), she grew to become a confident, independent, informed and studious learner demonstrating natural leadership ability (Montessori Made Manageable Inc., 297340 course powerpoint). She attended a technical college at 13 as she was considering a future in engineering, with her mother’s support. She received very high marks. She continued to study. At twenty she graduated with a certificate in physics/mathematics and decided to study medicine, against social/cultural norms and her father’s wishes. Her initial attempt to enter medical school was denied due to insufficient knowledge so a determined Maria spent the next two years taking the required courses. In 1892 she became a student at the University of Rome Medical School where she dealt with prejudice, isolation and opposition. She persisted and graduated with high honours.  Maria became involved with the pathology of “degenerate” children through her paediatrics and psychiatric rotations. This work continued after graduation and became her speciality. She saw an intrinsic connection between psychology, science and education. She quickly became a sought-after speaker, internationally recognised as an expert in the care and establishment of methods of teaching so-called ‘degenerate’ children in society (Povell, 2007).  By 1900 she was training teachers. She paid high regard to the work of pioneering physicians Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin but her **detailed observations** were almost unique among educational theorists (Kramer, R. 1976). She believed that, “Investigations of this kind must be carried out without any preconceptions as to their final outcome,” rid of prejudices. In observing children, she was able to confirm that they can productively and meaningfully remain engaged in activities for sustained periods of time. She treated each child as an individual before making generalisations. These careful observations were a natural way to collect data because of her scientific background and training. It was second nature to her to be thorough in all she did.  Sometimes I have quickly observed a child doing something that I thought seemed ‘off-task’ and rushed to correct them, then realised that they were actually on-task or processing their learning. More careful observation could have avoided the interruption. It also treats the child with respect.  Maria Montessori’s willingness to learn, not just approach children though a preconceived mind-set, is the same manner in which Montessori ‘teachers’ are taught tosupport children today.  This **‘follow the child’** approach has its foundation in a deep respect for children and their innate desire to work and their ability to construct themselves and came about through her uncertainty as to how to approach treating the special needs children. Through observation without prejudice, she was able to see unique individuals and the way that they were able to explore their world. In my experience, ‘following the child’ enables children to engage in their learning and removes ‘wait time’ and the arrogant assertion that a teacher knows best and can provide for needs without first observing and ascertaining them.  In the introduction to the principle of inclusion in the New Zealand Curriculum, it states that the curriculum ensures that student’s identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed (NZ Curriculum, 2007). While this is a mandate of the NZ Curriculum, it is seldom a true feature of modern teaching practice which prescribes the type of questions/ topics students encounter. I think that the process of inquiry learning can trivialise the document’s intent and the child’s cosmic connection the child needs.  I recently participated in a professional development day that involved completing a series of set challenges. While it eventually proved interesting and the company was good, I entered it with low motivation and energy as I really needed and wanted to be working on other things. It reminded me of how a child must feel when coming to school each day to learn what the teacher prescribes in a way that the teacher thinks is effective, in a one-size-fits-all approach. Allowing children to grow in a natural (normalised) way means they are more likely to reach that lofty goal of their potential but to do this, we need to overcome our mistrust of the child, our schema that the child is a bucket to be filled and we adults are the wise ones, entrusted to fill it.  Kramer, when writing the autobiography of Maria Montessori, noted that there was a “peculiar tension in Montessori between scientist and mystic, between reason and intuition” and a sense that she had “a destiny to fulfil” (Kramer, 1976). The unconventional elevation of status that Maria Montessori gave to the child, the faith that she placed in children as able and noble means teachers need to serve and support children rather than cause them to conform and be constrained. With four children, I quickly came to realise they had different approaches, needs, abilities and thinking, when they needed food, rest, time, help, independence and challenge and that they were unique, that I could influence them as much as they would allow but I could not impose my will without crushing theirs.  Montessori education allows the child to develop at **peace** with himself/herself and ultimately others and connect to the universe. Maria Montessori came to understand that the true path to peace is through the child who is connected and able to access the world for themselves. While most educationalists see education as the means to peace, they tend to base it on the presentation and acceptance of a moral code. Montessori, however, realised that a child at peace with themselves and their world is a child who is free to grow in the way that they are predestined to grow. They are able to tolerate others, respecting them without being told they need to do so. She discovered they had a natural tendency to work and contribute and a deep satisfaction in completing a challenging piece of work, but Montessori’s educational vision is far more profound. It connects a child to the universe and develops a deep sense of gratitude toward it.  Our modern approach falls short with an integrated curriculum and lacks meaning or the child. In fact, in most cases it would seem we push the child into mistrusting the system and meaningless targets that require the child to perform certain tasks (can the child do this? and this?) , rather than allowing the child to demonstrate what they can do and valuing such an outcome.  .  Also, through her observations, Maria Montessori was able to determine that children lacked long-term interest in toys or drawing materials in favour of **didactic** materials that enabled self-correction. These materials would be used repeatedly to satisfy the human tendencies for order, repetition, independence and perfection. She concluded that "children soon tire of toys that have only one function, but they seek out, continue to work with and keep returning to materials that let them see their errors and correct them, that aid their understanding of the physical world and that develop their intellect" (Spock and Hathaway, 1967). Through trial and error she developed a range of materials still used in centres today and sometimes in mainstream. The problem with mainstream use however is that once a material is taken out of context and used as a piece of equipment to achieve a target it loses value to the child. The aim of the material is to support a connection not enhance a programme. Maria Montessori believed that the process was as important as the outcome if not more important, something that would not sit well with national standards that are all about outcomes and ticking the boxes. In her life and work Maria encountered many situations involving children who were seen as less than average by established educators and she cautioned them that, “if we wish to develop a scientific system of education, we must therefore strike out on a different road from that which has been followed so far” (Montessori, M., Secret of Childhood, 1966).  The **prepared environment** is an essential component of a Montessori programme and is based on Maria Montessori’s work with children in the Casa Bambini where child-size furniture, accessible equipment and specially designed and presented materials enabled children to construct their own learning through individual pathways. I have experienced this in a classroom setting. When the environment is beautiful and the equipment is appropriate for the child’s plane of development and learning needs, then it becomes a place that is respected and the children become absorbed in their work, deeply concentrating for long periods of time, satisfied by their achievements without reliance on extrinsic rewards. Understanding the next steps for the child means that they can move onto the next stage of learning in a natural progression and take a direction that best meets their needs, not the needs of the teacher. The equipment should be ordered, beautiful, complete, accessible, presented properly and functional.  Maria Montessori considered movement to be another wonderful acquisition (Montessori M., Absorbent Mind, 1967). She found modern schools to be places where “spontaneous expression of a child’s personality is so suppressed that he is almost like a corpse, and where he is so fixed to his place at a desk that he resembles a butterfly mounted on a pin,” (Montessori, M., Secret of Childhood, 1966). She believed the child was predetermined in his/her development and felt that it was “imperative that a school allow a child’s activities to freely develop.” Her abhorrence of the ‘unnatural’ way a child was forced to sit day after day was evident in her writing. She observed that, “Everything is so arranged that, when a child is fixed firmly at his desk, he is forced to assume a position thought to be conducive to his health” and in developing her approach, she allowed for as much opportunities for the child to move and manipulate materials as she could (Montessori, M., 1966). Abstract concepts were first presented as concrete ideas and the child moves around the room to select and return equipment. Grammar is active and purposeful. Current theory endorses the idea that children learn best by doing (example, the learning pyramid). Those who decry the learning pyramid are basing their assertions on memory recall alone which is yet another example of a decompartmentalised education system. Learning is not recall, it is construction. Sharing your ideas with others, in my experience, consolidates, reflect and challenges thinking.  Overall, Maria Montessori was passionately interested in children as unique individuals. She used extensive scientific observations to determine what children needed to learn. Her philosophy has as a basic tenant, the belief that children are not empty vessels but capable of constructing themselves if they are given an environment that allows them the freedom and tools to do so. She advocated for them and saw education as a means of achieving real peace. Maria was a pioneer and a changemaker who challenged the status quo through science not merely philosophical ideas. Her pedagogy is as relevant today as it was in the past and her curriculum is holistic and cosmic not a series of performance tasks and preconceptions about what is best for the child. The life and works of Maria Montessori are profound and essential to anyone who truly wants to make a difference for children, freeing them to fully realise all they can be and contribute to the universe they ar intrinsically connected to.   |  | | --- | | The Learning Pyramid shows us that the **Greatest Methods of Learning Retention are at the Base of the Pyramid**. This is achieved through **Discussion Groups, Practice-By-Doing Activities, Sharing Ideas and Teaching Others**.The Learning Pyramid |   References  Books:  Hainstock, E.G. (1997). The essential Montessori. New York, NY: Plume Publishing.  Kramer, Rita. *Maria Montessori: A Biography*. Foreword by Anna Freud. 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