

Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori was born in 1870 in Italy. As she grew up it became apparent that her interests were not typical of females of that time, the subjects of mathematics and engineering. She pursued neither of these; rather she set her mind to attending medical school despite the Board of Education stating quite clearly that her enrolment would be impossible. It turned out to be possible and Maria became the first women medical student in Italy and later the first Italian woman to become a physician graduating in 1896. She later went on to teach in the University of Rome medical school and it was through her teaching and medical practice that she came into frequent contact with special needs children (referred to at that time as idiot children). Dr Montessori became involved with these children more out of pity and a longing to help them than any interest in pedagogy. Her observations and study of the children helped her form the conclusion that their mental deficiencies were a pedagogical problem rather than a medical problem. Dr Montessori began to pursue study in this area. One thing led to another and she was invited to direct a state orthophrenic school to serve children that society felt were hopelessly deficient. For two years she immersed herself in this work. It was during this period of intense study and observation that she came to the conclusion that the educational principles she employed were more rational than those being used in schools for normal children. Special needs children under her care developed to an unexpected extent and could “read and write so well that they were able to present themselves with success at a public examination taken together with normal children.” While everyone applauded this achievement, Dr. Montessori saw it differently: “Whilst everyone was admiring my idiots I was searching for the reason which could keep back the healthy and happy children of the ordinary schools on so low a plane that they could be equaled in tests of intelligence by my unfortunate pupils” (Standing, 1962, p30). From this point forward Dr Montessori waited for an opportunity to test her educational principles on normal children.

Seven years later the opportunity presented itself when she was invited by landlords of a housing project to work with ‘little vandals’ that had nothing to do all day but wreak havoc in their building. It was in this way that she opened the first “children’s house” (Casa dei Bambini) in a slum in Rome. Over time the little vandals became little angels because she ‘discovered,’ through observation, children’s natural tendencies and sought to harness these tendencies to facilitate their optimal development. She viewed the children as her teachers and sought to understand why they do what they do. She approached her work very much as a scientist, having no preconceived ideas, observing, testing, and often stumbling upon important concepts. For example, tax regulations governing expenses for the housing complex prevented Dr Montessori from acquiring typical school furniture. Therefore she had desks and chairs, utensils, and equipment made in sizes suitable for small children. It was in this way that she noticed that children greatly enjoyed and benefited from a world fit to their size.

Montessori shared her approach to education through annual six month international training courses. It is widely known that she was a brilliant lecturer, in fact a better lecturer than writer. While holding the training courses, she also carried on her psychological researches. Her approach to research and education was very biological, probably as a result of her medical training. While she was very scientific she was also very spiritual. As Standing says in his book, “Maria Montessori was herself the personification of what her own ideal teacher should be –

‘one who combines the self-sacrificing spirit of the scientist with the love of the disciples of Christ.’” (1962, p88).

Dr Montessori’s work was not just aimed at multiplication of her educational ideas. She also encouraged a social movement for the betterment of the working conditions of the child, an environment of calm and peace sheltered from the hustle of the modern world.

Montessori saw in the child a road to peace. This was probably partly in response to her experiences with war. When Fascist rule became dominate in Italy, she realized that the “development of strong and free personality could not thrive in a totalitarian atmosphere” (Standing, 1962, p86). Apparently the Fascists felt the same because they ordered all of her schools to be closed down. In Germany and Austria, under Nazi rule, her effigy was burned over a pile of her books in a public square. So Dr Montessori headed to Spain. She was not there long before the Spanish Civil War broke out and as a Roman Catholic her life was in danger. With the assistance of the British government she escaped and went to Holland where she opened a school for children and a training college. Maria was sixty-five at the time of her arrival.

Dr Montessori worked at an unhurried pace but always accomplished a lot, in part because she did not waste her energy on useless things. Once when asked why she did not respond to a certain professor who was attacking her methods, she responded as follows: “If I am going up a ladder and a dog begins to bite at my ankles, I can do one of two things – either turn round and kick out at it, or simply go on up the ladder. I prefer to go up the ladder!” (Standing, 1962, p86). That was Dr Montessori’s approach to life. She was focused on what she loved, children, and never let challenges get in her way.

For the purpose of brevity the above account of Dr Montessori’s life focuses primarily on her experiences related to children. She had numerous other interests, positions, researches and studies which informed and guided her educational principles that are not mentioned here.

Dr Montessori’s ideas were acclaimed the world over and she oversaw the spread of Montessori schools until her death in 1952. Dr Maria Montessori was an amazing person whose ideas continue to impact the world today.

Prepared by Sheryl Moriarty, November 2008