



Maria Montessori
by Kaitlyn Diane Meyer

What if freedom, curiosity, and discovery were more important for learning than strict discipline and memorization? That's exactly what Maria Montessori thought. As a physician turned educator, she changed the approach used in early childhood education. Montessori, born in 1870 in Italy, first pursued a career in medicine, becoming one of Italy's first female doctors. However, she discovered that her true passion was understanding the curious nature of children (Kramer 45). She recognized that traditional education often failed to nurture children's natural desire to learn and sought to create a more effective method—one based on observation, independence, and hands-on learning.

While working with children, she found that some couldn't learn the "conventional" way, which at the time was based on a teacher-centered curriculum that strove to be consistent across different classrooms and schools ("About Maria Montessori"). Traditional education emphasized rote memorization, obedience, and standardized instruction, leaving little room for individual exploration. Montessori felt that this method did not consider the natural ways that children learn, so she decided to test her own educational theories at her school for low-income children, Casa dei Bambini ("About Maria Montessori"). Here, she designed tools and created a space where children were encouraged to pursue their interests independently.

Her approach focused on hands-on learning, sensory exploration, and self-directed activities. Unlike conventional classrooms that relied on textbooks and lectures, Montessori's classrooms encouraged students to manipulate objects, engage in practical tasks, and learn through experience. Instead of simply memorizing letters, children traced sandpaper letters with their fingers, reinforcing literacy through both sight and touch. Likewise, bead chains helped them understand mathematical concepts in a concrete, hands-on manner (Lillard and Else-Quest 1893).

Her approach to teaching was child-centered; she used mixed-age classrooms to encourage cooperation, peer learning, and social development, as well as tailored pacing to allow children to study at their own speed (Montessori 134). Montessori believed that learning should be self-directed and that children naturally develop discipline when given the freedom to explore subjects that interest them. She observed that when children were engaged in meaningful activities, they demonstrated greater concentration, intrinsic motivation, and problem-solving skills.

Her classrooms were also designed to promote order and autonomy. Each material had a designated place, and students were responsible for maintaining the environment, reinforcing the idea that learning spaces should be treated with respect. This structured yet flexible approach helped children develop a sense of responsibility and self-discipline.



According to research, children who attend Montessori schools perform better academically, have better executive function, and greater social and emotional skills when compared to children who attend traditional schools (Marshall 116). Studies suggest that Montessori-educated students tend to be more adaptable and self-motivated, skills that are especially valuable in today's rapidly changing world.

Her ideas quickly gained international recognition, with schools across Europe, the United States, and beyond adopting the Montessori method. In 1911, the first Montessori school in the U.S. opened, and by 1915, her teaching techniques were being widely discussed at international education conferences. That same year, during the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, a Montessori classroom was set up behind glass walls so observers could witness children independently engaged in learning activities. The demonstration was groundbreaking, proving that young children could focus, work collaboratively, and develop advanced skills without traditional instruction (Marshall 118).

Today, there are over 20,000 Montessori schools worldwide, showing the lasting impact of her ideas ("Montessori Education"). Studies indicate that children who attend Montessori schools tend to excel in creativity, intrinsic motivation, and problem-solving skills—traits that are crucial for success in today's world (Lillard 376). Montessori's ideas have influenced not only early childhood education but also modern educational movements that emphasize experiential learning, personalized instruction, and project-based learning.

Her method is also supported by neuroscientific research, which shows that self-directed learning improves memory retention and brain development (Diamond and Lee 959). Research has demonstrated that Montessori education can enhance cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, and resilience, leading to long-term academic and personal success.

Maria Montessori's revolutionary approach challenged conventional ideas about learning. Her concepts continue to shape modern education, proving that education should support, rather than limit, a child's natural potential by encouraging curiosity, independence, and a passion for lifelong learning. Even a century after her time, her influence remains strong, inspiring educators, parents, and policymakers to rethink how children learn best. As society increasingly values innovation, adaptability, and creative problem-solving, Montessori's educational philosophy proves to be more relevant than ever.



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