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## Women in History - Maria Montessori

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# Women in History— Maria Montessori

Ginger L. Zierdt

## Childhood

In 1870, during the same year that Italy became a unified, free nation, one of the world's greatest educators, Maria Montessori, was born in Chiaravalle in the province of Ancona. Her father, Alessandro Montessori, was a successful government official and a member of the bourgeois civil service. Her mother, Renide Stoppani, was a well educated, wealthy woman devoted to liberation and unity of Italy.

When Maria was about twelve years old, her parents moved to Rome to give their only child a better education than Ancona could offer. The family's move from the more provincial town of Ancona to a sophisticated and cosmopolitan Rome enabled Maria the opportunities to use libraries and visit museums. Maria Montessori began studies in engineering at the Regia Scuola Tecnica Michelangelo Buonarroti. From this experience she began to model in her mind what a school should not be like. She also made the decision not to continue studies in engineering and would instead go on to study medicine, only to become Italy's first female doctor.

## Young Adulthood

One month after her graduation from medical school, Montessori was chosen to represent Italy in a Women's International Congress in Berlin (considered at the time a "feminist" gathering) where she championed the cause of the working women. A few years later (1900) she attended a similar congress in London. Here she attacked the practice of employing child labor in the mines of Sicily; and gave her support to a movement—patronized by Queen Victoria—which was directed against the exploitation of child labor.

Soon after graduating from medical school, Dr. Montessori was appointed assistant doctor at the Psychiatric clinic in the University of Rome. Part of her duty was to visit the asylums for the insane in Rome in order to select suitable subjects for the clinic. This experience led Montessori to take an interest in children with mental challenges, who during this period of time, were classed together with the insane. In 1897 Montessori had a revelation. She theorized that mental deficiency presented chiefly a pedagogical, rather than mainly a medical problem. She believed that using nature in the school would assist in meeting the real needs of these children.

Montessori further developed an educational theory, which combined

## About the Author

*Ginger Zierdt* is an Assistant Professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She has led the Center for School-University Partnerships as its director since 2004. From 2001–2004, she served with the teaching faculty in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood at Minnesota State Mankato as a pre-primary and primary grade methods instructor. Prior to working in higher education, Zierdt taught kindergarten and second-grade students as an educator within the Mankato Area Public Schools. Zierdt has a B.S. in Broad Area Elementary Education from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, a M.S. and Ed.S. in Education Leadership and Administration from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and is currently a doctoral student in Educational Studies: Higher Education Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Email: [ginger.zierdt@mnsu.edu](mailto:ginger.zierdt@mnsu.edu).

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ideas of scholar Froebel, anthropologists Giuseoee Serge, French physicians Jean Itard and Edouard Sequin, with methods that she had found in medicine, education, and anthropology. In 1900 she began to direct a small school (Orthophrenic) in Rome for “challenged” youth. The methods she employed were both experimental and miraculous. She offered that teachers should find the way to teach the child “how-to” before making him execute a task. She suggested that teachers see themselves as social engineers thus enhancing the scientific qualities of education.

## Career Defining Experience

From 1896 to 1906 she occupied the Chair of Hygiene at the Magistero Femminile in Rome, one of two women’s colleges in Italy at that time. She was also one of the permanent external examiners in the Faculty of Pedagogy. It was then in 1907 that Montessori began to assert her theories and methods of pedagogy—soon to be known as the “Montessori Method”<sup>1</sup> by directing a system of daycare centers for working class children in one of

<sup>1</sup>The chief components of the Montessori Method are self-motivation and autoeducation. Followers of the Montessori method believe that a child will learn naturally if put in an environment containing the proper materials. These materials, consisting of “learning games” suited to a child’s abilities and interests, are set up by a teacher-observer who only intervenes when individual help is needed. In this way, Montessori educators try to reverse the traditional system of an active teacher instructing a passive class. The typical classroom in a Montessori school consists of readily available games and toys, household utensils, plants and animals that are cared for by the children, and child-sized furniture—the invention of which is generally attributed to Dr. Montessori. Montessori educators also stress physical exercise, in accordance with their belief that motor abilities should be developed along with sensory and intellectual capacities. The major outlines of the Montessori system are based on Dr. Montessori’s writings, which include *The Montessori Method* (1912), *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913), *The Advanced Montessori Method* (2 vol., 1917), and *The Secret of Childhood* (1936).

Rome's worst neighborhoods. The news of the unprecedented success of her work in this Case dei Bambini "House of Children" soon spread around the world.

### **International Ambassador for Children**

Invited to the United States of America by Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and others, Dr. Montessori spoke at Carnegie Hall in 1915. She was invited to set up a classroom at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, where spectators watched twenty-one children, all new to this "Montessori Method," behind a glass wall for four months. The only two gold medals awarded for education went to this class, and the education of young children was altered forever.

Though Montessori was extended an invitation to remain in the U.S., she longed for her European homeland; however, during World War II Montessori was forced into exile from Italy because of her anti-fascist views. She went on to live and work in India and her concern for education intensified; she was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Maria Montessori's long and self-sacrificing labors on behalf of the child ended suddenly on May 6, 1952, at the age of 81, at Noordwijk-on-Sea, Holland. Since her death an interest in Dr. Montessori's methods have continued to spread throughout the world. Her message to those who emulated her was always to turn one's attention to the child, to "follow the child." It is because of this basic tenet, and the observation guidelines left by her, that Dr. Montessori's ideas may never become obsolete.

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### **Web-based Resources**

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