

# Madam Montessori

## Fifty years after her death, innovative Italian educator Maria Montessori still gets high marks

- By Nancy Shute
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Six-year-old Shari and her 5-year-old classmate Ugochi are adding 1,756 and 1,268. They've penciled the numbers neatly into their notebooks, but the method they're using to come up with the answer—3,024—isn't something you'd see in most American schools, let alone kindergartens. Each little girl loads a wooden tray with gold beads. Sprawled on a mat on the floor, they combine six of Shari's beads and eight of Ugochi's. "Nine units, ten units!" Ugochi counts triumphantly. With that, she scoops up ten beads and skips across the room to a cabinet, where she trades them in for a "10 bar"—ten beads wired together. Now the girls count in unison: "five 10s, six 10s, seven, eight, nine, ten 10s!" Then, pigtailed flying, they run to trade in the 10s for a 100.

The 21 other children in the class at the public Matthew Henson Elementary School in Landover, Maryland, seem equally energetic as they follow their own independent agendas. Five-year-old Taiwo lays out wooden letters that spell "May is back. I am happy." Nearby, two 4-year-old boys stack pink blocks, watch them topple, then stack them again, this time with the larger ones on the bottom. A 3-year-old uses a cotton swab to polish a tiny silver pitcher—a task that refines motor skills—while a 5-year-old gets herself a bowl of cereal, eats it at the snack table, then cleans up everything.

Nearly a century ago, a young Italian physician imagined that children would learn better in a classroom like this one—a place where they could choose among lessons carefully designed to encourage their development. Since then, the views of Maria Montessori, who died 50 years ago this year, have met with both worldwide acclaim and yawning indifference. Her method, which she developed with the children of Rome's worst slum, is now more commonly applied to the oft-pampered offspring of the well-heeled. Montessorians embrace Maria and her ideology with a fervor that often borders on the cultlike, while critics say Montessori classes are either too lax and individualized or, paradoxically, too rigidly structured. “

Her ideas were so radical,” says Mary Hayes, general secretary of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). “We're still trying to convince the world that this is the best way for children to grow.”

Teacher Rosemary Beam Alcott sits on the floor with Ugochi and Shari, who show her their notebooks. “Did you exchange your 10 ones for a 10 bar? Did you carry? Did you write it down? How many 100s do you have?”

“None,” Ugochi replies.

“That’s great!” says Alcott.

She turns to Taiwo. “May is back. I am happy. Me is flowers,” the child and teacher read together.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Alcott says. Taiwo giggles.

Back to the mathematicians. “Ugochi, please show me a 3 going in the right direction.” Ugochi erases, and writes again. “Good job! OK, put the beads away. I’m going to give you another problem.”

Back to Taiwo, whose letters now read, “May is back. I am happy the flowers smell good.”

“Wow!” exclaims Alcott. “What a wonderful story.”

Now a 5-year-old boy brings her his work. Using pieces from a wooden puzzle, he has traced the states around Texas on a piece of paper, colored them, copied labels and pasted them onto his new map. “Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico,” reads Alcott. “Very good!”

Montessori’s own life was fraught with conflict and controversy. Born in 1870, of genteel origins, she fought doggedly for the right to study medicine, becoming Italy’s first female physician. Yet she abandoned medicine to embrace education, a profession she had once scorned.

An outspoken advocate of women’s rights, for years she hid the fact that she was the mother of an illegitimate child. Little Mario was sent to a wet nurse in the country and later to boarding school. It wasn’t until he was 15, and Montessori’s own mother had died, that she publicly acknowledged her son and brought him to live with her.

Yet whatever her personal travails, Montessori’s educational vision has not only survived into a new century, it is thriving as never before. Many of her once-radical ideas— including the notions that children learn through hands-on activity, that the preschool years are a time of critical brain development and that parents should be partners in their children’s education—are now accepted wisdom. “She made a lasting contribution,” says David Elkind, professor of child development at Tufts University and author of *The Hurried Child*. “She recognized that there was an education particularly appropriate to young children, that it wasn’t just a smaller-sized second grade.”

Indeed, a half century after her death, Montessori methods are used increasingly in public schools like Henson, in Prince George’s County, Maryland, where 400 children are on a waiting list for Montessori classes. The county adopted Montessori in 1986 as part of a school desegregation program, and parents have fought hard to keep it.

Doris Woolridge, who has three daughters, including Shari, in Montessori classes at Henson, believes the system can hold its own, even in this era of increased emphasis on standardized exams. “To see a 5-year-old adding into the thousands—I’m just amazed,” says Woolridge, an

attorney for the District of Columbia. “I saw them working with the beads, and they learned so quickly.” Among other things, Woolridge approves of the Montessori idea of multiage classrooms. “The younger kids mimic the older kids,” she says, “and the older ones help lead the class.”

Perhaps none of Maria Montessori’s ideas sound as revolutionary now as they once did, but in her time she was a breaker of barriers. Born in the Italian province of Ancona, she grew up in a time when teaching was one of the few professions open to educated women. Her father, an accountant, urged her to take that path, but her mother supported Maria’s insistence, at age 12, that she attend a technical school to study mathematics. In her teens, Maria further tested her father’s patience by considering becoming an engineer. She gave that up only because she decided to be a doctor.

University officials finally surrendered to her persistence, but Maria’s fellow medical students shunned her, and she was allowed to perform dissections only at night, alone, because it was unthinkable that men and women would view a naked body together. In 1896, at age 25, Maria completed her medical degree. “So here I am: famous!” she wrote to a friend. “It is not very difficult, as you see. I am not famous because of my skill or my intelligence, but for my courage and indifference towards everything.”

Fame, however earned, had its privileges. Later that year, Montessori was asked to represent Italy at an international women’s congress in Berlin. The press swooned over the charming, bright-eyed young doctor who called for equal pay for women. “The little speech of Signorina Montessori,” wrote one Italian journalist, “with its musical cadence and the graceful gestures of her elegantly gloved hands, would have been a triumph even without her medical degree or her timely spirit of emancipation—the triumph of Italian feminine grace.”

Back home in Rome, Montessori began caring for private patients and doing research at the University of Rome’s psychiatric clinic. At the asylum, she came in contact with children labeled “deficient and insane,” though most were more likely autistic or retarded. Locked all day in barren rooms, they would scuffle over crumbs of bread on the floor. Observing them, Montessori realized that the children were starved not for food but for stimulation. That set her to reading widely, in philosophy, anthropology and educational theory. Mental deficiency, she decided, was often a pedagogical problem. Experimenting with various materials, she developed a sensory-rich environment, designing letters, beads and puzzles that children could manipulate, and simple tasks such as mat weaving that prepared them for more challenging ones. After working with Montessori for two years, some of the “deficient” children were able to read, write and pass standard public-school tests.

If retarded children could conquer such exams, Montessori wondered, what results would her methods have on normal youngsters in traditional classroom settings? She visited schools and found students “like butterflies mounted on pins,” she wrote, “fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired.” Montessori’s own barely formed vision combined Jean- Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy of the nobility of the child with a more pragmatic view that work—and through it the mastery of the child’s immediate environment—was the key to individual development.

To do that, she maintained, each child must be free to pursue what interests him most at his own pace but in a specially prepared environment. Montessori's chance to act on her philosophy came in 1906 when a group of real estate investors asked her to organize a program for the children in Rome's downtrodden San Lorenzo district so that the children, whose parents were off working all day, would not deface building walls. The investors gave Montessori a room in one of the buildings and 50 preschoolers, ages 2 to 6. Her medical colleagues were amazed that she would involve herself in something as mundane as day care, but Montessori was undeterred. She asked society women to contribute money for toys and materials and hired the daughter of the building's porter to assist her.

The Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House, opened January 6, 1907. At first, Montessori just observed. She noticed that the children came to prefer her teaching materials to toys and would spend hours putting wooden cylinders into holes or arranging cubes to build a tower. As they worked, they became calmer and happier. As the months passed, Montessori modified materials and added new activities, including gardening, gymnastics, making and serving lunch, and caring for pets and plants. Children who misbehaved were given nothing to do.

The children soon started asking Montessori to teach them to read and write. So she devised sandpaper letters that they could touch and trace, pronouncing the sounds as they did so. One day during recess, a 5-year-old boy cried excitedly, "I can write!" and wrote the word *mano*—hand—with chalk on the pavement. Other children began writing, too, and news of the miraculous 4- and 5-year-olds who taught themselves to write traveled quickly.

Acolytes from around the world flocked to Rome to sit at Montessori's knee, and soon Montessori schools were popping up in Switzerland, England, the United States, India, China, Mexico, Syria and New Zealand. Alexander Graham Bell, who had started his career as a teacher of the deaf, was fascinated by Montessori and in 1912 established a Montessori class in his Washington, D.C. home for his two grandchildren and a half-dozen neighborhood kids. A Montessori class, taught in a glass-walled classroom, would be one of the most popular exhibitions at the 1915 Panama–Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. But success proved more than even Montessori could handle. Though she had resigned her university chair to concentrate on the schools, she found herself overwhelmed by the demands for lectures, training and interviews. She complained bitterly about books describing her program and insisted that only she was qualified to train teachers. The fact that she had patented her teaching materials irked more than a few critics, one of whom decried the act as "sordid commercialism."

Other educators also raised questions. Most prominent among them was William Heard Kilpatrick, a disciple of John Dewey, who dismissed Montessori's methods as too formal and restrictive, failing to spark children's imaginations sufficiently. By the 1920s, interest in Montessori had waned in the United States.

A Montessori revival began in the late 1950s, led by Nancy Rambusch, a mother frustrated by the lack of choices for her children's education. After going to Europe for Montessori training, she started a school in Greenwich, Connecticut. Others followed. Today, there are some 5,000 Montessori schools in the United States, some affiliated with AMI, others with the American Montessori Society, founded by Rambusch. Some schools using Montessori methods are not

certified at all, and some that claim to use them do anything but. The little research that exists on the benefits of the method indicates that Montessori students do well in the long term, but more research is needed. “We have to verify that we’re in tune with brain development, and that our kids are prepared at all levels,” says Jonathan Wolff, a Montessori teacher and consultant in Encinitas, California.

Lilian Katz, professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of Illinois, says the criticisms of Montessori’s methods—obsession with the “correct” use of blocks and beads, the lack of emphasis on fantasy and creativity— are valid but don’t compromise the value of the program. “It’s pretty solid,” says Katz. “The strategies the teachers use are very clear. Children seem to respond well.”

With pinched budgets, little time for recess or music, and increased emphasis on standardized tests, these are tough times in education. But Maria Montessori’s legacy has never been more valued, even as it adapts to meet the needs of a new century. For some teachers, says Paul Epstein, head of the Chiaravalle Montessori School in Evanston, Illinois, “the materials have become the method. But you can do Montessori with a bucket of sticks and stones or any set of objects if you know the principles of learning.” Epstein’s middle school students don’t play with blocks. Instead, they’re doing something Maria never imagined, but doubtless would like. Last year, they ran the school’s snack bar, a hands-on task designed to help them with skills they will need as adults: common sense and time management. Says Epstein with a smile: “They’re learning to be entrepreneurs.”

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