

Maria Montessori, Who Gave Children Everywhere Freedom to Achieve Independence

by Jim Powell

What did inventor Alexander Graham Bell, philosopher Bertrand Russell, actor Cary Grant, actress Vanessa Redgrave, singer Bing Crosby, comedian Bob Hope, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and Britain's Princess Diana have in common? They all sent their children or grandchildren to schools inspired by Maria Montessori, the courageous woman who showed why freedom is absolutely essential for creativity and independence.

Despite sharp differences on political issues, people of every major culture and religion appreciate how Montessori schools set children free to learn. There are Montessori schools throughout Europe and the Americas. Montessori schools are well-established in India. There are Montessori schools in mainland China. They are in Russia. They are expanding fast in Japan. There's a Montessori school in remote Cambodia. Both Israel and the United Arab Emirates have Montessori schools. A Montessori school reportedly is being built in Somalia. Altogether, there are Montessori schools in 52 nations around the world.

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Montessori schools thrive because children and parents love them. More than 90 percent of U.S. Montessori teachers, for instance, are in private schools where revenue comes from parents voluntarily—not from bludgeoned taxpayers. By contrast, the major U.S. teachers' colleges, from Columbia on down, do their best to ignore Maria Montessori, treating her as a historical figure of little relevance now. Vast government teachers' unions are uneasy about the freedom in Montessori classrooms.

This has always been a maverick movement. Defying "progressive" educators who molded children to fit a collectivist vision, Maria Montessori declared that the purpose of education is to help individuals fulfill their destiny. She rebelled against regimented schooling and insisted that children must have freedom to grow. She showed that children learn mainly by teaching themselves, not by having teachers drum knowledge into passive heads. Montessori established that children begin learning practically from birth, and education—the right kind—could start offering benefits much sooner than had been thought.

"The fundamental principle," she wrote, "must be the liberty of the pupil;—such liberty as shall permit a development of

individual, spontaneous manifestations of the child's nature. If a new and scientific pedagogy is to arise from the study of the individual, such study must occupy itself with the observation of free children."

Montessori was a formidable presence when, in 1906, she began making epic discoveries about how children learn. "In her late thirties," wrote biographer Rita Kramer, "she was a somewhat portly figure, still handsome but putting on weight, still self-assured but a shade more dignified. She would come into a classroom wearing a simple but stylish dark-colored dress or shirtwaist, her dark hair piled neatly on top of her head, and smile at the children." She had a "smooth, unwrinkled face and bright, clear eyes . . . poise and serenity."

Montessori was born August 31, 1870, in Chiaravalle, Italy—the very year Italian states combined to form a new nation. Her father, Alessandro Montessori, was an official who managed the finances of a government-owned tobacco factory. Her mother, Renilde Stoppani, was the bookish daughter of a landed aristocrat.

When Maria was about five, Alessandro Montessori got a job as an accountant in Rome and moved the family there, so she would have access to a better education. She was encouraged to set her sights on teaching, since that was among the few professions available for women. Stubborn Maria, however, considered professions which were closed to women: first engineering, then biology and medicine. In 1896, she became Italy's first woman doctor, but she wasn't permitted to practice because it was unthinkable to have a woman examining a man's body.

Montessori accepted an appointment as assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic, University of Rome. This gave her an opportunity to observe "defectives"—children who, in modern parlance, were retarded, learning-disabled, or difficult for other reasons. These children were kept in crowded rooms without toys or much else to work with. As she observed them, she became convinced that their lives might be improved if they were treated more thought-

fully. Searching for ideas, she discovered the writings of Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin, French doctors who had spent their lives looking for better ways to educate such children.

In 1899, she spoke on the subject before a teachers' conference, and it caused quite a stir. She was invited to become a lecturer at the University of Rome and director of the new Orthophrenic School for "defective" children. For two years, 1899 to 1901, Montessori searched feverishly for teaching techniques that could help these children. She spent about 12 hours a day observing them, working with them, trying out various ideas. She visited institutions for "defective" children in London and Paris. Incredibly, the children she taught learned to read and write as well as ordinary children.

Then came the anguish and joy of her life that led to a new career helping children around the world. At the Orthophrenic School, she worked with a Dr. Giuseppe Montesano. One thing led to another, and they had an affair. She gave birth to a son, Mario. It appears that Dr. Montesano refused to marry her—he soon married another woman. Her mother was certainly horrified that scandal could destroy her daughter's career. Mario was sent to live with country cousins near Rome, and the whole business was hushed up. Biographer Kramer concluded that pregnancy as well as breaking up with Dr. Montesano must have occurred in 1901 when Maria suddenly resigned from the Orthophrenic School, dropped out of sight for about a year, and abandoned her successful work with "defective" children.

Imagine the anguish of this woman who was pressured to give up her own child, unable to share with him the benefits of her extraordinary insights that would help other people's children around the world. For more than a decade, she visited him periodically without identifying herself. He thought of her as a mysterious "beautiful lady." Not until after Maria's mother died in 1912 did Mario come live with her.

Meanwhile, Montessori transformed her grief into a new vision for her life—improving

education for normal children. She enrolled as a *student* at the University of Rome. She studied everything that might help her better understand how children learn. She took courses in psychology, anthropology, hygiene, and teaching. She visited elementary schools and noticed what teachers did and how children reacted. These schools had adopted the military-style method promoted in Prussia, the United States, and elsewhere: large numbers of students seated in rows before a teacher who instructed everyone at the same time. She reacted instinctively against the regimented teaching, the passivity of students, the system of rewards and punishments.

Casa dei Bambini

Montessori wrote magazine articles expressing her views, and one of them got the attention of Edouardo Talamo, an executive with a residential real-estate developer, the *Institutio Romano dei Beni Stabili*. Two of the firm's new apartment buildings were being vandalized by young children living there, whose parents were away at work. Talamo concluded it was in the self-interest of the firm to start a school within each building, so the children would have constructive things to do and be properly supervised. He asked Montessori for advice. This was no plum job, because the buildings were in the impoverished, squalid, violent San Lorenzo section of Rome.

She offered to take on the project herself, despite objections from friends who considered it demeaning for a doctor to be teaching young children. Instead of the usual school desks, Montessori acquired child-sized chairs and tables for 50 or more three- to six-year-olds. She brought along self-correcting instructional materials which she had created for "defective" children, to help them learn sorting, fitting things together, and other skills essential for independence. Her observations suggested the need for additional materials, and gradually her repertoire expanded. She found that children learned abstract concepts more readily when materials involved all of a

child's senses, touch as well as sight and sound. Known as *Casa dei Bambini*—"Children's House"—the school opened January 6, 1907.

The children were an unpromising lot—sullen, withdrawn, rebellious. Yet Montessori made a series of startling observations as she worked with them. She discovered children have a powerful, inborn desire to learn and to achieve independence. She saw how children learned spontaneously where they had enough freedom. They developed remarkable concentration on tasks that they chose. They preferred exploring real things—the world of grown-ups—rather than conventional toys. Classroom order was maintained without rewards and punishments when children were happily engaged. Children blossomed in an atmosphere of dignity, respect, and freedom.

Freedom, Not License

Although Montessori gave children considerable freedom, this didn't mean they could do anything they wanted. She insisted children conduct themselves properly and treat others with respect. "The first idea that the child must acquire," she wrote, "is that of the difference between *good* and *evil*; and the task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound *good* with *immobility*, and *evil* with *activity*, as often happens in the case of old-time discipline. And all this because our aim is to discipline *for activity*, *for work*, *for good*; not for *immobility*, not for *passivity*, not for *obedience*. . . . A room in which all the children move about usefully, intelligently, and voluntarily, without committing any rough or rude act, would seem to me a classroom very well disciplined indeed."

Montessori observed that children thrived when the teacher—whom she termed a "directress"—showed how to do something, then encouraged free exploration. She emphasized practical life skills to help children develop self-confidence and become more independent. Such skills included personal hygiene, putting materials

back where they belonged, cleaning the classroom, preparing meals, taking care of plants and pets.

Like most people, Montessori had assumed that children wouldn't be receptive to reading and writing until age six. But the young children in her classroom asked for instruction. She and her assistant made sets of script letters with markers enabling the children to tell which way was up. She devised exercises to help children learn the shapes and sounds of letters.

Within two months, she witnessed an explosion of writing. By Christmas, while government school children were still struggling with their letters, two of Montessori's children—four-year-olds—wrote holiday greetings to building owner Edouardo Talamo. Montessori reported triumphantly: "These were written upon note paper without blot or erasure, and the writing was adjudged equal to that which is obtained in the third elementary grade."

Contrary to prevailing doctrines, Montessori found that children best learned how to read after learning how to write. She prepared cards to label everyday objects, and she showed how to sound them out—the children already knew the sounds of individual letters. *Within days*, they were reading street signs, store signs, package labels, and just about everything else around them as well as books.

The Montessori Method

She began training teachers, opening more schools and writing books. Her first book was *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini*. In 1912, it appeared in English as *The Montessori Method* and became an American bestseller. She was no abstract philosopher like her contemporary John Dewey. Rather, she was a doer who provided a specific model to help children learn and achieve independence. Her book was translated into Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Polish, Romanian, Russian, and Spanish.

Montessori was a sensation. Aspiring



Maria Montessori (1870–1952)

teachers crossed the continent to be trained by her. In December 1913, she visited the United States where she met telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell, electrical genius Thomas Edison, social worker Jane Addams, and Helen Keller who, though blind and deaf, had made herself a remarkably cultivated woman. During the next four decades, Montessori traveled throughout Europe and Asia—she trained over a thousand teachers in India alone.

Although Montessori schools sprung up around the world, her influence waned after the initial publicity about the Casa dei Bambini. Concerned that her work was being oversimplified, she insisted on total control of teacher training and of Montessori materials, and this alienated many supporters. She encountered ferocious opposition from academics, especially in the United States. The most influential adversary was William Heard Kilpatrick, a "progressive" follower of John Dewey and professor at prestigious Columbia University Teachers College.

Montessori surely encountered opposition because she was a woman when school administrators and education professors were men. She was Catholic, which made a lot of Americans suspicious. Her academic training was as a medical doctor, not an educator. Finally, she was Italian. Americans had become disillusioned with President Woodrow Wilson's intervention in World War I, which failed to "make the world safe for democracy" as he had promised, and they turned inward, away from Italy and just about everything else European.

Maria and her son and his family left Italy in 1936 when fascist dictator Benito Mussolini imposed government control over schools. They settled in Amsterdam, then spent World War II in India and returned to Amsterdam afterwards, promoting her ideas every step of the way. Most famous student of an Amsterdam Montessori school: a Jewish girl named Anne Frank whose poignant diary was published after she died in Hitler's Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

While chatting with friends in Noordwijk aan Zee, a North Sea Village not far from the Hague, Maria Montessori suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died May 6, 1952. She was almost 82. Mario, who had become her training associate, was by her side. She considered her place wherever she happened to be, so she was buried at a Catholic church cemetery in Noordwijk.

When the obituary notices appeared, few Americans had any idea who she was. Rejecting failed "progressive" education and rooting around forgotten doctrines, though, some enterprising individuals rediscovered Montessori.

In Greenwich, Connecticut, a feisty, outspoken educator named Nancy McCormick Rambusch wasn't satisfied with the offerings from local schools. She had read about

how Montessori got great results giving children freedom to learn. Rambusch went to London for Montessori teacher training. Friends asked her to educate their children, and in 1958 she opened the Whitby School which sparked the American revival of Montessori.

Four years later, at Santa Monica (Calif.) Montessori School, former government school teacher Ruth Dresser led the revival on the West Coast—attracting celebrity parents like Robert Mitchum, Yul Brynner, Michael Douglas, Sarah Vaughn, and Cher.

Now there are 155 American schools accredited by Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the group established by Maria Montessori in 1929 to uphold her standards. Another 800 schools are accredited by the American Montessori Association (AMS) which, started by Rambusch in 1960, considers some variations appropriate for American culture. About 3,000 more schools call themselves "Montessori." In a dramatic turnabout, 200 government schools, embarrassed by revelations of their costly failures, have established "Montessori" programs.

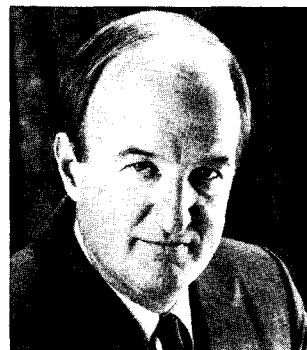
My own son, Justin, goes to The Montessori School (AMI, Wilton, Connecticut), which is a wonder. It goes through the sixth grade. Tuition is around \$5,000 versus the \$10,000 per student local government schools spend. Like Montessori schools everywhere, mine welcomes parent classroom observations—discouraged in local government schools. You can see for yourself how children thrive when they are free to move about. You can see the intense, joyous concentration of children who freely choose their work. You can see children teach themselves important skills with Montessori materials. You can see children gain independence with the liberating spirit of Maria Montessori. □



The Age of Confusion

“There’s a great deal of agreement among economists, contrary to what people may think.”

—Milton Friedman, interview
in *Reason*, June 1995



Is the economics profession moving toward consensus or away from it? In a recent interview in *Reason* magazine, Professor Friedman happily proclaims that most economists agree on certain fundamentals. “You won’t find much difference of opinion on the proposition that raising the minimum wage will cost jobs. You won’t find much difference of opinion on the desirability of free trade.”

I wish Professor Friedman were right, but unfortunately, I’m afraid the profession is moving further away from consensus toward an Age of Confusion. Judging from recent conflicting studies, they apparently can’t even agree on the evils of the minimum wage and protectionism.

Will increasing the minimum wage cost jobs? Economic theory asserts that if you raise the cost of labor, the demand for workers will decrease. Yet in a recent study of the minimum wage at fast-food restaurants in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, economists David Card and Alan Krueger claim just the opposite. Surprisingly, they conclude, “We find that the increase in the minimum wage increased employment.”¹ Both teach at Princeton University, and Professor Card was recently honored with the John Bates Clark Award for the most outstanding economist under the age of 40. The article has created a furor, however, with counter-studies questioning the reliability of the Card-Krueger data, which was based entirely on telephone interviews with

restaurant managers. A similar study based on actual payroll records contradicts the Card-Krueger conclusions.² Nevertheless, the Clinton administration’s support for an increase in the minimum wage is based in part on the controversial Card-Krueger study.

Academic economists are also taking pot shots at another sacred cow, the virtue of free trade. A recent work by Paul Bairoch, professor of economic history at the University of Geneva, claims that protectionism is not at all bad and in fact has generally had a positive impact on economic growth. After surveying the relationship between tariff rates and GDP data for industrial nations since 1846, he asserts that many industrial nations often suffered recessions when free trade was adopted and recovery when protectionism was imposed. Great Britain is the only major exception, he notes.³

The Flaw in Empirical Studies

The problem with these historical studies is not just the data, but the whole issue of linking one set of data with another. In logic, it’s known as the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Just because one observation occurs at the same time as another doesn’t necessarily mean one causes the other. It is sheer folly to isolate one factor among the complex mix of factors playing a role in economic activity. Correlation does not mean causation.

For example, several years ago, in the

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