

# A Tribute to Maria Montessori

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Plank, Emma: A Tribute to Maria Montessori. Childhood Education

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As I stopped at a bookstore window in Quebec this summer, Maria Montessori's book on her method caught my eye. It is more than forty years since it was first published; it got translated into many languages and inspired governments and individuals to concern themselves seriously with the problems and methods of early childhood education. Dr. Montessori's recent death gives us an occasion to pay our tribute to this unusual woman.

Montessori's life history epitomizes the rapid developments of the past century. Born in 1870 in Chiaravalle, Italy, she became the first woman to secure a medical degree from the University of Rome. She specialized in child development, worked as a lecturer in psychiatry, and before she reached thirty founded the Scuola Ortofrenica, a school for backward children. In 1907 a chain of Case dei Bambini (pre-school centers) was established in a slum district of Rome and she was put in charge. Finding schools in which the children were, as she put it, "rows of butterflies transfixed with pins", she introduced the ideas of individuality, activity, and independence into teaching of young children. Her writings covered methods of teaching pre-school and elementary school children and branched out into her general philosophy of education. Training courses in centers of learning in Europe, America, and India followed. Montessori did not get along with Fascism and since the early 'Thirties lived outside of Italy. She died in Noordwijk, Holland, on May 6, 1952.

Many of Montessori's ideas have become everyday tools for us in early childhood education. In some areas we have progressed way beyond her concepts. Besides, Maria Montessori's personality

did not endear ~~xx~~ her to American educators, who prefer a less dogmatic and sectarian approach. These may be reasons why during the last quarter of a century Montessori's books have not been considered, in America, as sources of progress in education. Still, there are areas in her prolific writing we could go back to and reexamine with new insights.

Let us take two examples, one from the pre-school and one from the school level, out of many possible examples which could show the potential fruitfulness of such a study:

Montessori's idea of organizing the nursery school environment in such a way that it <sup>re/</sup>produces the adult world on the children's scale could be used more vividly and really; for instance, we have since learned that the young child needs opportunities to dramatize family relationships. So each pre-school has a play corner, most of them including sinks and stoves. The only thing that is wrong with the beautiful scale imitation of a sink is that its main function, to provide water, is missing. In this way we lose the essential value of the sink - to mess around in soapy water and to clean and achieve something real at the same time.

At a time in educational philosophy when we have learned to recognize the need for instinctual gratification, we have to realize that at the same time we must provide opportunities for the sublimation of these drives; we have to help the child move into his next phase when he is ready for it.

This brings us our example from the school level. Montessori's observations and methods can give us new stimulation in the areas of the beginning of reading and the development of concepts of number. Since at present we approach the teaching of reading with visual methods, we rightly postpone it as long as possible

to allow for visual maturation. If all senses could be made part of the reading process, most five-year-olds would be ready for the beginnings. So far we have found Montessori's tactile approach to reading in remedial reading only. Could we not look at the teaching of reading and arithmetic in a prophylactic rather than in a remedial manner and get some suggestions from Montessori's description of sensitive periods and methods of teaching for it?

This reevaluation of parts of her contribution would seem to be the real tribute which we can pay to a great educator.

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*I think in "Childhood Education"*

