

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF**

### **MONTESSORI** **EDUCATION**

**Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952)**, the first ever woman to graduate from the University of Rome Medical School in 1896, was a medical doctor who became internationally renowned for her work in the education of young children.

From her early experiences working with children in asylums, she came to develop specific theories about the developmental needs of children, and applied them in educational settings. **Dr. Montessori's focus on the "whole child" led her to develop a very different sort of school from the traditional adult-centred classroom.** To emphasise this difference, she named her first school, which opened in 1907, the "Casa dei Bambini" or "Children's House". This name emphasised that the classroom was not the domain of the adults in charge, but rather it was a carefully prepared environment designed to facilitate the development of the children's independence and sense of personal empowerment. This was the children's community. They moved freely within it, selecting work that captured their interest, rather than participating in all-day lessons and projects selected by the teachers.

Montessori taught her teachers how to "**follow the child**" through careful observation, allowing each

child to reveal their strengths and weaknesses, interests and anxieties, and strategies that worked best to facilitate the development of the child's human potential.

Within a few years, the Montessori method had become very well established in Italy and Dr Montessori had become a public figure, spending her time researching, lecturing, writing, travelling and setting up schools and training centres. In 1934, after Mussolini forced her schools to close, she moved her headquarters to Barcelona in Spain. After this, she supervised training courses in Spain, England, the Netherlands and India where she became interned during the Second World War. She became a permanent resident of Amsterdam after the Spanish Civil War began in 1936. It was in the Netherlands that she established the Association Montessori Internationale, the objects of which were to propagate, maintain and further the rights of the child in society. Maria Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949 and 1950. She died in Noerdwijk, the Netherlands, in 1952.

### **What's different about Montessori?**

Dr Montessori believed that the goal of early childhood education should not be to fill the child with facts from a preselected course of studies, but rather to cultivate the child's own natural desire to learn. **She believed that real education**

comes from within oneself, and is not taught by any other person, and that a truly educated person continues learning long after the hours and years they spend in the classroom, because they are motivated from within by a natural curiosity and love for knowledge.

Therefore, **the Montessori method of education is designed to accommodate a child's natural desire to think and discover for him/herself (hence our motto "Help me to do it myself").** It is based on the **principles of respect and independence** where young children are respectfully regarded as full and complete individuals in their own right, capable of developing a meaningful degree of independence and self-discipline, in following their natural urge to learn and explore their environment.

Montessori is designed to help children discover and develop their own unique talents and possibilities. **Each child is treated as a unique individual learner. Children learn at their own pace, and learn in the ways that work best for them as individuals. This method teaches the child to *think*, not simply to memorise, feedback and forget.** Learning becomes its own reward, and each success fuels a desire to discover even more.

The objective is less to teach the child facts and concepts, but rather **to help them fall in love with the process of focusing their**

**complete attention on something and solving its riddle with enthusiasm and even joy.** The prepared environment of the Montessori class is a learning laboratory in which the child is allowed to explore, discover, and select their own work. The independence that the child gains is not only empowering on a social and emotional basis, but it is also intrinsically involved with helping the child become comfortable and confident in their ability to master the environment, ask questions, puzzle out the answer, and learn without needing to be spoon-fed by an adult.

The Montessori method of education believes that a **child between the ages of 2.6 and 6 years** is perceived to be in a particular phase of development characterised by increasing abilities to explore their environment. **Dr. Montessori described the young child's aptitude for learning as the "absorbent mind", where the young child literally "absorbs" information from the environment.** Young children touch and manipulate everything in their environment. In a sense, the mind is hand made, because through movement and touch, the child explores, manipulates, and builds up a storehouse of impressions about the physical world around her. **Children learn by doing,** and this requires movement and spontaneous investigation. Many exercises are designed to draw the child's attention to the sensory properties of objects within their environment:

size, shape, colour, texture, weight, smell, sound etc. Gradually the child learns to pay attention, seeing more clearly small details in the things around them. They have begun to observe and appreciate their environment. This is a key in helping the child discover how to learn.

Dr Montessori also identified times where she believed that children has special **“periods of sensitivity”** - a time space when the child’s attention is drawn to a certain element in the environment with an irresistible impulse and which passes when the need for it no longer exists. Hence, the Montessori classroom provides many specially designed materials to help the child benefit more fully from these **“sensitive periods”** by making available a great many things, which will attract the child at this particular time.

**Montessori Education emphasises ‘active learning’ and the process undertaken rather than the end product.** The learning environment reinforces the child's independence and urge towards self-development. This is achieved in three ways - beauty, order and accessibility. The Montessori materials are beautifully handcrafted and are displayed on low, open shelves. Each piece of material has a specific place and they are arranged in sequence from the simple to the more complex. It presents one concept at a time to the child and has a built-in 'control of error'. **The multi-age group fosters a sense of**

**community.** Peer teaching and modelling occurs and children have opportunities to be both the leader as well as the follower. **Responsibility, care and consideration for others, as well as for the environment, are all encouraged and fostered.** As they move through the program, the older child has the opportunity to develop leadership qualities, self-confidence and a sense of responsibility as he interacts with the younger children.

### **What does a Montessori classroom look like?**

In the Montessori classroom there are five main areas - practical life, sensorial, language, mathematics and culture.

**Practical Life activities** give the child opportunities to develop independence, co-ordination and concentration. The environment provides real situations for the children to take on the responsibility in caring for it, themselves and for others. Tasks seen in the child’s everyday life form the basis of these activities. Through doing exercises such as cleaning, buttoning, buckling, etc. and other daily life activities, the child develops eye-hand co-ordination, fine motor skills, self discipline and the ability to complete a cycle of activity and attempt other areas in the classroom.

**Sensorial activities** aid children in their exploration and understanding of the environment. Children learn

through seeing, touching, listening, tasting, smelling. This information needs to be classified and ordered within the mind of the child. The materials assist with this and through heightened awareness they take this knowledge back into the environment.

**Language** is used in the Montessori classroom in the broadest sense. For the child, it includes listening with understanding, encouraging conversation by recounting activities undertaken and learning that words are made up of sounds of letters. The desire for reading and writing occurs spontaneously.

**Mathematics** The complete range of maths apparatus takes the child from an initial understanding of the meaning of the numbers 1 to 10, to a comprehension of the decimal system and the four processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. All mathematical concepts are introduced with materials the child can feel, touch, manipulate and move around. The materials are designed to take the child from a physical concept of numbers through to an abstract level of understanding and maths.

**Cultural activities** include experiences with music, poetry, stories, artwork and items from the child's community, society and cultural background. The areas of geography, zoology and botany are all included in this area. A range of globes, puzzle maps and folders containing pictures from different countries and cultures all help to

give the child an insight into different cultures and countries.

Montessori education provides a stimulating environment, which helps to prepare the child for future learning and living. **The Montessori environment provides a balance of individual and group work, challenge and support, free choice and appropriate limits, independence and collaboration. It takes the whole child into consideration and helps the child move towards a real joy of learning and living.**