

"Scientific observation has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment." ~Maria Montessori

# MONTESSORI STORY

The first 100 years of Montessori in America  
and 50 years in Orange County

by Julian Draven

*T*welve toddlers turn their tiny faces towards their teacher as she settles down on the floor with a large, orange pumpkin. The children, sitting quietly and attentively in a semi-circle, watch with wonder as the adult cuts the top off the pumpkin to reveal the inside of the autumn gourd. "Can we touch it?" one boy asks. The teacher obliges by moving from child to child, letting them touch,

inspect and even smell. "It's stinky!" says one girl. During the examination, the children are polite and patient, waiting their turn with Zen-like calmness. Once satisfied that the toddlers have completed their sensory exploration, the teacher returns to her spot on the floor and pulls out the pumpkin's innards, setting them aside, as she begins the next phase of instruction.

Nobody is taking notes, none of the children

are worried which parts of the lesson will be on the next exam, and the teacher isn't reading from a government mandated curriculum. A different form of learning is taking place, an educational philosophy that revolutionized the way much of the world views childhood learning, a method that was created with scientific principles and study, a method that was first brought to America 100 years ago, the Montessori Method.

A young child works with the Small Bead Frame,  
learning math into the thousands.

Photo by Heike Larson at LePort Schools





**W**hat is the Montessori Method? In Orange County there are approximately 75 schools that use the Montessori name. To the uninitiated, Montessori might be mistaken for a religious or cultural affiliation. In actuality, Montessori is a term used to describe a method of teaching characterized by mixed-age classrooms and education based on human development. The Montessori philosophy respects the unique individuality of each child. Lindsay Journo, Vice-President, Academics, at LePort Schools, where the method is in use, notes that “it is a real commitment for a school to fully embrace the Montessori Method. Everything is carefully designed and \$20,000 in materials is required per classroom.” The attention to design and materials, however, are an integral component. “The materials are such that [they] allow the school to keep the philosophy of following the child as he progresses, and the same materials can be used for divergent age ranges, as the tasks become more advanced,” says Cornelia Lockitch, Montessori Curriculum Coordinator at LePort.

At the preschool level, the Montessori Method emphasizes learning through all five senses, not just through listening, watching, or reading. Children in Montessori classes learn at their own, individual pace and according to their own choice of activities from hundreds of possibilities. They are not required to sit and listen to a teacher talk to them as a group, but are engaged in individual or group activities of their own, with materials that have been introduced to them one-to-one by the teacher who knows what each child is ready to do. “Children are accountable for certain goals,” says Gina Maturan, co-director of IvyCrest Montessori, “the children are free to self-assign tasks, within clearly defined limits, allowing them to pursue their interests, while still having daily goals to help implement traditional learning for those who will go on to public schools.” Yet for the Montessori educated child, she says, “Learning is an exciting process of discovery, leading to concentration, motivation, self-discipline, self-confidence and a love of learning.”

This method of learning starkly contrasts the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a United States Act of Congress concerning the education

of children in public schools that was proposed by the administration of George W. Bush. The law, which was passed with bipartisan support, was designed to introduce national standards to a system in which students in some demographic groups were more likely to succeed and others likely to be left behind. Students must be tested annually in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and at least once in grades 10 through 12. Students must be tested in science in at least one grade in elementary, middle and high school. All students take the same test under the same conditions. Schools that don’t meet goals for their overall student bodies or specific categories of students are sanctioned.

Dr. Maria Montessori, the progenitor of the Montessori Method, might be appalled to discover that all children were expected to perform the same tasks at the same times and with the same level of proficiency. Dr. Montessori’s scientific research and study reinforced her philosophy that the individuality of a child should be respected and that each child should be allowed the freedom (within limits) to advance at a pace appropriate to their inclination and ability. Dr. Montessori observed that

## Maria’s Early Years: Activist, Delegate & Professor

August 31 - Maria Montessori is born in Chiaravalle, Ancona, Italy.

1870



1896

Maria serves as a delegate at the International Congress for Women’s Rights; her proposal for equal pay for equal work for women is adopted. Maria is appointed assistant doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic in the University of Rome.

Attends a feminist congress in London and speaks out against the exploitation of child labor.

1900



1904

The University of Rome appoints Maria as a lecturer in science and medicine, and she chairs the Department of Anthropology.





children go through various sensitive stages, in which they are very receptive to learning specific skills. During these “sensitive periods” children should have the freedom to pursue those activities of interest to them rather than being directed elsewhere. She stressed the importance of developing the senses between the ages of two and six—when the child naturally wishes to use and perfect his or her senses. Thus, the materials used by the children are designed for them to learn by seeing, touching, hearing, feeling and moving.

Lisa Siess, an AMI Montessori certified teacher at Primanti Montessori, has noticed an increase in enrollment in the Montessori schools “because of discouragement with public schools.” Siess states that she is “seeing students come in after first grade from public schools, which used to never happen.” After 25 years of working as a Montessori teacher, Siess has had the opportunity to see “parents bring back the siblings of children that she taught,” and, in one case, Siess “even had a former student bring in her own child. I can’t think of better evidence that the Montessori Method has a positive, lasting impact on a child’s life.”

## Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori was born in 1870 in Chiaravalle, Italy. As a young girl, the last thing she wanted was to be a teacher. Maria thought school was boring and she considered quitting so that she could become an actress. Luckily she stayed in school and, at the age of 13, attended an all-boy technical school in preparation for her dream of becoming an engineer. Defying the expectations of Italian society in the late 19th century, Maria Montessori was the first woman to graduate from the University of Rome La Sapienza Medical School, becoming the first female doctor in Italy.

During her last two years in school, Montessori studied children’s medicine (pediatrics) and developed a special interest in psychology, performing research at the psychiatric clinic of the university. In 1897, Dr. Montessori joined the staff at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome. She was troubled by the children she saw there. The more she studied the children, the more she became convinced that they could be helped. After much research and study, she came to the conclusion that the children belonged in schools, not

locked away in asylums.

Dr. Montessori’s interest in the children’s development led her into the one career she had not wanted—teaching. Her classroom was filled with objects to touch and hold. She believed that children should learn first with their senses, then with their minds. Using her methods, Dr. Montessori was able to teach the mentally challenged children to pass the same reading and writing tests given to “normal” children. Emboldened by her results, she couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if the same methods were used to teach children who were not mentally challenged. “Little by little,” she said, “I became convinced that similar methods applied to normal children would develop or set free their personality in a marvelous and surprising way.”

In 1907, Dr. Montessori was given the opportunity to put her educational theories into practice with the founding of Casa dei Bambini, a school in an extremely impoverished neighborhood of Rome. What ultimately became the Montessori Method of education developed there, based upon Montessori’s scientific observations of these children’s almost effortless ability to absorb

## The First American Montessori School Opens

January 6—Maria opens the first Casa dei Bambini in San Lorenzo, Italy.

1907



1911

Anne George, an American, goes to Rome to take Maria’s training course. The first American Montessori school opens in Tarrytown, New York. The Swiss and Italian public schools decide to use the Montessori Method as their standard system.

The Montessori American Committee is formed by Anne George, Sam McClure and Mr. & Mrs. Bell; they organize the first international training course in Rome. Maria’s book *The Montessori Method* is translated into English.

1912



1913

Maria visits the U.S. for the first time. Maria gives a lecture at Carnegie Hall. The Montessori American Committee becomes the Montessori Educational Association under the direction of Mabel Bell (Alexander Graham Bell’s wife) as president.





*Outdoor activity is an important part of the day.*

*Photo by Nick Martin*



*Montessori educational materials nurture the child's exploration and creativity.*

*Photo by Heike Larson*

knowledge from their surroundings, as well as their tireless interest in manipulating materials. Under her educational guidance, these children, living in slum-like conditions, were able to read and write by the age of four and five.

The superlative success of Maria Montessori's teaching methods astounded the public and interest in her educational practices spread like wildfire. By 1911, Italy and Switzerland had integrated the Montessori Method for all public schools. That same year the first American Montessori school was founded in Tarrytown, New York. In the years following, and for the rest of her life, Montessori dedicated herself to advancing her child-centered approach to education.

## The Method

The Montessori-prepared environment allows children to meet their needs through individual, spontaneous activities. The child's sensitivities guide his choice. To build concentration and self-discipline as they learn skills, the children work with scientifically selected materials. Their education is an active, rather than passive, process. The child educates himself.

In a Montessori environment, the teacher prepares and presents the material needed for the child to carry out his/her great work, and offers them to the child in the form of individual or small group presentations. Once an initial presentation or lesson has been given, the activities are freely chosen and frequently repeated according to a child's needs.

The Montessori classroom fascinates both children and their parents. Siess states that "Most of the true Montessori schools have observation rooms with two-way mirrors where parents and educators can watch the children's progress without interrupting the flow of the day's activities." Montessori classrooms are normally bright, warm and inviting, filled with plants, animals, art, music and books. There are interest centers filled with learning materials. These five areas are practical life, sensorial learning, math, language and geography/cultural. Each area includes intriguing, concrete, self-correcting materials which allow the child to work on his/her own, building self-confidence through competency.

Montessori classes are organized to encompass a three year age span, which allows younger students to experience the daily stimulation of older role

models, who in turn blossom in the responsibilities of leadership. Students not only learn with each other but also from each other. "The older children are able to act as mentors, building self-confidence as they journey through their three years of growth and learning," asserts Lindsay Journo. The multi-age classroom also allows the students to work at the pace which is most comfortable to their ability. If a 3-year-old is particularly advanced, he can work with the older children without feeling singled out.

Since the basis of the Montessori approach is the simple observation that children learn most effectively through direct experience and the process of investigation and discovery, days are not divided into fixed time periods for each subject. Instead, teachers call students together as they are ready for lessons individually or in small groups. Further, the age range of children in the same environment fosters cooperation and mutual help among the children. The opportunities for freedom of choice, movement and communication help develop inner discipline. The child's freedom to repeat an activity develops concentration, which Montessori says is the only true foundation for education.

## Beginnings of the Association Montessori Internationale



1922

*Maria is appointed a government inspector of schools in Italy.*

*The Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) is founded in Berlin, Germany.*

1929

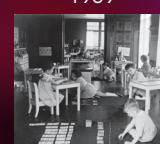


1935

*The AMI relocates to Amsterdam and continues to be headquartered there.*

*Maria flies to India to escape World War II (Mahatma Gandhi had visited the Casa dei Bambini in Rome).*

1939







**Sensorial materials help engage all of the child's developing senses.**  
 Photo by Gina Maturan at IvyCrest Montessori



**Lisa Siess observes as her student learns.**  
 Photo by Aza Voskanyan at Pramanji Montessori

## Montessori in Orange County

The first Montessori school in Orange County opened its doors in 1962 off Chapman Avenue in Fullerton. The school was named Clavis, and was the eighth Montessori school to be established in Southern California. Although there are approximately 75 private schools currently in Orange County that use the Montessori name, not all Montessori schools are created equally. In fact, the Montessori name is not trademarked and can, therefore, be used by any school to represent itself, even if the school does not actually follow any of the Montessori principles. "When searching for the right school for your children, be sure to research the curriculum and qualifications of the teachers," says Siess.

One of the educators at OC's first Montessori school was Ms. Qudsia Rowe. Qudsia and her family lived with Maria and Mario Montessori in India from 1939 to 1944. India was a British colony, and the Montessoris were placed under house arrest during World War II because they were Italian nationals. Ms. Rowe received first-hand experience with the Montessori Method from Dr. Montessori herself. After receiving teacher training from

Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in 1955 in New Delhi, Ms. Rowe received a scholarship to Boston College, where Tom Laughlin (the screen actor) recruited her to teach at the Montessori school that he opened in Santa Monica in 1959. Regarding the No Child Left Behind educational reform, Ms. Rowe says, "I don't think the gifted, like Edison, Steve Jobs, Einstein...they are not given enough support. No matter what, people who are talented, they can survive and overcome, but if they were given the support and assistance, what could they accomplish? They could change the world."

Lindsay Journo, whose passion for the Montessori philosophy is evident in her enthusiastic discourse, says that the interest in Montessori schools is "growing rapidly, with [at least] two new campuses opening in Irvine in the next year." Siess agrees that the OC Montessori community is expanding, but cautions parents to do their homework when choosing the right Montessori school for their children. "Not all Montessori schools are created equally," she says.

Perhaps if enough people were familiar with Maria Montessori and the success of her teaching methods, then there could be an educational revolution with real reform. Children could enjoy learning

and have the self-confidence to believe in the importance of their individuality, rather than spending nights and weekends cramming to pass arbitrary standardized tests. What greater gift could we give our children than a love of learning and classrooms that honored their beautiful uniqueness?

There have been many great minds and personalities to rise out of the Montessori educational system. Montessori alumni include such luminaries as: Prince Henry and Prince William, of the English Royal Family; Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Nobel Prize winner for Literature; and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the former first lady. Several world-class entertainers have also been Montessori children, such as: Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, George Clooney, Helen Hunt and Joshua Bell. And, naturally, the business and technology worlds have been the careers of choice for still other Montessori graduates, such as: Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com; Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the co-founders of Google; and Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia. There are numerous other outstanding individuals from around the world and right here in Orange County to benefit from the Montessori education, far too many, in fact, to enumerate in a single alumni listing.

## The Method Arrives in Orange County



1949

Maria addresses the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. She is nominated again for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Addresses the Eighth International Montessori Congress. She is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. France bestows Maria with the Cross of the Legion of Honor (France's highest honor).

1950



1951

Nominated a third time for the Nobel Peace Prize. Addresses a United Nations education conference in Florence, Italy.

May 6—Maria Montessori dies at the age of 81 in Noordwijk aan Zee, Holland.

1952



1962

First Montessori school opens in Orange County in Fullerton, Clavis Montessori.

