

Nobel laureates inspiring improvements in education

Section: Education

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Article translated from [Periódico Educación](#)

Rita Levi-Montalcini: Scientist, Compassionate, Brave, and Tireless

In life, and certainly in school, we often encounter situations that seem insurmountable. In those moments, it is important to have role models who can help us remember that everything is possible and that, even in the most adverse situations, courage, science, solidarity, and friendship can be our allies. In Rita Levi-Montalcini, Nobel Prize winner in Medicine in 1986, we find an example of all these qualities.

As a female scientist, she recalls in her memoirs that from a very young age, she was aware of having female role models like Sappho, Vittoria Colonna, and Gaspara Stampa, all of whom were poets, but she knew of no female scientists. Some people even used this to try to dissuade her from her dream of studying medicine. Luckily, this did not stop her, though it was not easy in 1930. She even gained the approval of her father, who initially was not very convinced. This allowed her not only to complete her studies successfully but also to graduate top of her class. As she says, with “dedication and determination to overcome obstacles, one can surpass difficulties others dare not face.”

After graduating in medicine, Rita began specializing in neurology and psychiatry, as her motivation from the beginning was to study the nervous system. She continued working at the university with her professor Giuseppe Levi, from whom she learned scientific rigor and methodology.

In 1938, her university research was interrupted by Mussolini's manifesto, which barred Jews from holding research positions. Rita did not give up and looked for different ways to continue practicing medicine, though she missed her life in the laboratory. With the onset of World War II, her challenges increased, but it was the friendship of Rodolfo Amprino that gave her strength when continuing on seemed nearly impossible.

"Don't give up, set up a laboratory and keep going. Remember Cajal and how, in the half-asleep town that Valencia must have been in the mid-19th century, he laid the foundations for what we know about the vertebrate nervous system."

And suddenly, Rodolfo became that kind of friendship everyone should have in school, [the kind that evidence shows benefits all students immensely.](#)

If we follow Rita Levi-Montalcini's example—ensuring no one is left behind for “not daring” and offering rigor and truth—schools must highlight women role models in science and provide a feminist education based on evidence and high expectations for both students and teachers.

Despite the challenging working conditions (home laboratories, having to move to different countries several times, difficulty obtaining the fertilized eggs she needed...), she never set aside her passion. Sharing information with other scientific communities in the most collaborative and egalitarian way allowed her to achieve so much.

In her book *In Praise of Imperfection*, Rita Levi highlights that throughout her life, she encountered thousands of people,

but perhaps only a hundred truly made an impact on her. Gender, status, profession, or age did not determine who became important in her life; rather, it was the quality of the interactions that stayed with her. Undoubtedly, one of these people was Stanley Cohen, with whom, after around 40 years of studies, her research achieved its best results. Together, they discovered the nerve growth factor, a breakthrough for which they shared the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1986. This colleague once told her, "Rita, you and I are good, but together we're wonderful." This motto is a powerful reminder of how friendship can help us prevent gender-based and all forms of violence.

With this step that brought her global recognition, she continued to demonstrate her solidarity, participating only in events with humanitarian purposes. She founded an organization that offered scholarships to African women to support their education, as learning, training, and keeping an active mind were, for her, essential throughout life. She lived by this philosophy until her last moment at the age of 103. As she would say:

"Keep your brain inspired and active; make it work, and it will never deteriorate."