

PSYCHOMOTOR AWARENESS AND HEALTH EMERGENCY. IN SEARCH OF THE BODY IN KINDERGARTEN, DURING COVID-19

CONSAPEVOLEZZE PSICOMOTORIE ED EMERGENZA SANITARIA. ALLA RICERCA DEL CORPO NELLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA, AI TEMPI DEL COVID-19

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Abstract¹

The Kindergarten School has got a key role to play in ensuring the overall training of children's personalities, promoting their cognitive, emotional, social and communication development, cognitive, and making them progressively autonomous, in implementation of *Long Life Learning* process. Psychomotor awareness and recent contributions of *Embodied Cognition* recognize the body, the game, the context as preferentially selected tools in order to promote education and development in such an "absorptive" age group as children, in body, cognitive and emotional terms. The current health emergency has severely undermined the educational and inclusive possibilities of this level of education and it is necessary for schools, in the current emergency situation, to develop training measures that, starting with their awareness of the role of the body, emotions and context, aim at achieving *bio-psycho-social well-being* (WHO, 2011).

It is also essential to consider what elements can be transferred to teaching, in the dual possibility of a teaching in the presence, transformed by the current emergency or of an undesirable but possible new distance education, LEAD "Distance educational relations for children" (Commission for Children Integrated System 0-6, 2020), in order to respond effectively to the changing and growing educational needs.

La Scuola dell'Infanzia svolge il fondamentale compito di provvedere alla formazione globale della personalità del bambino, promuovendone lo sviluppo cognitivo, emotivo, sociale, comunicativo, rendendolo progressivamente autonomo, in attuazione del processo di *Long Life Learning* (TRELLE, 2010). Le consapevolezze di matrice psicomotoria ed i recenti apporti dell'*Embodied Cognition* riconoscono il corpo, il gioco, il contesto quali strumenti privilegiati per promuovere il processo formativo e di sviluppo, in una fascia d'età così "assorbente" quale quella dell'infanzia, in termini corporei, cognitivi ed emotivi.

L'attuale emergenza sanitaria ha fortemente compromesso le possibilità educative ed inclusive di questo grado di istruzione ed è necessario che la scuola, nell'attuale situazione emergenziale, progetti un intervento formativo che, a partire dalle consapevolezze circa il ruolo del corpo, delle emozioni e del contesto miri al raggiungimento del benessere *bio-psico-sociale* (OMS, 2001). È indispensabile anche interrogarsi su quali siano gli elementi trasferibili alla didattica, nella duplice possibilità di una didattica in presenza, trasformata alla luce dell'emergenza o di una non auspicabile, ma possibile, nuova didattica a distanza, LEAD "Legami educativi a distanza" per l'infanzia (Commissione Infanzia Sistema Integrato 0-6, 2020), per rispondere in maniera efficace al mutato e crescente bisogno formativo.

Keywords

Corpo, didattica, inclusione, comunicazione aumentativa alternativa.
Body, teaching, inclusion, augmentative and alternative communication.

¹ *Valeria Minghelli specifically dealt with the design framework that outlines the research.

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1. Introduction

Kindergarten provides children with the opportunity to experience the first forms of learning, relationship and socialization within a formal educational environment. Although it is not yet compulsory to attend, to the Kindergarten is given the connotation of “formal educational institution”, in which the child is placed, not only in a different environment the one he comes from, but also and we will say, above all, in meaningful social relations with adults and peer groups, which will stimulate his ability to adapt, communicate, time-sharing, spaces and materials on a daily basis, while respecting new skills principles of civil and democratic coexistence (MIUR, 2012).

The programming documents of the *National Guidelines* (MIUR, 2012; 2018) guide the entire organization of content, spaces, times, activities, as well as the methodologies and strategies of intervention to be implemented, in the “high” and difficult task, which is still unrecognized, of ensuring the overall development of personality, in relation to the three dimensions of body, mind and emotion, already from this level of education, not yet mandatory and yet indispensable.

D.Lgs. 65/2017 explicitly states what reported so far, guaranteeing education, training, care, relationship and play opportunities «to girls and boys, from birth to six years of age, to develop relationship potential, autonomy, creativity, learning, in an appropriate emotional, playful and cognitive environment». A tight network of relationships, contacts and exchanges is established between the child and the world around him, in which the body, as a «medium of knowledge and communication with itself, with others and with the environment» (Sibilio, 2002, p.23), is the privileged element in establishing such relationships. The play-motor activity promotes the development of the child’s various potential: body-functional, cognitive, emotional, and social.

In the age group between three and six, children are exposed to a wealth of experience and knowledge, the new social environment is an opportunity for communication exchanges that require and involve continuous skills upgrading, increased lexical inventory and a permanent comparison with new situations that trigger *problem solving*.

Experience of material sharing, conflict resolution and rule-making introduce the child into a playful-real micro-context, that works as a prediction of all future experiences. If the child is able to acquire the skills needed to “survive” and for the “well-being” in a peer micro-environment, governed by hetero-imposed and more endogenous rules, the skills acquired will be a valuable asset from the perspective of *Long Life Learning* (Ass. TREELE, 2010).

If, in addition to the arduous and noble task facing infant schools (including nursery), we consider their inclusive potential, in an age group where the child is so easily shaped, it is clear that school can and must work hard on this, giving to all children the opportunity to share and grow and an effective response to the needs of esteem, belonging to a group, to the greatest need for self-determination (Maslow, 1973), to which each subject tends in his or her individual *life plan* (L. 328/2000; D.Lgs. 66/2017; Giaconi, 2015).

The playful approach provides for the possibility of staying long in an learning environment, structured *ad hoc*, with a relaxed time and a welcoming space (MIUR, 2012), opportunities for social exchange and interaction, continued *problem-solving* stimulations in which children are immersed and, as a result, developing adaptive functions that are increasingly effective in achieving personal and social autonomy, give the kindergarten, the task of pursuing the ultimate goal of all inclusive perspectives promoted by legislation: achieving bio-psycho-social well-being (WHO, 2001). So what happens to children and teachers themselves, in view of a health emergency that has affected everyone, regardless of their clinical, socio-cultural conditions, the difficulties ascribable to the most varied areas of special educational needs? What happens if there is any lack of space? What happens if the structured reassuring container, made up of flexible spaces, games and toys, which were the subject of sharing and a vehicle for the most exciting adventures, is missing?

What happens to children, without their bodies coming close, without understanding the mood, the limits of their own body, the glances that are woven on complicity, reinforcements and emotions? What happens “without the body”?

It is necessary to consider the possibilities for action, with a dual perspective of “presence”

and “distance” with the hope/commitment that the fundamental educational and inclusive project on this educational level will not be abruptly interrupted.

Kindergarten will not yet be compulsory, but its responsibility in shaping the emotional, cognitive and relational structure of tomorrow’s citizens is undeniable. Now, in this pandemic emergency, more than ever.

2. Body, space and time: psychomotor awareness.

The proposals in the area of Montessori education (1952) already underlined the importance of sensory-physical activity investment in early childhood, in a global vision of the subjects in various areas of development. Moreover, Piaget (1969) identified in the movement the birth and structuring of intelligence, understood as a form of dynamic adaptation of the individual to the environment, the *learning by doing* (Dewey, 1976), and again, the identification of *kinesthetic bodily intelligence*, among others, as a knowledge tool (Gardner, 1983), over time sown sprouts of new awareness around the “body” that have become real “shrubs” that have overturned the theoretical paradigms and educational/didactic and enabling practices.

The body becomes, with the multidisciplinary contributions coming from the theories on the game, an instrument of expression and understanding of one’s own and others’ emotions. «Sensory-physical pleasure is the evident expression of the unity of the child’s personality, because it creates the connection between bodily sensations and emotional tonic states» (Aucouturier et Al., p. 151). It assumes the characteristics of an “emotional body” (Sibilio, 2002) capable of «alternative, complementary or vicarious meanings» (Sibilio, 2012, p. 332) capable of expressing through non-verbal channels conscious and unconscious attitudes and intentions, within the teaching-learning process.

There are many references in scientific literature about the importance of favoring, especially in this particular educational level, an approach that encourages the child’s spontaneous initiative, including to place teaching/learning proposals within a more likely *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotskji, 1979), implicitly identified by the child’s choices. A model that engages children in performance tasks would prematurely confront them with competitive and defeated scenarios, with important consequences on their motivation to participate. These reflections are well translated into the educational, preventive and rehabilitation psychomotor practice of the Aucouturier model, in which the child exists primarily through the body in relation to the other, through action and play.

«Through play, the child models reality and models itself to the real, preparing for adult life» (Palumbo, 2016, p. 34). The expression “psychomotor expressivity” introduced by the Author, refers to this way of the child being in the world «in a unique and original way: it includes the sensory, tonic of mobility, affectivity, imaginary life, the intellectual development of the child and therefore the whole child» (Gomez Paloma, 2004, p. 291).

Moreover, the psychomotor approach gives a central role to the environment as an instrument of mediation for a spontaneous action. This specific element is particularly in line with the *bio-psycho-social* perspective of the *International Classification of Functioning*, ICF (WHO, 2001), now the main instrument of inclusive practices.

Psychomotor practice provides for a combination of «regularity, predictability and coherence-based time-space devices» (Gison et Al., 2012, p. 39), which constitute an element of reassurance for the child. The space/time organization provides for a time for reception, which is intended to take over and recognize the uniqueness of children; a time for play, a motor and symbolic sense, in which they perform expressive functions of meaning, symbolization and catharsis that move from a “recognized and loved” body in real and symbolic contexts, which are an opportunity for unique imaginative scenarios, a time for storytelling and/or representation that have the purpose of reworking, to a more conscious level, their own experience in relation to the games undertaken previously and to separate oneself from them. Construction, manipulation or design allows energy

to be incorporated into games, into a more refined activity, which continues to involve the body, this time in a creative action, helping to reduce tensions and the expressive production.

Psychomotor culture, over the years, has had multiple occasions of application in the educational and habilitation fields, and has, in turn, contributed to corroborate psycho-pedagogical theories around the body, mind, and emotion dimensions. These have found a new reason to be in the light of neuroscientific studies which, together with several disciplinary areas, are forming the skeleton of the latest *embodied cognition* approach (Damiani & Gomez Paloma, 2020).

Studies continue to demonstrate with scientific evidence the interaction between body, mind and emotion and the neurogenerative potential of structured learning processes considered these beliefs (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006; Gomez Paloma, 2010; D'Alessio & Minchillo, 2010; Damiani et Al. 2015; Wilson & Golonka, 2013; Revolver, 2012).

The interaction between body and emotional experiences helps to enrich the experiences, as well as thoughts and learning related to them (Oliverio, 2009). Neurosciences make it possible to say that attention is focused on emotionally relevant stimuli and this interaction allows for the storage of information (Chavez et Al., 2009).

It has been established that the development of brain structures and functions is affected by changes due to the experience that affect of the genetically determined characteristics of the central nervous system. These considerations place the role of primary social experiences in a completely new perspective (Muratori, 2008).

The identification of an “*spazio noi-centrico*”, continues the reflections of the subsequent studies on mirror neurons, «the creation of this shared space would be the result of this embodied simulation activity, defined [...] by the activity of *mirror neurons* that allow the mapping on the same nervous substrate of actions performed and observed, sensations and emotions personally experienced and observed in others» (Gallese, 2003; Gison et. Al., 2012, p. 10).

The *Embodied* approach argues that «the active body participation enables pupils to live the experience and feel deep emotions, intended as a reinforcing input, product of the total involvement of the person as a whole» (D'Anna & Gomez Paloma, 2019).

The need to recognize the body as an instrument and object of “welcome, recognition and inclusion” is felt, than ever before, and all the limits of training are already being revealed, which must be deprived of a fundamental dimension of education, even partially.

3. What childhood without a body? The need to see and care for everyone

Thinking about barriers only works in a constructive way, if it is used to understand how to reduce the impact of barriers and to identify a number of facilitations. The intention of this paragraph is to reflect, starting from the awareness of the psychomotor approach and the *embodied* perspective, on the possibilities of maintaining what “in physical or virtual distance” can be a more effective means of involvement and inclusion of children “all” and reassurance for families, giving them back the image of a kindergarten that responds to the needs of children, of educational “care”, of cognitive, psychophysical and social development.

The references to psychomotor practice and to awareness of the *incarnate reality* pursue the conviction that, in the current health situation, it is essential to take into account the contributions of scientific literature which have been synthesized so far in order to identify good practices (imagined or already applied), based on certain “elements”, that allow them to be interpreted equally or differently, even respecting physical and never social distance. An opportunity to address the risk of further prolonged deprivation is in the suggestions developed by the Commission for the Integrated Education and Training System, which turn the acronym DAD, “*Didattica a Distanza*”, into LEAD “*Legami Educativi a Distanza*”, for the age group 0-6, «because the educational aspect at this age is connected to the emotional and motivational relations» (Commission for Children Integrated System 0-6, 2020, p.2).

The ICF language gives context an essential role in the evolution of the difficulties that may or may not be attributed to a particular disease. So what happens to the context? What is left?

What are the strengths?

By didactic at distance, where this experience has occurred, children have had to give up their body as a whole, and, suddenly, games have given way to words, colors, sheets of paper; “adult-children” sitting in a two-dimensional logic from which scientific literature and programmatic, policy and regulatory documents suggest escaping (MIUR, 2012; 2018; 2019).

All this has had an important impact on their motivation to learn and participate. What happened to children with disabilities? And above all what happened to them without the *ad hoc* structured space, the classmates, without the patterns of action identified in the relationship with the adult and translated into the one with the classmates? It is an inalienable ethical, moral and deontological duty to ask oneself all the questions necessary to understand how to ensure that that virtuous relationship is not interrupted, that the body continues to play its part and that emotions are driven by participation and learning.

Feelings of self-efficacy, replacing absence, will be the place for children’s words, their narratives, their interests that become an opportunity to continue to investigate “emerging skills” (Gison et Al., 2012) to recognize and send back to the parent.

The body lacks the dimensions of freedom, self-perception, and *inter-subjective proximity* (Gallese, 2014), but it remains a significant body (Nicolodi, 2020) able to continue to express itself and “listen” to the narratives of other bodies.

This is an opportunity to demonstrate the irreplaceable “presence” of an educator who is responsible for mediating the relationship between peers and the inclusion of different needs. It is now time for the kindergarten to “play the game”, on its possibilities, not just already and not only, to respond to the educational and caring task, as regards the role of guarantor of an educational process, otherwise inevitably suspended. The distancing process may affect the physical body, but it may not affect the *significant body*, creator and sign-carrier and meaning in the relationship. A body that, as Nicolodi (2020) states, still needs to feel “good, loved, desired”. The child, though physically distanced by implicit fears and not by legislation, still needs to be looked at, seen, recognized, empathically understood and welcomed, and needs that positive mirroring that returns an image of power to his actions (Nicolodi, 1992): all possibilities that are fortunately compatible even in the distance.

It is also necessary, considering the pressing health emergency, think in the event of a new LEAD, on which basic principles of the school in the presence can and should be kept. The containers of “space” and “time” and the theme of “transformative action on reality”, that emphasizes the power of action and “self-determination” of the child, which, this time, can be translated into laboratories, scientific production experiments in which, from the use of several elements, we will be able to produce a concrete new final element (a cake, a cookie that can be shared in the family) or in graphic-expressive or manipulative laboratories. This is essential because, in cancelling the external dimension of the child and therefore in the self-determination of the child in the social context, time is diluted, not just for children, so creating an object that remains, giving tangible evidence of what has been done, learned and shared, in a time and space defined and real, means affirming one’s own ability to act, interact and exist itself.

The need for individualization and personalization is also of relevant importance, above all at a distance, where the sense of efficacy that is given back to the child enjoys the resonance of the implicit return back to the family.

Therefore, the importance of dialogue with the family, for everyone and especially for the child with disabilities, also becomes necessary to propose a multitude of approaches, starting from the resources and needs of the family system, from the areas of interest and competence of the individual child, to move within its specific ZSP, relying on its own special interests.

It might be useful to propose an activity in several ways and ask the parent which of those proposals had the most effectiveness and emotional and participatory resonance and pursue that path. Such an approach becomes an opportunity to implement the continuity of school-family life, which could and should be extended to the clinical field as well; this would certainly give rise to a coherent approach from the three different and similarly fundamental contexts. This seems to us to

be a way of collecting the emerging educational needs of the moment and of translating it into an effective response, capable both of acting directly on the contingent situation and of “re-launching” an educational challenge which, even in emergency situations, can become a resource.

Space, a variable of absolute importance in the programmatic, psychopedagogical considerations proper to the psychomotor and the *embodied* environment, is “lacked”, has dissolved to be redefined in the current situation, to the disadvantage of that space of sharing “noicentric” shared with others, the social space, far from mental, indispensable for the relationship to re-define perspectives. «Recent evidence from the neuroscientific field and conceptual reflections of *embodied cognition* contribute to the enrichment of the framework of the theme of relational dynamics and educational relationship» (Vanacore & Gomez Paloma, 2019, p. 152). Space takes on even more the double connotation of “physical environment” and “social environment” in which relational dynamics are strongly connected to the assumption of a point in space.

Continuing on the elements of the psychomotor practice that, while in the distance, can and must continue to work, or rather implement its own effectiveness, “time” can become a stable and reassuring “container”. Remember the importance of offering stability through the establishment of routine events, also recommended by the *National Guidelines* (2012), which the child can wait to “prepare his heart” (Antoine de Saint-Exupery, trad. 2015).

It is important to reflect on how this strategy would be facilitated in distance learning, in a scenario of a new *lockdown*, it would be desirable to provide for moments of sharing with classmates, organized according to routine, in order to allow the family context to “accommodate” to better defined and less invasive demands from school, «adherence to family routines has been identified as important for family resilience during periods of crisis» (Black & Lobo, 2008); to create “the expectation” in which the child may feel desired and can at the same time desire his or her classmates and teachers.

The identification of a “dedicated space” could also lead to a progressive acquisition of autonomy. Indeed, one of the roles of the routine is to make the child enable to autonomously acting within a known time and space.

“Classmates” have the ability to establish themselves as social and relational, emotional interlocutors, also as effective models in a dimension of implicit peer-tutoring which is specific to inclusive dynamics (Zambotti, 2015; Zappaterra, 2010). The *lockdown* has, in the distance, reduced the opportunities for comparison between peers, and has translated them into a virtual reality that is very ineffective in transferring awareness of the physical and emotional closeness of others.

In the distance learning of the previous *lockdown*, there has been a “loss” of this particular degree of education, especially for children with disabilities, without wanting to find fault, we will, in the future, have to activate strategies to continue the principles of inclusion. A strategy to “continue” the social structure that has been set up so far, even at a distance, could be a “tale” of the experiences lived so far, through audio, video and/or photographic material that narrates the salient episodes, describes classmates, illustrates their preferred activities, describes their characteristics and highlights the child’s effectiveness situations.

It should also be remembered that it is important to set up small inclusion groups to nurture the effectiveness of the child, first with privileged peers and then with others, for example, by identifying an effective activity, such as a little song to be repeated in groups, from which it would be possible to structure a routine in which the child can participate.

The role of emotions becomes a fundamental driver for everyone’s participation, in the absence of a physical space, takes up an emotional space that must be nourished by child’s research, affection, care, feedback and motivation. In this way, a multisensory stimulation would pursue various objectives related to the three dimensions we discussed at the beginning: *cognitive, emotional and social*. In addition to an emotional resonance for all children, in particular, in the case of children with disabilities as a result of this reflection, there is the idea that a “narrative” of classmates, kept alive by images, videos, can be a means of the concrete and emotional experiences that would otherwise risk being nullified in the absence of the concrete context.

Furthermore, this strategy would also be an opportunity for a positive narrative of the social

inclusion of one's child to the family of origin. A *scaffolding* that, for the transitive property, will move to the child, resulting in the possibility of enhancing inclusive actions at home. Finally, giving back images of the child's effectiveness, not only socially, but also in educational activities, would provide an opportunity to continue work considering the skills acquired, and to strengthen the positive responses through the construction of the child's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1996) and the perception of efficacy by the adult in the family context.

Moreover, it would be useful to give back to the child and the family, the image of a teacher who, at school and even at a distance, "sees" him, recognizes his potential, perceives his participation and effectiveness, and for him pursues the same life plan, which adapts to the new contingencies, but does not brutally interrupt the inclusive project.

Here, distance becomes an opportunity to share professionalism, materials, views, beyond any rhetoric. If these actions are translated into practice, the danger of rhetoric has already escaped. To the school is offered the opportunity to be the promoter of training and welcoming, communication and sharing, research and training.

The involvement of the family has to turn from a task to a resource: the possibility of transferring to the family the professionalism, the research capacity, the concern of the school, the shared concern that becomes a "pact" from which all the members involved put their respective competences, professionalism and possibilities into play.

Let this be the opportunity to grow, as happens after every great difficulty, taking advantage of the experience, to continue in a life project that no longer breaks apart, in the constant search for that true, real, effective, not perfect, but participated inclusion which the whole school, starting from nursery, must provide.

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