

## MARIA MONTESSORI'S OBSERVATIONAL METHOD BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

### IL METODO OSSERVATIVO DI MARIA MONTESSORI TRA TRADIZIONE E INNOVAZIONE

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#### Abstract

The ability to observe is an indispensable competence and educational resource to orient the intervention of the educator that, in the pedagogical domain, should be able to operate a synthesis between observation and educational action, between theory and pedagogical praxis. Maria Montessori was among the first scientists to consider observation as a fundamental "habit" for all professions related to education, especially to detect the factors of vulnerability and the barriers that inhibit the development of the child's potential. The objective of this paper is to reflect on the link between the observational method of the pedagogue from the Marche region of Italy and the paradigm of inclusion, specifically the ICF-CY.

La capacità di osservazione è una competenza e una risorsa educativa indispensabile ad orientare l'intervento dell'educatore che, in ambito pedagogico, dovrebbe essere in grado di operare una sintesi tra osservazione e azione educativa, tra teoria e prassi pedagogica. Maria Montessori è stata tra i primi studiosi a considerare l'osservazione come "abito" fondamentale per tutte le professioni legate all'educazione, soprattutto per rilevare i fattori di vulnerabilità e le barriere che ostacolano lo sviluppo delle potenzialità del bambino. L'obiettivo del presente lavoro, è quello di proporre una riflessione sul legame esistente tra il metodo osservativo della pedagogista marchigiana e il paradigma sotteso all'inclusione, nello specifico all'ICF-CY.

#### Keywords

Observation; inclusion; Montessori

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## 1. Suggestions from beyond the Alps

In the years when the magistrocentric, classist, authoritarian, and conservative vision of schooling was being challenged by the new schools movement and activism, in the direction of a pedagogical approach aimed at greater puerocentrism and making education the barycenter of social life (Traviglini, 2020; Cambi, 2003, 2014), in Maria Montessori's studies, original reflections emerged on the psychic development of the child and the enhancement of the child's talents in educational spaces that were in line with the natural childlike inclination to activity, play, and discovery. The value of experimentation, the centrality of work and doing, respect for individuality, and the structuring of the environment - cornerstones of American pragmatism - permeate Montessori's thinking and contribute to the definition of a new method of inquiry and research. According to the American philosopher and pedagogue Dewey

"it is not enough to insist on the necessity of experience, nor even on activity in experience. Everything depends on the quality of the experience that is made. [...] it follows that the central problem of an experience-based education is to choose the kind of present experiences that will live fruitfully and creatively in the experiences that follow" (Dewey, 2014, pp. 13-14).

The principle of the *continuity of experience*, which treasures past actions directing future ones, and the idea that it develops in a constant interaction with the person's living environment, leads to explore new horizons of education and educational and didactic practice that, in its new *progressive* guise, cannot ignore the centrality of the learner nor neglect the needs and interests that constitute the core of the educational relationship. The concept of freedom that, in parallel, is making its way, is not identified mistakenly with spontaneity or with the simple freedom of movement of the child, rather, with "the freedom to think, to desire, to make projects (Dewey, 2014, p. 52). At the same time, its full manifestation, demands an active participation of the educator who is given the responsibility to validate the general principle of education through experience and who is asked for the ability to identify the conditions that can, in the daily educational practice, facilitate the growth and development of each child in a school of *all and for all* (Dewey, 1969, 1971).

In the pedagogical experience of the doctor of Chiaravalle, it is possible to trace a continuity with Dewey's pedagogical, philosophical and social principles: the concepts of experience, education and freedom constitute the ground on which to build a *pedagogy of growth* (Honneger Fresco, 2017), promote healthy and harmonious development in childhood and make the child autonomous and free to act, choose and learn. Similarly, the suggestions derived from scientists on the "*education of the unteachable*" (Sandri, 2014; Mura, 2016) reinforce in her the idea of the centrality and educational value of the observational method that she considers necessary for the planning of paths that can allow the recovery of specific skills in children with severe cognitive deficits; a method that, in later years, she extends to all children since she recognizes the universal value and effectiveness of strategies and tools, to be employed not only in the reeducation of disadvantaged people (Tornar, 2007).

The experience conducted by the doctor Jean Mark Itard with little Victor, and the results obtained with other patients present in French psychiatric institutions, "testified

to the effectiveness of a scientific intervention procedure (i.e. based on careful observation of the relationship between educational stimulus and cognitive response) capable of modifying certain behaviors" (Caprara & Macchia, 2019, p. 28). Although the condition of "savage of Aveyeron" had severely compromised the linguistic and relational skills of the boy, the obvious improvements in his developmental path stimulate a reflection on the usefulness of rethinking educational models and training paths: Itard understood that "he was not a poor being without resources, but there was in him a spark of humanity sufficient to motivate an intervention able to seek his educability" (d'Alonzo, 2018, p. 10).

In the light also of Edoard Séguin's theories concerning the treatment of *idiotie* through a *physiological method* aimed at "mobilizing residual potential" (Mura, 2016, p. 51), Montessori declined in her pedagogical action the principles of education of the senses, of corporeality and movement, of which she recognized the educational and inclusive value in the educational treatment of "idiots" and inaugurated, with the institution of the Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica, a formative path for future teachers and educators centered on the valorization of sensory education and observation in educational environments with specific characteristics. The opportunity to personally deal with the education of children with intellectual disabilities allows her to learn new methods of special education and the effectiveness of pedagogical care, not only medical, in line with the reflections of the Belgian pedagogue Decroly for whom the use of *the medical-pedagogical Dossier* more than a medical importance, has the function of collecting as much information on the bio-psycho-social state of the person since - as Goussot writes - it is necessary "to know how to observe in order to know how to educate" (Goussot, 2015, p.132) by modifying the tools, methods and, above all, understanding well the pedagogical profile of each child, that is, his specific learning style.

Starting from these suggestions, to which an intense practical activity as a doctor and pedagogue is linked, Maria Montessori becomes an active protagonist and participant in the elaboration of her own method, which has in itself *dynamism* and *order*, two aspects that (according to the etymological origin of the term itself) delineate "a way of acting for a purpose and a way of functioning that produces something new with respect to the starting point - and that at the same time - appears as an ordered reality that gives order" (Triani, 2019, p. 260). In fact, her educational proposals and the method of observation, which is decisive in the field of special education, present the characteristics of dynamism and innovation, of order and precision, which characterize a methodological system that wants to define itself as rigid but not rigid, open and flexible to continuous redefinitions but, above all - as she herself defined it - "an aid so that the human personality can conquer its independence" (Montessori, 1955, p. 8).

## **2.Observation for and of the child**

In an Italian context still strongly tied to the *modus operandi* of experimental psychology, that is, to the idea that the study of the person could take place through quantitative tests that, in the Montessori perspective, left the educational methods untouched, concerned with detecting only certain aspects of the child's personality, the researcher reflects on the importance of a new method of observation. The merit of Itard and Séguin was that they employed, in their scientific investigation, means and instruments whose function was not only to collect data about the person, but to carry out real educational actions built on the basis of systematic observations of behavior whose educational purpose was to improve the quality of life of the person. Montessori's

intuition is to understand the strictly pedagogical character of the treatment of disability, to recognize the educational value of the observational method that forms the backdrop of the emerging Italian special pedagogy that is enriched by the contributions of Montesano and De Sanctis in whose writings, for example, "we find a method of observation that tends to capture the potential of the child [...] and aims to identify the strengths that can foster the development of skills and learning" (Goussot, 2019, p. 140).

The observational method, initially aimed at that part of 'degenerate' childhood encountered in the Roman psychiatric clinic (Mura, 2016, p. 80), becomes a constitutive element of the new pedagogical-didactic approach of the schools of the Roman periphery, with the aim of acting on the *person* and the *environment*. Observation, in fact, is to be understood as that path which implies on the part of the adult a greater care and a finer observation of the true needs of the child, that channel through which to detect the abilities and aptitudes of the child and, at the same time an opportunity to modify the context, nourishment for his absorbent mind (Montessori, 1952). *Pedagogy as a science*, which recognizes the incidence of biological heredity and the influence of the environment, identifies observational teaching based on direct experience as a priority, but

"If we wish to develop a scientific system of education, we must therefore strike out on a different road from that, which has been followed so far. Teachers must be trained and schools transformed at the same time. If we are to have teachers, trained in observation and experimentation, it is necessary that they should be able to carry out these activities in the school. A basic requirement for a scientific educational programme must therefore be a school that will permit a child to freely develop his own personal life. If a system of education is to rise from a study of the individual student, it will have to come about in this way, that is, from the observation of free children, who are watched and studied, but not repressed" (Montessori, 1999, p. 20).

The task of the adult, in the daily life of the family and of the school, is therefore that of "trying to observe those slight manifestations that demonstrate how the psychic life of the child develops immediately from birth and has already acquired a remarkable development from the first months of existence" (Montessori, 2000, p. 45), amazing at and treasuring his capacity as a "most profound observer" capable of absorbing images and above all actions.

Interest constitutes the driving force that impels the child to action and to encounter the other, but also that which directs the teacher and the educator in paying greater or lesser attention to the phenomenon observed, in detecting the impediments to participation and to a healthy and harmonious development. Observation, then, is transformed into a moment of authentic discovery of the child, of detection of his needs and interests, of free expression of his individuality; to support these natural inclinations implies for the teacher the need to withdraw "more and more into the shadows, limiting himself to preparing the ground for the children to work alone. "Our work - Montessori wrote - consists in indicating to the teacher when her intervention may be useless or even harmful: and we may call it «the method of non-intervention»" (Montessori, 2000b, p.114).

The method of observation and *non-intervention* is therefore "established by a single fundamental basis: the freedom of the students in their spontaneous manifestations. I began by arranging the environment and therefore the school furniture" (Lamparelli, 2008, p. 17). The observational moments become an opportunity for the educator both to detect the child's abilities and to promote a renewing and modifying action of the

environment, built as a home where everyone can feel free and at peace (Benetton, 2019). The space is set up with specific furnishings such as light and easily transportable wooden tables and chairs, washbasins with accessible countertops, low cupboards, blackboards on the walls, and materials for educating the senses, and is conceived as the dimension in which

*"the children's movement* from a state of order becomes more and more coordinated and perfect as the days go by; they learn to reflect on their actions. Now the observation of the way in which [they] act, passing from the first disordered movements to the spontaneous orchestrated ones, here is the teacher's book, here is the book that inspires her actions, the one in which she can only read and study to become a good educator" (Montessori, 2008, p. 30).

The *Children's House*, with its interior and exterior spaces, constitutes, therefore, a laboratory dimension of research and pedagogical experimentation with a double educational value: it is a place designed *for the child* and functional to his or her development, but it is also a potential environment of activity and observation *of the child* in a natural context, indispensable to the teacher-observer in order to promote itineraries of research and review, *in itinere*, of his or her own educational and didactic practice. The scientific-based method favors, therefore, the synthesis between observation and educational action, between theory and pedagogical practice (Tornar, 2007) and scientific observation becomes a means of learning for the child and a tool in the hands of the teacher-observer to improve and transform his or her actions. The pedagogical method of observation, which is inclusive for the child with disabilities and which *"treasures abnormality"* (Crispiani & Mazzetti, 2016, p. 308), now becomes the method for the participation and learning of all, capable of bringing back to the center of the educational and didactic action the holistic vision of the person; a method, which although born in the hive of special pedagogy, orients, enriches and outlines new horizons for teaching and confirms the originality of a *complex* and *current pedagogist* (Cives, 2004; Honegger, 2008).

### **3. Montessori and the role of observation in promoting inclusion**

In line with what has been expressed so far, Raniero Regni, in his book *Infanzia e società di Maria Montessori* (2007), considers Montessori's method precisely as an instrument of observation, "literally as a way of accessing the child's psyche" (Regni, 2007, p. 76). For the educator, observation, in the field of special needs, is positioned as a crucial element to know, therefore, both the person, who is at the center of educational care, and also the context in which they develop, interact, and move (Bortolotti & Sorzio, 2014).

The focus of inclusive education is on both the rights and potential of the child and the context (UNESCO, 2005). The construct of inclusion is a pedagogical concept that connects to the interpretive model of bio-psycho-social disability, a paradigm underlying the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health version for Children and Youth (ICF-CY, WHO, 2007) that invites us to remember how "an environmental factor can be a barrier either because of its presence (e.g., negative attitudes toward people with disabilities) or its absence (e.g., the unavailability of a needed service) (WHO, 2007, p.227). Also in the new Legislative Decrees No. 66/20217 and No. 96/2019, the importance of paying attention to contextual factors is emphasized, which, as already anticipated, positively or negatively influence the child's potential and participation in the educational context. In this scenario, the observation phase is fundamental in order to create an inclusive learning environment according to the logic

of a reasonable accommodation (Ianes, 2021) aimed at improving the performance of the child compared to his initial capacity.

In fact, from the point of view of educational continuity, in order to reconstruct the history of the person and record his or her current situation, it is important to organize educational-didactic interventions starting from the observation of developmental areas, also indicated in the new Interministerial Decree n. 189 / 2020, which are: the dimension of relationship, interaction and socialization; the dimension of communication and language; the dimension of autonomy and orientation; the cognitive, neuropsychological and learning dimension. Observation has precisely the objective of tracing any forecasts of change, development of skills and abilities that can be expected in periods of intervention of varying length, which will be designed and proposed following precise phases of observation. As can be seen, in daily educational practice, it is increasingly important, therefore, the use of systematic forms of detection (Bortolotti, 2014) involving the assumption by the educator of a way of working that requires an adequate methodological competence.

Maria Montessori is among the first scientists to consider observation as a fundamental "habit" for all professions related to education (Aureli & Perucchini, 2014) and, together with Sergi and the "Schools of Scientific Pedagogy," she committed herself to training teachers in the methodical observation of children by spreading "the idea of seeking, in scientifically guided observation, a source of renewal of education" (Montessori, 2013, ch. 1). Montessori, in order to implement accurate observation, suggests describing the child's behavior in a variety of situations, as also outlined in ICF-CY, in order to design an educational program with an appropriate assessment of the child's profile. In his work, specifically in the book "Self-education. In elementary schools" he argues that the ability to see the teacher must be exact and spiritual, as if he were a scientist or a saint. It is necessary, therefore, to adopt a shared and scientifically founded method in order to ensure systematic observation. The educator, in order "not to intervene at random or on the impetus of prejudices, should remain even on what does not seem interesting" (Montessori, 2013, ch. 1). Knowing how to observe, of which Maria Montessori speaks, corresponds to a self-reflective path that is not resolved with a preparation of a cultural type only (Pironi, 2007). The educator, in fact, should equip herself, through training and practice, with the ability to learn to observe without being invasive and at the same time monitoring herself, her own emotions, and her attitudes toward the behaviors noted.

The complexity of the act of observing, in the context of inclusive education, therefore, presupposes a set of knowledge and skills that are fundamental to the preparation of an observational project and to the related procedural choices of a systematic type represented by the motivation (why did I choose this objective of observation) and the definition of an objective (what am I observing); the identification of the age of the subject and the observation context (depending on the objective, it will be decided at what age and in what physical and social context to observe) and the choice of observation tools and procedures (what observation tools I use; when and for how long I observe) (Sansavini, 2017).

Maria Montessori's "eye guide" was the Biographical Chart, an anthropological observational tool designed in 1886 by Giuseppe Sergi (Bocci, 2016). The author in *First Steps in Scientific Pedagogy* identifies the biographical chart as a valuable document for each person to adopt longitudinally from preschool age onward, so that it becomes a document capable of guiding the individual in his or her own self-education (Pesci, 2003). Montessori used the biographical chart in order to detect the psychophysical development of the child, going beyond the evaluation of behavior. In this perspective, the term "observation" is declined in the pedagogical field and is connected to educational action, in which the role of the observer is aimed at improving the action of the educator with pedagogical-project objectives (Pironi, 2007). The scholar adopts a guide to psychological observations of the child that goes beyond the analytical

study of development and the adoption of adjectives such as good or bad (Montessori, 2013). Below is an excerpt from the guide to observing child conduct.

*Guide to psychological observations - Conduct*

- 1. note the state of order and disorder in the acts of the child*
- 2. notice whether in the order of the acts there are: crises of joy, states of serenity, manifestations of affectivity.*
- 3. note whether children take part in the activities of their peers (Montessori, 2013, ch. 3)*

Observation, therefore, has primarily descriptive purposes that promote change and can also have evaluative purposes of the child's abilities and skills. This stage does not correspond to a diagnosis or a label but allows for "an understanding of the characteristics of motor, cognitive, communication, language, social, and emotional skills" (Sansavini, 2017, p 74), which goes far beyond the biases associated with stigma conditions (Goffman, 1963). As suggested by Montessori and affirmed in the ICF-CY, the role of the observer must not, therefore, be evaluative in nature but reside in a broader reflection that contemplates individual-environment interaction.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Building on the reflections of the pioneers of special education, specifically Maria Montessori, as noted above, very often when there is a situation of disability or difficulty, the presence of a structured supportive environment with appropriate facilitators is helpful in facilitating the achievement of "unexpected" goals (Ianes et al, 2021). Specifically, barriers and facilitators can affect performance, which is defined as what the person is able to do with the influence of contextual factors. In this sense, the observational capacity gives an important framework to the educator, useful for identifying barriers and facilitators, in order to plan interventions and structure an environment that is as inclusive as possible, therefore aimed at ensuring the active participation of the child.

This paradigm can already be found in the works of Maria Montessori, who attributed an important role to observation and to child-environment interaction, especially during the early stages of development. According to Borghi (1995), "paying attention to the early stages of life means channeling future development in the best way and also means, in several cases, preventing possible risks" (Elia, 2014, p. 1). The detection of vulnerability factors and an early educational pathway is crucial precisely during sensitive periods when there is greater brain plasticity. The "absorbing mind" of which Montessori speaks is confined to spatial and temporal constraints related to specific areas of the child's brain. Sensitive periods are windows of opportunity designed to allow for greater adaptation to the environment and to stabilize brain connections, thereby consolidating knowledge. In this perspective, "the individual is not something small that increases, always retaining the same form ... but there are different types of psyche and mind in different periods of life"; "development is a succession of births. At a certain period of life, one psychic individuality ceases and another is born" (Montessori, 1970, p. 15).

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