THE INCLUSIVE POTENTIAL OF PSYCHOMOTOR PRACTICE

IL POTENZIALE INCLUSIVO DELLA PRATICA PSICOMOTORIA

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ABSTRACT

Psychomotricity has spread in the Italian school context, in the second half of the seventies, proposing itself as a discipline with individualized and personalized itineraries, oriented to develop the motor, relational and cognitive skills of children with disabilities, managing to carry on, since the first experimentation protocols, both the educational and therapeutic branches. In this scenario, psychomotor practice is proposed as an added value able to contribute to the improvement of the educational and training offer of schools and to enrich educational-didactic practices in an inclusive perspective. With this aim, the Municipality of Bologna has proposed, within kindergartens, the AGIO Project which proposes psychomotor activity paths within the training offer, to promote well-being and the prevention of social disadvantage. It was presented by Luisa Formenti and aims specifically to experiment with sensory-motor-perceptual patterns and fusional pleasure, to the development of creativity, and to the enhancement of body expressiveness, communication and symbolization skills.

La psicomotricità si è diffusa nel contesto scolastico italiano, nella seconda metà degli anni Settanta, proponendosi come disciplina con itinerari individualizzati e personalizzati, orientata a sviluppare le competenze motorie, relazionali e cognitive dei bambini con disabilità, riuscendo a portare avanti, sin dai primi protocolli di sperimentazione, sia il ramo educativo, che quello terapeutico. In questo scenario, la pratica psicomotoria si propone come valore aggiunto in grado di contribuire al miglioramento dell'offerta educativa e formativa delle scuole e ad arricchire le prassi educativo-didattiche in ottica inclusiva. Con questa finalità il Comune di Bologna ha proposto all'interno delle scuole dell'infanzia il Progetto AGIO, che propone percorsi di attività psicomotorie all'interno dell'offerta formativa, per favorire il benessere e la prevenzione dello svantaggio sociale. È stato presentato da Luisa Formenti, e mira nello specifico alla sperimentazione degli schemi senso-motorio-percettivi e del piacere fusionale, allo sviluppo della creatività, alla valorizzazione dell'espressività corporea, della capacità comunicativa e di simbolizzazione.

KEYWORDS
psychomotricity, child, inclusion, play, disability
psicomotricità, bambino, inclusione, gioco, disabilità

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Introduction

Psychomotricity was born in France, around the 60s of the last century, thanks to the contribution of Bernard Aucouturier and Andrè Lapierre (1975). It is a discipline with significant educational, therapeutic, and preventive potential, and bases its action on mind-body synergy, expressed through playful activity. Psychomotricity, through the observation and analysis of the game, manages to bring out the emotional and affective experience of the child, accompanying him in a process of psycho-affective maturation and self-awareness (Coco & Perciavalle, 2013). Through motor activity and play, psychomotor practice can work synergistically and harmoniously with emotions, affectivity, body's dimension, and intellect of the child. The key goals of this practice aim to achieve a global development of the infant's identity through the enhancement of motor, relational and cognitive skills, increasing awareness of one's own body and enhancing the communicative and expressive potential inherent in every child (Coco & Perciavalle, 2013). The historical-cultural horizons that characterized the evolution of the concept of physical education in the nineteenth century represent a cross-section of the important theorizations concerning the connections between body and mind (Eraldo & Comunello, 2011).

In the Italian context, in the ministerial programs of 1893, in fact, the term *gymnastics* is replaced by *physical education*, distancing itself from that military meaning that has, until then, characterized gymnastics in every order and grade of school, as a discipline that aims only at the enhancement and exaltation of the body understood as a perfect machine (De Panfilis, 1991). The historical evolution of studies that laid the foundations for the birth of psychomotricity is relatively recent. The first use of the term "psychomotor" can be traced back to around 1870 to explain and name the regions of the cerebral cortex close to the areas defined specifically motor, where it was assumed that the incorporation, still quite nebulous, between motor action and mental image took place (Coste, 1997). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the criticism of the gymnastic methods used at school is increasingly disruptive, both in Italy and in the rest of European countries. Supporter of a physical education characterized by the enhancement of the psychophysical well-being of the students and therefore in opposition to the military gymnastics of the time, is the Italian physiologist Angelo Mosso. The researcher has strongly criticized the military-type gymnastics of the time, and has promoted greater attention and consideration of the classroom setting. Angelo

Mosso and the French doctor Philippe Auguste Tissiè, reiterated the urgency of changing the vision of physical education as militaristic to embrace a more educational and scientific conception of the same (Russo, 2018).

This was the historic transition from *gymnastics* to *physical education*. The French physician deepened studies of numerous authors, of different disciplines, which matured in him the firm conviction that body and mind are strongly related. Tissiè thus began to design a protocol of educational and therapeutic intervention. In 1892 he had a young patient with *mental instability with morbid impulses* not attributable to any genetic pathology (Russo, 2018). Tissiè devised a specific protocol for the young patient, which included three weekly sessions, lasting one hour each, of therapeutic gymnastics. The therapeutic gymnastics protocol consisted of motor coordination, balance, jumping, rope exercises, running, boxing, and cycling. The progress was evident from the first sessions, in fact the boy increased self-esteem, reduced motor coordination disorders, and improved his character by being more controlled and less anxious. According to Tissiè, these improvements are to be understood as consequences of the therapeutic gymnastics protocol (Boscaini, 2020). Another important contribution to the historical evolution of psychomotricity came from the French psychiatrist Ernest Dupré; very relevant, in this regard, were his studies on the *Motor Debility Syndrome*, which demonstrated the intimate connection that binds neurological and psychological dysfunctions and how mind and movement are inseparable in taking charge of a patient. The psychiatrist defines motor debility as a deficiency that causes in the individual a dysfunction within the locomotor apparatus, thus opening the field to the study of the psychomotricity of the infant (Dupré, 1925).

The body-mind synergy was also supported and promoted in Frence by the physician and pedagogist Henry Wallon and by Edouard Guilmain, director of a special school. Wallon, in the first half of the '900, dedicated himself to the drafting of texts that demonstrate the intimate connection that binds the character to the movement (Russo, 2018). Wallon, in his *"The Origin of Character in the Child"* (1949), understands movement as a manifestation of the infant's emotionality and affectivity. Guilmain in his activity as director of the special school of Paris, also meets infants and young people with behavioral disorders. For this category of students, Guilmain structures a method for observation of motor skills and an educational and rehabilitative protocol, based on Wallon's theorizations and Dupré's writings (Russo, 2018).

The focus of Guilmain's studies and experiments is the relationship between mind, movement, and behavior. He tries to highlight the link between some characteristics of movement and between specific character traits, to theorize the synergies between movement's patterns and thought's patterns (Russo, 2018). Guilmain, therefore, designed a re-education and rehabilitation method, whose aims were to enhance muscle tone by working on posture, maintaining balance and facial expressions. One of the cornerstones of this method was to increase the relational sphere through play. The cardinal purpose of Guilman's re-educational method is to re-establish a control of thought over movement patterns (Boscaini, 2020). Between the forties and early seventies of the last century, an important contribution to the theorization of psychomotricity was given by the Spanish neuropsychiatrist Julian de Ajuriaguerra. The innovative potential of Ajuriaguerra's contribution lies in the changing view of infant disorder. While until then clinical studies had brought the mental disorders of children to identical conditions, in progress, those of adults, Ajuriaguerra, on the other hand, identifies the new category of psychomotor disorders of the infant, which include motor debility, psychomotor instability and the inability to plan the motor gesture, some tics and stuttering and motor stereotypies (Boscaini, 2020). Such psychomotor disorders also do not result from genetic pathologies. According to Ajuriaguerra, these disorders can vary in the same individual in characteristics, intensity and duration, because they are influenced by contextual and relational stimuli. Thanks to the precious and substantial contribution of Ajuriaguerra, the foundations are laid for the birth of contemporary psychomotor practice and for its diffusion in all European countries (Russo, 2018).

1. Corporeity and play in psychomotor practice

Psychomotricity has theoretical matrices that unfold in two different orientations: educational-habilitative and therapeutic-rehabilitative (Aucoututurier et al., 1986). In both orientations, psychomotor practice takes charge of the infant as a whole; expressiveness and communicative ability represent, in psychomotricity, his place in the world and his emotional and experiential experience (Aucoututurier et al., 1986). One of the founding principles of psychomotor practice is to enhance the child by allowing him, through proposals of free play alternating with others of structured play, to express and affirm his action in the educational space (Cristaldi & Pampanini, 2007). Psychomotor practice, through playful activity and bodily relationship, offers "*experiential conditions very close to the existential dimension in which it acts and lives*" (Vecchiato M, 2007).

Psychomotor observation, therefore, examines the discomforts and disorders, based on the meaning that the child attributes to them, as a manifestation of his unconscious experience and his dimension of emotional, affective, and relational life (Cristaldi and Pampanini, 2007). The movement thus becomes a tool to promote the harmonious and global development of the child. The French psychomotricist Jean Le Boulch defines playful activity as a resource to promote a global education of the infant's personality, in which to emphasize the bodily expressiveness experienced and agitated through play and in relations with the peer group (Barbieri & Peserico, 2004). Le Boulch in "L'éducation par le mouvement - La psychocinétique à l'âge scolaire" (1966) states that "*psychomotor education conditions every preschool and school learning that cannot be carried out successfully if the child has not become aware of his own body, lateralization, the ability to situate himself in space, the mastery of time and if he has not acquired sufficient skill and coordination of his gestures and movements*" (Aucoututurier et al., 1986). Rosati (1987, cited in Gomez Paloma, 2004) argues that an infant who plays, runs, jumps, experiences skills and develops skills necessary for his psychophysical development and fundamental for his autonomy.

Moving from the motor action in the playful context, a global well-being of the infant is promoted, which he will learn from direct experience, which will represent a field of continuous experimentation that will allow him to fully access the process of symbolization and to implement cognitive decentralization (Trucco Borgogno, 1988). Psychomotricity, to design itineraries adapted to the needs of each infant, makes use of fundamental tools such as free play, movement and body expressiveness (Ambrosini Et al., 1999; Cristaldi & Pampanini, 2007; Szanto-Feder, 2014). Mauro Vecchiato (2022) asserts that the key purpose of psychomotor intervention is to promote the spontaneous playful activity of the infant, so that he can gradually be able to fully experience the motor and sensory-perceptual schemes, to activate the process of symbolization, and to relate to the peer group, and, in this way, he can live experiences that promote a harmonious psychophysical development. It is important that the child is the fulcrum of this experience, that he learns to draw from his own resources, that he is able to freely express his innate potential, developing them in a constant and progressive way, encouraged in this path by the professionalism of the psychomotricist, who must guide him, without intervening, setting up the psychomotor setting with materials and tools that favor the learning and the process of autonomy of the child (Vecchiato, 2007).

The game in psychomotor practice represents the context in which the infant experiences and consolidates the first units of movement, enhances and increases the innate motor skills of the child, involving the little ones in fun, stimulating, but above all educational and didactic group activities. Active involvement and intrinsic motivation make infants always eager to play and experiment through body and movement. The playful activity, therefore, is an important engine of the intellectual, motor, and affective development of the infant (Trucco Borgogno, 1988). It is a precious medium that affects the totality of the individual involving the processes of attention, memory, and language, but also the emotional sphere and obviously motor skills (Coco & Perciavalle, 2007). It also allows the child to be able to choose the motor patterns most appropriate to environmental challenges, to develop coordination skills of their actions in response to those of others (Cottini, (2003). In psychomotor practice it is central to put the infant in the best conditions so that he can express himself freely through play, and it is also important to test the child by making him experiment with different forms of play, to make the game an important learning opportunity (Ambrosini et al., 2007). Specifically, in the first sessions of a psychomotor process it becomes a priority to allow the free expression of sensory-motor pleasure, with movement games that involve the use of materials present in the setting, for example if the child needs to externalize his internal tensions he can channel them by playing with the *Forms* (Coco & Perciavalle, 2013). During the meetings the psychomotor therapist will propose psychomotor activities to favor the process of symbolization, creativity and social games (Aucouturier et al., 1986; Vecchiato, 2007). The pleasure inherent in the playful activity of the infant in the first years of life is mainly related to the sensory and motor spheres. This first form of play is in fact called "sensorimotor", because the infant experiments through movement and the senses, crawling and rolling in the next space, throwing objects to catch the sound of falling and living the pleasure of waiting, putting objects and body parts in the mouth and manipulating, making noise, hiding his games and himself, They are part of types of sensorimotor play that favor a careful discovery of the environment and become learning opportunities. Sensorimotor pleasure, therefore, allows the infant to create a fully lived body scheme that will allow him, over time, to develop a positive image of himself (Coco & Perciavalle, 2013).

2. The design of psychomotor paths in the Italian school

Psychomotricity has spread in the Italian school context, in the second half of the twentieth century, proposing itself as a discipline with individualized and personalized itineraries, oriented to develop the motor, relational, and cognitive

skills of children with disabilities, managing to carry on, since the first experimental protocols, both the educational and therapeutic branches. (Formenti, 2017). In the educational context, these innovative protocols of observation and analysis of the game, individual and in groups, have involved, with enthusiasm and confidence, numerous teachers, who have chosen to experiment with these itineraries in some special schools in northern Italy that instructed pupils with intellectual disabilities. With the regulatory provisions in favor of people with disabilities, of the late sixties and seventies, there was in Italy, a historical-cultural evolution of special pedagogy, which culminated with the closure of special schools and differential classes and which provided for the integration of disabled pupils in "normal" classes, but with the presence of a *Support Teacher*, in 1977*, with the law n.517* (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, General Series n.224 of 18-08-1977). From the eighties of the last century to the present day, psychomotor practice supports teachers by providing them with educational and therapeutic intervention protocols, taking important steps in the field of inclusion both for students with social disadvantage and for those with disorders or disabilities. In this historical-cultural and normative context, the Italian school has made considerable efforts to promote a widespread legitimization of the rights of pupils with disabilities and the complementary delineation of the school integration process, with the aim of reducing the phenomenon of isolation and marginalization that the classrooms used for educational support activities ran the risk of depicting (Sturm, 2000). These classes, located within the school complex, were structured as laboratory ateliers, within which the support teachers proposed activities aimed at filling emergencies in the sphere of learning and stimulating creativity, in order to promote the fundamental process of integration of disabled students. (Formenti, 2017). In this historical-cultural horizon, in Italian schools it spreads the orientation of pedagogical activism and the pedagogical approach of *learning by doing by* John Dewey (1938), the *global method of Decroly,* (1975), the *tailor-made school* of Claparède (2022), the *vital impulse of the child of Ferrière (1931), the Montessori's method* of the homonymous pedagogue of Clairvaux (1909*), the method of free work for groups* of Cousinet (1952), and *the techniques of life of* Élise and Célestin Freinet, (1973).
In this cultural ferment, a school permeated by activism is increasingly affirmed, a school reality with laboratory classrooms that have innovated the school allowing to implement educational practice with different educational activities, based on the use of various means of expression such as painting, dance, music, dramatization, graphic arts. In the same historical context, were also born the first State schools that offered families the opportunity to choose *full-time*, in which different professional profiles collaborated in unison to promote the processes of

education and training of students. Specifically, *the law n.820 of 1971* (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, General Series n.261 of 14-10-1971) ordered that there be a continuous relationship of comparison and collaboration between teachers of the "normal" classes and those of the “integrative” classes, and that a position of tenured teacher for integrative activities was assigned for each "normal" class where this additional school activity was carried out. On the merits*, Article 1 of* the aforementioned law provides that "*the supplementary activities of the elementary school, as well as special teaching, with the aim of contributing to the enrichment of the pupil's training and to the start of the realization of the full-time school, will be carried out in additional hours to those constituting the normal school timetable, with specific task, by tenured elementary teachers*". This cultural ferment has already begun to mature in kindergartens, where a phase of experimentation has begun aimed at promoting and enhancing the different forms of communication of infants "*passing from a learning dimension on predetermined behavioral patterns, to a more autonomous and active dimension, which saw the child build his own growth by experimenting concretely in action, with the use of diversified materials within spaces modified according to its evolutionary needs, respecting its times and its methods of evolution*". (Formenti, 2017) Subsequently, many schools begin to mature the practice of open classes, taking advantage of all the environments of the school and abandoning the idea of the class inhabited and coordinated by a single teacher (Formenti, 2017). The birth of open classes was provided for by art. 4 of Decree of the President of the Republic n. 275 of 1999 (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, General Series n.186 of 10-08-1999 – Ordinary Supplement n. 152) which, in the context of didactic autonomy, recognizes the opportunity for schools to activate "*individualized educational paths, in compliance with the general principle of the integration of pupils in the class and in the group, also in relation to pupils in a situation of handicap according to the provisions of Law 5 February 1992, n. 104",* managing in the most appropriate way the groups of students who come from the same class or from different classes or from different years of course, with the aim of supporting and improving school activities, thus managing to achieve educational success in line with *"the aims and general objectives of the education system and with the need to improve the effectiveness of the process of teaching and learning* ".

Over the years, decentralized territorial classrooms have arisen in which students could, in the afternoon, practice various laboratory activities. In the decentralized classroom it was possible to create new connections between disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, thus allowing to enhance the psychoaffective dimension of the students, favoring their overall well-being. "*This is where teachers'*

*didactic-educational practices are implemented. It is a place that in pedagogy translates into scientific attention for space (Iori, 1996), environment (Gennari, 1997) and landscape (Regni, 2009): the places where education is inhabited by children, who (as stated in articles 20 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) have the right to the protection of their habits and to learn respect for the natural environment. The relationship between school and city/landscape is dialectical in nature and places the environment as a further and alternative scenario to the classroom, indeed it qualifies this as a "decentralized classroom", as Frabboni claims. The environment, adds the Emilian pedagogist, is one of the "gold coins in the backpack of teaching", the vast training field in which the educational-didactic action can be expressed in depth and extension to promote the range of multiple intelligences. Environment to be understood, therefore, as a book of knowledge, of culture, of sociality and of nature (Frabboni and Scurati, 2011, pp. 60-62)" (*Calvaruso, 2011). From the laboratory school we have reached, in a gradual process, as asserted by Luisa Formenti, the pedagogical conception of Frabboni in reference to the integrated training system, according to which, the school is linked, in an effective and efficient way, to the territory for responding to the educational needs of children and families, in the different stages of growth. In this scenario, as Giuseppe Trebisacce clarifies "*to overcome the risks of an enlarged or polycentric training system and at the same time to restore incisiveness and vigor to the educational action of the school and other subjects of training, could be useful a project of integrated training system based on a close and coordinated relationship between the intentionally educational agencies of the territory and aimed at a full and rational use of the resources present in it*" (Trebisacce, 2011). Finally, it becomes essential that the family, the school and local authorities establish, in agreement between them, an important synergy of educational and training intentions, which allows to promote an experiential evolution of the students, through the support of the territorial aid network, thus structuring decentralized classrooms, able to meet the educational and training needs of the community.

In the present scenario, innovations in services included classrooms located inside museums, playrooms, libraries and other places of interest and culture (Formenti, 2017). In this context, the *national law n. 285 of 28 August 1997* "*Provision for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence*" (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, General Series n.207 of 05-09-1997). In this context, originated the *Territorial Centers of Psychomotor Activity*, located within the contexts of state services dedicated to childhood, which, by structuring itineraries for the development of psychomotor, expressive, and relational skills and abilities

of infants, within a framework that provides an integrated vision of child development, stand as seats of education and training also for infants with disabilities (Formenti, 2017). The psychomotor practice moves and evolves from an incipit of merely therapeutic and rehabilitative intervention, intended only for infants with disabilities, to an educational and habilitative practice aimed at all children, disabled and not, oriented to favor and improve, making use of the essential use of the game, motor, cognitive and relational skills, also aiming at consolidating the basic prerequisites of school learning (Abrunzo et al., 2020). The historical-cultural evolution that has seen the transition from the concept of integration to that of inclusion, moved by the provisions of the *Declaration of Salamanca* (UNESCO, 1994), has favored an essential cultural and value transformation, especially evident in the educational context, as it promotes the well-being of all students and provides individualized and personalized interventions that take the form of taking charge of each student, disabled and not, with the aim of achieving educational success. In this scenario, psychomotor practice is proposed as an added value able to contribute to the improvement of the educational and training offer of schools and to enrich educational-didactic practices in an inclusive perspective. With this aim, the Municipality of Bologna has proposed within kindergartens the Project AGIO (Accoglienza - Gioco – Integrazione – Osservazione, Reception - Play - Integration - Observation), which proposes itineraries of psychomotor activities within the training offer, to promote well-being and the prevention of social disadvantage. It was presented by Luisa Formenti and aims specifically at experimenting with sensory-motor-perceptual schemes and fusional pleasure, the development of creativity, the enhancement of body expressiveness, communication capacity and symbolization. This project not only aims to increase the educational offer of kindergarten, but also constitutes a valuable training opportunity for the teachers themselves, regarding experimentation in the playful context, the dimension of education to corporeality and the development of relational dynamics with the peer group. (Formenti, 2017) Therefore, the inclusion of psychomotricity activities at school, contributes to the achievement of numerous objectives such as the enhancement of the self and self-esteem, the improvement of mind-body synergy, the development of relational skills through play, the ability to be part of a group and, by the psychomotricist, detect through the systematic observation of each child, any potentially dysfunctional situations (Formenti, 2017) . It becomes evident that psychomotor practice has inherent an inclusive potential that welcomes and satisfies the educational needs of each student.

Conclusions

The inclusive process has favored a profound cultural and value change of the school agency because it provides for the promotion of the strengths of each student and the shared care of the teaching team, of all students, disabled and not, placing itself as an essential step in the process of implementation of the psychomotor baggage of each student. In the present scenario, therefore, psychomotor practice is proposed as a valuable inclusive intervention project that, inserted in the curricula of schools, in particular of childhood, may be able to enrich the educational offer and promote good practices, in order to favor, from an ICF perspective (WHO, 2002), the bio-psycho-social well-being of all pupils (Abrunzo et al., 2020). Psychomotor practice in the school's context can make use of a multidisciplinary team, to count on a range of experts with different skills and distinct professional roles, particularly important in protocols aimed at children with disabilities; or it can disseminate its principles and experience its laboratory activities in training courses aimed at teachers, with the aim of enriching their professional background. The psychomotor project assumes a significant importance and, in the school's context, must include a structure that provides individualized and personalized paths, to promote not only the harmonious development of the child's skills, but, in a broader horizon, also the design of a truly inclusive school reality (Wille & Ambrosini, 2010).

The design of psychomotor itineraries within schools, using Dewey's principle of *learning by doing*, proposes laboratory activities for all students, regardless of the presence or absence of students with disabilities, but allowing everyone to be able to achieve the goals for the development of skills. The playful activity favors cooperation between children and the eventual resolution of conflicts in group dynamics, representing a valuable tool for weaving inclusive plots in the school context. In this vision it is appropriate to promote the development of group identity in psychomotricity paths to encourage the sharing of spaces, tools, and materials, to encourage mutual respect, educate to active listening and to the enhancement of the peculiarities of each one (Formenti, 2017). It is necessary to create a welcoming and inclusive setting, in which differences represent a wealth and an opportunity for growth for all children.

In conclusion, psychomotricity laboratories allow to remove any profile of marginalization and exclusion towards pupils with Special Educational Needs. Psychomotor practice, therefore, can contribute to improving the sense of self-efficacy of each student, can favor the development of the self, can enrich the process of symbolization and the ability to dramatization. Psychomotricity also makes use of a playful setting designed to promote body expression,

communication and relational skills and the early identification of risky situations (Eraldo & Comunello, 2011). The psychomotor practice laboratories are proposed as experiential training contexts for teachers, moving from the importance of experiencing the possibility of being able to "manage" and understand the spontaneous play of infants, to attribute a psychomotor meaning to the setting and materials, to promote education to corporeality and motor skills in a framework of expressive and communicative freedom of children and with the aim of achieving a harmonious psychoaffective development within a safe and structured setting (Formenti, 2017). The psychomotor practice, in conclusion, arises, as a precious vector of promotion, through playful activity, aiming at the design of routes, in the school's context, permeated by cooperation, altruism, respect for the rules, enhancement of differences and inclusion.

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