

Outdoor education in Maria Montessori's philosophy: a chance for inclusion?

L'educazione in natura nella filosofia di Maria Montessori: un'opportunità di inclusione?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we are going to present some of the revolutionary and brilliant proposals of Maria Montessori's educational approach, which, through its innovative use of space and movement still offers solutions to problems in our day and age. Montessori's ideas are explained in relation to environmental education in the context of child-nature interaction as well as the practices applied within the framework of these ideas; they are also essential to facilitate educational inclusion, as they promote a sensory based and a child centered learning approach.

In questo contributo verranno presentate alcune delle rivoluzionarie e brillanti proposte dell'approccio educativo di Maria Montessori che, attraverso l'uso innovativo dello spazio e del movimento, offrono ancora oggi spunti di riflessione per fronteggiare i problemi del nostro tempo. Centrale nell'analisi teorica presentata è l'invito a concepire l'incontro con la natura come un elemento sostanziale della proposta educativa, come strumento per facilitare l'inclusione educativa, grazie alla costante promozione di un apprendimento sensoriale e centrato sul bambino, nel rispetto dei suoi tempi e dei suoi interessi.

KEYWORDS

Montessori Children's House, Nature, Movement, Sensory approach, Inclusion.

Casa dei Bambini, Natura, Movimento, Approccio sensoriale, Inclusione.

* Paragraph 2 and conclusion are assigned to Vanessa Macchia

Introduction

Montessori fully understands that those who are educated can't remain passive, but they must interact with those who educate them in a relation that can never be static or merely conceptual but should be dynamic and integral. This integrity derives from a unitary conception of the human being, who is made up not solely of intelligence and spirit, but also of the body. The spirit is inseparably united to corporeity, which represents its learning tool, a source of concreteness, the basis for relationships and new discoveries. The positive interaction between spirit and body should be promoted in education, being reflected in a mutual reference between knowledge and experience. This will allow children to experiment that going to school is like learning to live and that staying in touch with nature, appreciating its beauty, capturing its colors and smells, is a school of life, always providing great opportunities to learn.

University teaching experience, together with careful observation of schools based on the method outlined in this article and the attention to the most recent studies on these issues, enable us to state that Montessori's educational method is anything but outdated. On the contrary, its prophetic and innovative character allows the method to anticipate times and to identify needs that have shown up only later on in their dramatic urgency.

It is up to us, to recover and adapt these insights to this day and age, radically overcoming the interpretation of education as rote learning and establishing a positive relationship between man and the environment and between individuals. This theoretical research starts in fact from the analysis of Montessori's words and comes to put them in relation with more modern reflections on these issues.

1. The constant discovery of the child through contact with nature

We are going to begin our analysis of movement as an educational tool in Montessori's approach starting from the relationship with nature, that becomes the essential space to be discovered, explored and move within freely. We could say that the child never stops working, if we refer to work as the constant spirit of detection in which s/he is engaged with, the discovery both of the world surrounding him and of himself, principally achieved through contact with nature.

According to Montessori, contact with nature should be completely inhabiting the encounter between the child and the external world, not confined to specific, structured activities. In this regard, in *The Discovery of the child* (1948), it's stated that the influence of nature has been considered too long as a tool to stimulate morality or to teach children a set of rules and procedures resulting from one another. On the contrary, in Montessori's approach, the child is absolutely encouraged to live in nature, enjoying everything revealed by the encounter with it. The expression "give the world to the child" is crucial in order to understand the proposal merged within cosmic education, revealing a very profound significance:

For a long time, it was thought that nature had only a moral influence on the education of a child. Efforts were made to develop a sensible response to the marvels of nature, to flowers, plants, animals, landscapes, winds and light. Later an attempt was made to interest a child in nature by giving him little plots of land to till. But the concept of living in nature is still more recent in a child's education. As a matter of fact, a child needs to live naturally and not simply have a knowledge of nature (Montessori 1972, p. 67).

The aim of putting children at the heart of the educational relationship, generated by a deep and pervasive respect for the individual, leads Montessori to imagine the sense of liberation and completeness of a kid when left free to run and find his personal contact with natural elements. However, this exposure requires a certain progression, not simply an impulsive action. In fact: «It would be too soon for us to say: Let the children be free; encourage them; let them run outside when it is raining; let them remove their shoes when they find a puddle of water; and, when the grass of the meadows is damp with dew, let them run on it and trample it with their bare feet; rest them rest peacefully when a tree invites them to sleep beneath its shade» (Montessori, 1972, p. 68).

Coming now to the present times, considering the characteristics of our schools and the increasingly complex tasks of teachers, the idea of also having to deal with the outside space, through the implementation of specific activities in the school garden or adjacent green spaces, may be scary. Probably, though, considering the explosive power of nature, we wouldn't need anything but living outside, allowing children to undertake work. The spaces used as vegetable gardens may contain, at the change of seasons as well as in the most complex moments of the school year, only a few flowers or medicinal herbs for the preparation of herbal tea. Nature will be the one providing insects, herbs, dry leaves, an opportunity for children to study and wonder (Richter, 2004). And, most likely, not only for them.

A very large variety of initiatives to be created and invented with children is connected to contact with nature. The exploration of nature, learning from it and finding inside it a reason for teaching and enrichment, makes it possible to develop a sense of respect and gratitude, practicing wonder and creativity. As Montessori underlines:

Work for a child must possess some variety within itself. A child does not have to know the reason for sowing or reaping to have his interest aroused. He will readily undertake very simple actions which have an immediate end or which permit him to use some special effort. He will, for example, gladly pluck weeds from paths or furrows, sweep up dried leaves, or carry away an old branch. In a word, to have a field of activity and occasions for new experiences and difficult enterprises bring satisfaction to the animating spirit which prompts a child to make its way in the world (Montessori, 1972, p. 74).

A key element in the contact with nature is the sensorial experience, today often limited or even shrunken because of increasingly scarce practice of the senses, or because of their superficial use, hurried, not friendly but only instrumental. In the relationship with nature, touch is far from being merely the use of external tools, it becomes the perception of the thick of things and of their existence, conversely often only supposed. View works out to grasp the details and marvel at the beauty and harmony of small things. Taste refines up to appreciate the delicate flavor of a medicinal herb, alongside stronger, or even violent flavors we are used to enjoy. Smell, nowadays almost totally neglected or abused by the exhaust gases of the city, learns to incorporate the nuances of the sweet fragrance of plants, distinguishing provenance with eyes closed.

A whole world unfolds when the senses are freed from the cage where we shut them away, so that attention to the senses becomes the beginning of a new life, when the child discovers previously unknown knowledge channels and approaches reality. In the Montessori method, the use of senses has its first and immediate application in the contact with nature, but it is not limited to this. So much

so that smell and even hearing are the basis of all didactical proposals, which involve continuous phases of movement and also tactile understanding of concepts (letters, grid numbers, numerical rods, three-dimensional geometric figures, bells for musical scales are just some of the copious examples).

2. Movement as practical life in outdoor space

For children, contact with nature, a true work practice activating knowledge, takes place in continuous movement. Montessori reminds us of the importance of motion not only inside the classroom, but also outside, in direct contact with the environment. She promotes an education steeped in natural elements, in their contemplation keeping alive the desire to understand their essence and expresses it clearly by inviting adults to indulge the instincts of children for running on the grass, taking off their shoes, lying under a tree. The mountain setting, for various reasons, naturally promotes this attitude. However, the openness toward experiences that can be offered to children in direct contact with nature, lies especially in a mind-set willing to experiment with natural elements such as water, sand, soil and devoted to bringing children outdoors daily. The proximity to nature is certainly an element that promotes those habits, but the harsh climate of the Alpine areas could hinder it. In Northern European countries, though, we often hear that “there is no bad weather but only unsuitable clothing”: if indeed children get used to wear suitable clothes, boots and rain jackets at school, the weather will almost always be suitable for children outdoor activities and experimentation.

The external environment, naturally promoting motion, teaches how to run, jump, slip, take and keep, all factors that psychomotricity studies consider fundamental for the process of development of healthy children. Observing the changes in the flow of seasons, experimenting with planting and harvest, following the insects and learning how to describe them, are all very important elements to stimulate reflection on the concepts of sustainability, ecology, environmental protection, hardly replaceable by educational projects and arbitrarily designed paths.

As seen in the case of the senses, movement, too, should not purely be considered instrumentally, as the mere ability to move around and reach things. Montessori believes it has also a relevant educational impact, being the possibility to inhabit the space, and not just to stay there or use it. By carefully reading Montessori’s writings, we clearly discover a number of invitations to movement, above all movement in the open air, a significant element of the educational proposal. This is not only connected to the materials and their path, but it is also and above all an invitation to live with children in nature whenever it is possible, with everything it entails: the use of outdoor space, building a vegetable garden, co-existence with pets. Reflecting on the concept of movement has been a fundamental pillar of Montessori’s work, enabling her to narrow her brilliant insights, activating a series of operational proposals which, after a careful process of experimentation and observation, converged in a concrete path. The organization of space invites to select activities for work; all materials must be managed with precise movements that involve the whole body: the pink tower, the brown scale, the rods must be transported, placed, ordered (think also about the lacing dressing frames or setting the tables).

The motto *mens sana in corpore sano* may also be interpreted in the light of a reversal of the two terms: the body feels better when the mind is engaged in

clever, sensible activities with a clear purpose and in a respectful and harmonious environment. «We can illustrate this by noting that work is a physical exercise in the service of the mind, and that, when a man works, his work indirectly assists in the circulation of the blood and respiration. A problem of health is, therefore, also a problem of work» (Montessori 1972, p. 78). This has certainly been the case for many children who have attended the first “Children’s House”¹, whose sanitary conditions were often far from favorable. Those children, regularly carrying out fulfilling, interesting and rewarding activities, benefited from a stronger and healthier body. We can extend the same consideration to the cases of psychosomatic diseases that increasingly seem to also affect children.

So simple to seem obvious, but absolutely far-sighted is Montessori’s take on the uniqueness of the person and the importance of considering work (accomplished by hands or entire body handling materials) as gymnastics for the mind, a tool for confidently appropriating concepts, letting them fully penetrate the person. That’s how movement reveals all its educational value and impact on the child intellect itself, on its elasticity, receptivity and assimilation of concepts.

One of the most important practical aspects of our method has been to make the training of the muscles enter into the very life of the children so that it is intimately connected with their daily activities. Education in movement is thus fully incorporated into the education of the child’s personality (Montessori 1972, p. 78).

Anyway, Montessori does not just propose teachers to stay in the fresh air and work in the garden, she deepens her reflections arguing that physical energy should not be burned with activities directly aimed at this, considering that everyone, not just kids, should exercise muscles on a job and choose primarily this peculiarly human and higher way to spend energy. Another suggestion is not to relegate physical activity in short, specific periods of time, when you give importance to the body as if to vent exceeding energies (such as organizing group stages where gymnastics exercises are proposed to children, jumping and running without any connection with everyday life). Also for these reasons, the practical life exercises should be proposed without hesitation at the Children’s House, their purpose is to make children safer and more precise in movements, to support them in the achievement of basic skills for a pleasant living. In primary school, they will help older pupils to appropriate most complex mental representations as physics and chemistry notions as well as a number of mathematical concepts:

If we would but think of it, the carrying out of a practical life affords an abundance of exercise, and the gymnasium for perfecting one’s actions is the very environment in which he lives. This is something different from that type of manual labor which produces something new. Instead, we are continually moving objects around at the bidding of our intellect which foresees the goal to be obtained (Montessori 1972, p. 81).

Conclusion: The modernity of Montessori’s proposal

The educational proposal, of which a number of features have been outlined in

1 Montessori classrooms for children from 2½ or 3 to 6 years old.

these pages, is incredibly modern. It emerges as a response to the most urgent challenges that education must face in today's context, both from the observation of Montessori's inspired schools and from the recent studies of experts who acknowledge and enhance this peculiar approach to education. Regarding the first aspect, an interesting attempt to promote movement, so that is increasingly at the service of intelligence and a regular feature of school education, is implemented in Montessori German-speaking schools in South Tyrol, developing Montessori teaching partially differently from Italian ones, thanks to local school autonomy. Provided that difference is an enrichment and would generate a fruitful debate, we would like to point out here a number of common features found in the Montessori German speaking schools we visited. We would like to state beforehand that school autonomy allows those entities to organize themselves absolutely independently as concerns initial and ongoing training, as well as teachers' selection. Teaching strategies, class organization, materials are peculiar of an environment networking with Austria and Germany and therefore carrying with it very interesting items to be investigated.

One of the most surprising elements is the care and imagination with which teachers prepare proposals for practical life, in order to reinforce or to complement the standard materials, and their arrangement in space. The trays for pouring, for example, often vary throughout the year and are prepared accurately by choosing a plurality of materials, from the format of pasta to seeds, hazelnuts, marbles, pipettes with colorful liquid, fragrant coffee grinder. That's how the proposals offered by teachers become an incredibly attractive invitation for children, eager to deal with such delicate originality. Water, soap and brush are magical tools in the hands of kids, as well as sand and dirt, hardly ever absent in Montessori German schools. During the Christmas season, while Italians usually divide into "pandoro" or "panettone" lovers, in Bolzano families of German culture, dozens of different types of cookies are traditionally prepared: with almonds or candy fruit, cinnamon, poppy seed or other flavorings. In general, this constant attention to detail, care and originality could also make our Italian classes more cheerful and would add a touch of familiarity daily.

In addition, we'd like to underline that the modernity of Montessori's approach does not emerge only from the constructive educational experience in schools, but also from the attention given to the method by current studies on education. As for the critique asserting that Montessori has now lived a hundred years ago and her suggestions are no longer relevant or feasible, nor fitting with the needs and characteristics of our cities, we respond that the forward-thinking of Montessori is recaptured by many contemporary educators. In other words, but with very similar reflections, through their research, they simply confirm her insights (Tawil et al. 2011; Rathunde 2013; Darakoglu 2014). Thereupon we would like to mention here a few recent educational approaches, such as the so-called "Pedagogy of the snail" and the thought of Gianfranco Zavalloni (2011)², who is in favor of mixed ages classes, considers slowness as an educational and existential value and promotes outdoor work, looking after a vegetable garden or a pet. Moreover, we would like to mention the innovative experiments of libertarian and democratic schools that organize their curricula not only around theoretical knowledge, but also around operational ones: building, organizing, implementing are considered

2 Gianfranco Zavalloni (1957 – 2012) Kindergarten teacher first and then school director, he founded the Ecoistituto di Cesena and has personally worked with pedagogical approaches oriented to promote a non-violent, inclusive, ecological and creative education.

basic objectives for the growth of children and teenagers (Codello & Stella, 2011). These educational experiences are profoundly inspired by the principles for an educational and a social inclusion, especially through the appreciation of each child.

Montessori's insights gathered in two recent Italian books (collecting both her writings and the contributions of experts) that deepen the themes of the work in nature (in gardens and vegetable gardens) and the importance of a healthy and balanced nutrition. We refer to *In giardino e nell'orto con Maria Montessori e Le ricette di Maria Montessori*, respectively published in 2010 and 2008. The texts approach the understanding of problems affecting the environment, nature, the animal and vegetable kingdoms and support parents, teachers and educators in the necessary but complex task of educating to an ecological and respectful behavior towards the world.

In conclusion, we would like to outline a number of assumptions of modern neurosciences that clearly, explicitly, declare the merit of the mentioned insights. By means of work and direct physical experience, children conquer most of the knowledge and better understand the laws governing the world they live in. Moreover, they become skilled in building interpersonal relationships and in designing personal and creative research paths. This article was drafted under the inspiration of the possibility for the Montessori method to still be considered an effective alternative to many mainstream and truly ineffective educational systems, which unfortunately often are unable to value the many resources - environment, space, movement, play, discovery, creativity - available to them. The creativity and the originality of this proposal should not lead to indifference or mistrust, but should be seen as an incentive to deepen the anthropological premises and the educational inspiration at the heart of this approach.

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