The Contribution of Maria Montessori’s Pedagogy and her Educational Action to Modern Inclusive Policies

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ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori’s influence on modern inclusive policies, in particular in relation to school education, is really remarkable. Her culture, pedagogical intuitions, her institutional projects and her methodological and didactic innovations influenced profoundly our views on education, offering a detailed and original understanding of childhood as the foundation of a mature, critical and democratic society. Maria Montessori’s ideas, based on solid philosophical and anthropological grounds, not only found validation by embracing and implementing the achievements of various sciences pertaining to human evolutional development and its social community, but also shed light on research topics that are still object of scholarly attention. This is testified to by the fact that her educational methods are still relevant today, and they can be easily adapted to the change in life conditions and the widespread use of new media technologies. Cooperative work, mutual assistance, individually tailored education, reading, curricular and extracurricular activities, the tailoring of learning environments to the individual pupil, the need to monitor and evaluate learning outcomes, the design and experimentation of teaching, social involvement, use of technological aides, as well as inclusive and integrative education, are but a few of the foundations of her philosophy. Hence the importance of her ideas to this day.

KEYWORDS
Background, Design, Experimentation, Inclusion, Media Technologies, Personalisation

1. EFFECTIVENESS OF A “POSITIVE” AND “SCIENCE ORIENTED” PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Every critical evaluation of current inclusive policies geared towards pupils with special needs, which also aims at looking at the future, cannot ignore Maria Montessori’s educational experience and her pedagogical philosophy. All the more so, when children’s special needs are a result of psychological and physical deprivation and reflect on pupils’ learning potential, significantly undermining their ability to manage relationships, to the extent that they influence negatively the foundation and growth of both individual and social identities.

Placing Maria Montessori and her work at the forefront of the field is not only a well deserved tribute to an insightful and brilliant scholar, devoted to her mission of “freeing” the individual from any form of indoctrination and/or environmental pressure, but also a formal acknowledgement of her intuitions and of the high quality of her work, which changed the paradigm of teaching in her own time and is still profoundly influential to this day. Montessori contributed to the shaping of modern pedagogy into a science liberated from dogmas (Catalfamo, 1971). Her methodology, with
the progress of research and its practical application, has demonstrated its own potential, achieving results which are both still relevant and very promising for future developments.

Montessori’s basic idea is that an abstract pedagogy, unrelated to reality and poised only to find and justify its own relevance in self-referential terms, cannot possibly be based on sound epistemological, scientific or social grounds. On the contrary, education must be based on a “Pedagogy of the concrete”: adherent to the background and personal experience of individuals and focusing on their uniqueness. Our thoughts and efforts must, therefore, be directed towards establishing a pedagogy open to the stimuli that scientific research offers. Such research should be intentionally driven towards the understanding of the different contexts in which identity is formed and consolidated, with the aim of contributing to the definition of the processes and tools that might help individuals both to adapt and to depart from their own backgrounds, by respecting each individual’s needs and potential.

The pedagogy which will result from this scientific approach will establish itself as a science without renouncing its basic functions: the foundation and perspective orientation in the individual’s education. Such pedagogy would shape in a coherent and effective way the horizons of teaching.

Naturally, pedagogy needs to emulate the methodologies of hard science in order to become a positive force, so that the data resulting from its enquiries can be critically evaluated and thus generate general models applicable to education. These models, in turn, should be shared as well as being verifiable through experimentation and should also be open to change so that they might answer effectively individual and collective needs.

Maria Montessori’s pedagogy actually shows all the features pertaining to science, it being open to experimentation and observation as well as being centred on the uniqueness of every pupil. It also has the ultimate goal of positively modifying, intentionally and constructively, the starting conditions of the pupil. Such educational actions must always be carried out with the full participation of the children, because their needs are to be addressed individually, by prearranging adequately the learning environments, without losing sight of the social aspect of education.

In this way pedagogy avoids losing itself among pointless theoretical abstractions devoid of any content, and losing touch with its actual object that is to say who is to benefit from it, in what learning environment and social context (with its projected development), bearing in mind the ethical nature of relationships, the establishment of principles of sharing and empowerment and so on. And this is actually the innovation brought about by research pedagogy, the most recent branch of which is Special Pedagogy and the related specialised didactics. These must not be alienated from the theory of pedagogy and didactics, but must integrate it, also since the funding principles and procedures meant to achieve pedagogy’s formative goals fully contribute to the making of an “integrated formative model” able to benefit all individuals, in their different expressions and behaviours.

Maria Montessori successfully transformed the insightful intuition of a scientific pedagogy in a model of action that reaffirmed the rights of women and children denied at the time (and still partially at risk today, in many economically and culturally underdeveloped areas). Women are at risk because they are often prevented from exercising their rights and are influenced by ancestral sexist prejudices: Childhood, in turn, is also extremely vulnerable in its delicate formation, especially if there is any physical, psychological, economical or cultural disadvantage.

2. EDUCATION AND TEACHING IN A “SYSTEMIC MODEL”

As stated earlier, the pedagogical model developed by Maria Montessori is scientific and is rooted in teaching, which the author like to define as “active assistance to the normal expansion of life” (Montessori, 1999, p. 67), or as support to the development of human potential (Montessori, 1952).

Her recommendations are almost never of a practical nature (didactics in action), but are virtually always related to a well-established theoretical background, in which not only the founding principle (the attention to the individual) but also the rationalisation of the objectives (personal and social identity flourishes if the potential of each individual is respected) are present.
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