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Maria Montessori in the Role of a Teacher

Maria Montessori w roli nauczycielki

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Montessori's teaching career, the role of the teacher, historical perspective, teaching conduct, social and civil commitment

The essay analyses the figure of Maria Montessori as a teacher and the teaching that she conducted in her career. A historical perspective is adopted, with reference to some fundamental moments in Montessori's teaching life, described with the help of her own early writings (often unpublished), and the testimonies of some of her colleagues and students. M. Montessori began her career as a teacher in 1899 at the "Higher Institute of Teaching for Women" and then she continued at the "Pedagogical School" of the University of Rome. The analysis presented in this article shows that Montessori considered it essential to combine theory and practice, to promote students' active participation, linking what is learnt in the classroom with the outside world. From her earliest experiences as a teacher, it became fundamental for Montessori to place her teaching against the background of social and civil commitment, open it up to comparison, and to integrate her experience with work and empirical research.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE ABSTRAKT

Kariera nauczycielska Marii Montessori, rola nauczyciela, perspektywa historyczna, styl nauczania, zaangażowanie społeczne i obywatelskie

Prezentowany esej jest analizą sylwetki Marii Montessori jako nauczycielki oraz jej kariery nauczycielskiej. W analizie przyjęto perspektywę historyczną, z odniesieniem do wybranych, kluczowych momentów w karierze nauczycielskiej M. Montessori, opisanych z pomocą jej własnych, wczesnych pism (często niepublikowanych), oraz wspomnień jej współpracowników i studentów. Maria Montessori rozpoczęła swoją karierę jako nauczycielka w 1899 roku w „Wyższym Instytucie Edukacji dla Kobiet”, a następnie kontynuowała pracę

w Szkole pedagogicznej Uniwersytetu Rzymskiego. Przedstawione rozważania ukazują, że M. Montessori uznawała za kluczowe: łączenie teorii z praktyką, wspieranie aktywnego udziału studentów, łączenie tego, czego się nauczyli w klasie szkolnej z działaniem w świecie zewnętrznym. Na podstawie swoich wczesnych nauczycielskich doświadczeń M. Montessori fundamentem swojego nauczania uczyniła zaangażowanie społeczne i obywatelskie, a także otwarcie się na porównanie i integrację zdobytych doświadczeń z pracą i badaniami empirycznymi.

Montessori dedicated many pages of her writings to the teacher, their training and their way of being, but what kind of teaching did Montessori conduct herself? What did she think of the teacher's role? Since I am adopting a historical perspective, I shall answer these questions with reference to some of the fundamental moments in Montessori's teaching life, with the help of some of her writings – some unpublished – from her younger days, and the testimonies of some of her colleagues and students.

Montessori's teaching career began in 1899, at the *Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero* (the Higher Institute of Teaching for Women) of Rome, where she taught "hygiene and anthropology".

In a letter of 26 October 1899, sent by Montessori to a Mr. Castelli, she solicited the creation of a chair in the "pedagogy of the mentally retarded" or, alternatively, in "hygiene and anthropology". The individual study of the child's physical development, also by means of specific instruments for appropriate anthropometric measurements at various ages, would enable the recognition of any manifestations of abnormalities and the appropriate interventions of physiological and pedagogical hygiene.

As its name suggests, the *Istituto Superiore di Magistero Femminile* was intended only for women and had the task of training teachers in literary subjects for 'normal' schools (in which elementary school teachers were trained) and for technical schools.

In her letter, Montessori gave her reasons for requesting a chair in "pedagogy of the deficient" or, alternatively, in "hygiene and anthropology", pointing to the possible advantages for the vocational and personal training of young female teachers, future mothers, and for social prevention.

In view of the delicate nature of certain subjects like the hygiene of puberty and generation, Montessori considered it preferable for the subject to be taught by women in order to fight "the hypocrisies imposed until then by prejudice which was often fatal to health, and give with the voice of science and with the ideal of public health, a basis of high morality to all those cognitions that women students today learn only

in less noble ways”.¹ For Montessori, it was a matter of clearly putting across the contents of scientific research in order to break down prejudice and contribute to woman’s liberation and moral elevation, and to combat the degeneration of humankind.

Minister Baccelli appointed her to teach “hygiene and anthropology” in January 1900, and Montessori took to the task with commitment and assiduity, gaining the students’ participation to the extent that they obtained excellent results in the final examinations.

In a letter of 22 January 1902 to the minister of education, Montessori illustrated the methods she used in her teaching in order to make it “pleasant and practical”, such as trips to “visit the main hygiene institutions in Rome and its surrounding area”. Montessori also intended to create a hygiene laboratory and a pedagogical anthropology laboratory inside the *Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero*, considering that the lack of these resources was a serious drawback for her teaching activity.²

Right from the start of her teaching activity, Montessori considered it essential to combine theory and practice, to promote students’ active participation, linking what is learnt in the classroom with the outside world. Her approach and its dynamics complicated her relations with colleagues who were more inclined to a more traditional face-to-face kind of teaching. But what did the young students think of Montessori?

One of them, Paola Boni Fellini, described her as follows: “The scientific underpinnings in the Doctor’s [Montessori’s] words or, at least, the positive side is always there, like the warp under the embroidery; but every gesture, colour, and acute, shrill, cutting voice if necessary, are of the priestess, of the Sybil (the sybils were virgins gifted with prophetic virtues inspired by a god). She always comes alone; comes forth importantly, with a slow, absorbed pace. While intellectuals, feminists exhibit masculine attires and neglect, she adorns her soft person with feminine grace, often in a fluttering of veils”.³

This first description already seems to show one of the distinctive features of Montessori’s lessons and conferences: an impassioned, vibrant eloquence that does not fear emphasis; a stylistic register that feeds on various tones: the scientific, narrative and lyrical ones.

Montessori’s interest for an innovative kind of teaching was confirmed four years later by a circular letter dated 24 August 1906, from the director of the *Istituto*

¹ Letter of 26th October 1899, Central Archive of the State, Rome, Personal files of the University Professors. See also F. Pesci, *L’insegnamento di Maria Montessori al Magistero di Roma*, [The Teaching of Maria Montessori to Faculty of Education in Rome], in “Educazione e scuola”, no.30-31, April-September 1989, p. 111.

² Letter of 22nd January 1902, Central Archive of the State, Rome, Personal files of University Professors.

³ P. Boni Fellini, *I segreti della fama*, [Secrets of Fame], Rome, Centro Editoriale dell’Osservatore, 1955, p. 22.

Superiore Femminile di Magistero, Giuseppe Aurelio Costanzo, who says that: “The greatest development that Miss Maria Montessori has given to her teaching lies in the direct viewing of things, making frequent scientific visits to experimental hygiene laboratories, pest control offices, margarine factories, model dairies, the anatomical institute, schools and the slaughterhouse, and giving illustrative lessons in these very places, so that she has to devote many hours to the task besides the ones already assigned to her by the timetable of the subject”.⁴

From her earliest experiences as a teacher, it became fundamental for Montessori to place her teaching against a background of social and civil commitment, in this case women’s emancipation, and also to open it up to comparison and integration with work or research places.

Montessori’s ability to get her students involved is also witnessed by Ugo Pizzoli, a physician who founded a pedagogy laboratory in the town of Crevalcore, near Bologna, in order to get the participation of the masters of the scientific spirit of the times so as to improve their expertise for the pedagogical-didactic aspect by adopting the anthropometric, aesthesiometric and observational technique. In 1903, Pizzoli invited Montessori to give some anthropology lessons which he commented upon as follows: “We recall with particular pleasure how the learned Doctor [Montessori] managed to break the monotony of an exposition of anthropology by proposing here and there the solution to some pressing social problems. Talking, for example, of the dimensions of the female cranium in relation to the male, she asked and answered the following question: ‘Why does the anthropological superiority of women correspond to their social inferiority?’ (...) All this did not disturb the order of her lessons; because it was like an appendix that the brilliant and zealous Doctor thought fit to perform to give a highlight to her lessons”.⁵

The students enthusiastically received Montessori’s references to current affairs such that they asked her to finish the course with some conferences on the very theme of the women’s question.

In 1906 Montessori took up another teaching post at the “Corso di perfezionamento dei licenziati della Scuola Normale” of Rome University; this was better known as the “Pedagogical School”, set up to enhance teachers’ cultural education. She taught “pedagogical anthropology” there.

The “Pedagogical School” was to be a more suitable place for Montessori’s scientific and innovative spirit. Here, her yearning to experiment with different

⁴ F. Pesci, *L'insegnamento di Maria Montessori al Magistero di Roma*, [The Teaching of Maria Montessori to Faculty of Education in Rome], p. 113.

⁵ U. Pizzoli, *Relazione del secondo corso di pedagogia tenuto in Crevalcore nell'agosto 1903* [Report of the Second Course of Pedagogy Lectured in Crevalcore in August 1903], in “Bollettino del Laboratorio di pedagogia scientifica in Crevalcore”, year I, booklet VII-VIII-IX, July-August-September, 1903, p. 179. p. 184.

didactic methods found a better reception compared to the *Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero*.

As we read in an article published in *L'Illustrazione italiana*, "In the 'Pedagogical School', elementary school teachers are not mere listeners and spectators of what the teachers say and do, but are an active part of the teaching and the main agents for the Institute's whole activity and life. The notable library – with its over 4,000 books – is not only available for the teachers enrolled in the school, but they also issue their own booklets and, thanks to their commitment, it works" (...). "Next to the library there is a rich pedagogical museum, with valuable collections of embalmed animals, minerals, physics and chemistry instruments, exhibits related to human body, geography exhibits, etc."⁶

And here are the students of Maria Montessori's pedagogical anthropology course: a student is experimenting with a spirometer, another with an anthropometer and Montessori is illustrating the human body to the students gathered all around her.

The lessons she gave in academic years 1905-1906 and 1906-1907 were collected by the student Benedetto Franceschetti, reviewed by Montessori and then published with her permission. I wish to thank Prof. Harald Ludwig for making it possible for me to access some of the lessons Montessori gave in the academic year 1905-1906.

For Montessori it was a matter of training teachers on the types of congenital anomalies and on their biological and social bases, as well as on the defects of a normal man, in order to provide for human regeneration with adequate hygienic and pedagogical interventions. Montessori did not identify pedagogical anthropology with scientific pedagogy, but the latter was addressed to "educating men already made physically better on the guidelines of the related positive sciences"⁷ like pedagogical anthropology, but also hygiene and psychology.

Teacher training was performed by means of theory and practical lessons which Montessori gave in the classroom and with trips to external institutions, as on 25 May 1906 Franceschetti wrote: "After giving a series of lessons on medical history, objective examination, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment, showing the benefits that the subject could have from a rational hygienic and pedagogical treatment, the Doctor [Montessori] took us to visit Saint Michael's Reformatory in Rome for delinquent minors, speaking to us first of the Doria Reform in a preparatory lesson"⁸. Saint

⁶ *Una nuova istituzione scolastica. L'Istituto pedagogico e il prof. Credaro* [A New School Institution. The Pedagogical Institute and the Prof. Credaro], in "L'Illustrazione italiana", 21st July 1907, p. 56.

⁷ M. Montessori, *Antropologia pedagogica* [Pedagogical Anthropology], Milan, Vallardi, no date (but 1910), p. VII.

⁸ M. Montessori, *Lezioni di antropologia pedagogica del Prof. Maria Montessori*, [Lessons of Pedagogical Anthropology by Prof. Maria Montessori], collected stenographically and compiled by Benedetto Franceschetti, Only edition authorized and revised by the teacher, Academic Year 1905-1906, Lit. Sabbadini, Rome, p. 260.

Michael's Reformatory had children and young adults difficult to educate, rebels to authority, vagrants, delinquents, aged 9-21 years, in order to educate them for honesty and work.

In the preparatory lesson, Montessori sketched out the legislation concerning reformatories, dwelling in particular on the novelty in 1904 of the start of the reform by Alessandro Doria, from 1902 the director general of prisons, in which it stressed the educational and correctional function of reformatories, apart from the punitive one. To this end, the reform promoted the pedagogical grounding of staff, and then in 1907 the institution of a "corps of educators for minors to replace prison guards".⁹

Montessori commented on the reform enthusiastically and perhaps with excessive optimism: "Prison, all of a sudden, must become an institute of scientific pedagogy: prison guards must be replaced by elementary school teachers – men of mind and heart".¹⁰ Montessori illustrated the reform in some articles she published in the daily *La Vita*, dedicated to the theme of rehabilitating delinquent minors.

The reformatory visit lasted three hours and the students could read the individual notes of the inmates and conduct a summary morphological examination by observing the children. From this they drew the conclusion, shared by Montessori, of the existence of great differences between the various inmates which would require more accurate selection, avoiding their being grouped all together.

The students also went to the educational manual work laboratory, where the inmates were ordered to work in front of the visitors. The children "set about their tasks in many different ways and means, such as gently stroking the clay, crudely and tiresomely scraping the iron, the cardboard on the squares, making sawdust; they seemed to symbolize the life of social work", Montessori mused.¹¹

During their visit, the students asked Montessori for some explanations, and she was not able to answer all of them. Hence, in the following lesson she took up the questions once again in order to deal with them more fully. The students had found some discrepancies between what they saw and what Montessori had said in the preparatory lesson, and so they made some objections.

Montessori's scientific spirit made her teaching style open to observation, to contact with life, to discussion, exchange and critical spirit. This was also seen when she read and commented on the medical history of some children, together with her students.

The topics that interested her students during the visit included moral education: how could it be achieved without resorting to coercive methods? Montessori was very

⁹ A. Pennisi (ed.), *La giustizia penale minorile. Formazione, devianza, diritto e processo* [The Juvenile Criminal Justice. Training, Deviance, Law and Trial], Milan, Giuffrè Editore, 2014, pp. 466-467.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

clear on this: “The psychic stimulus geared to enhancing human activities, to giving life to an apathetic person, and even to enabling one to grow luxuriantly is a pleasant stimulant of sweetness and caress” [...]. Man is won over with goodness”.¹² Also, she believed that so-called ‘bad tendencies’ are often the result of pathologies aggravated by poor conditions of life.

Montessori was well aware that the education of delinquent minors, as well as the abnormal ones, is a complex task; however, teachers can find a guide in anthropology: analyzing cases individually and then proceeding with intellectual stimuli, through objective lessons and moral stimuli, through praise and caresses, but also through firmness and authoritativeness.

Montessori herself had been a teacher of mentally retarded children in the medical-pedagogical institute opened in Rome in 1899, on an initiative of the “National League for the Protection of Deficient Children”, for which she was an advisor. Moreover, she had had the responsibility of the class of mentally retarded children attached to the Orthophrenic School, opened in 1900 and directed by her and Giuseppe Montesano; this was the place where teachers who trained in special educational methods for normal children did their internship.

Montessori knew fully well that a great deal of energy had been necessary to keep mentally retarded children active: the teacher had to be firm and obtain obedience, and they had to require of the student only what the child was actually able to do.

On the basis of her own experience and lessons learnt from Séguin, Montessori described the qualities of the teacher: they had to “possess a strong suggestive power”, be physically attractive, have a clear voice, a powerful gaze, clear-cut gestures, and an expressive face. Hence, a teacher that could influence, charm and seduce, whose lessons always had to start from an object, briefly described, on which the teacher had to fix and maintain the child’s attention by modulating his/her voice, using praise and exclamations. It was a matter of concretely conveying the idea of an object, getting the child to perceive qualities through the senses.¹³

Among the students of the “Pedagogical School” who attended Montessori’s lessons in November 1906 there was Anna Maria Maccheroni, who recalled her first lesson: “The room was big. To the left and right of the teacher’s desk there were only two rows of students’ desks; the room was full of rows of desks in front of the teacher’s desk. I chose a seat at one of the desks on the right so that I could see the room

¹² Ibid., p. 288, 289.

¹³ M. Montessori, *Riassunto delle lezioni di didattica date in Roma nella scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica l'anno 1900* [Summary of the Didactics Lessons Held in Rome in the Orthophrenic School for Teachers’ Training in 1900], in M. Montessori, *L'autoeducazione nelle scuole elementari* [Self-education in Elementary Schools], Milan, Garzanti, 1992, pp. 672-673 (1st Italian edition 1916; 1st English edition entitled *The Advanced Montessori Method*).

crowded with students. Montessori was on her feet, watching the students carefully. Her penetrating gaze did not disturb those it fell upon [...]. I noticed she did not follow the manner of educated women of the times. They were few and dressed in men's type jackets and tie. She did not do so! However simple, her dress had grace and good feminine taste. [...] Whenever she showed us some anatomical part, for example, a prepared brain, she would wear the white cape used by doctors".¹⁴

A Montessori trait thus returns, already found in the testimony of her student Paola Boni Fellini at the *Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero*: the care for her person, her elegance and femininity, combined with a composure and overall tone that attracted the audience. In Maccheroni's words, "The Doctor [Montessori] used simple, clear language. Her voice was harmonious, her manner of speaking was lively, alive such that even the less active students could follow her. Everything she said had the warmth of life".¹⁵

This also confirms Montessori's oratory skills. She would accompany what she said with demonstrations, stimulating the imagination. Again, in Maccheroni's words, "On her desk she kept a small skeleton, well mounted and held up by a metal support. Perhaps it was the skeleton of a newborn baby. Why did she keep it there? I thought I knew why. She told us of the early period of the child's life as a period of rest, but, as she said, actually it is a period of great activity. It is true that the little child is lying down, but at that time the baby is building their own body: bones, muscles, skin... and they are getting in touch with the outside world. She showed us the big difference in proportions of the child's body and the adult's body. If we divide the stature of the adult and of the child into eight parts, for the child we obtain two eighths for the head. In the adult we obtain only one eighth. She helped us to imagine an adult with a baby's proportions. It would have been a monster. [...] In these conferences she would follow an absolutely original line. She would guide us to see something that, I thought, nobody had taught her".¹⁶

A lecturer at the *Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero* and in the Pedagogical School, a teacher of mentally retarded children, Montessori always kept her attention alive and consistent on the theme of teacher training, which must not be carried out with notions of pedagogy proposing an abstract image of the child and non-existent from a psychological perspective, but must be carried out with the guide of positive sciences, both the ones concerning man and those concerning the society.

¹⁴ A.M. Maccheroni, *Come conobbi Maria Montessori* [As I Knew Maria Montessori], Rome, Edizioni "Vita dell'Infanzia", 1956 p. 11, 14 (1st English edition entitled *A True Romance. Doctor Montessori as I Knew Her*, 1947).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Hence, in a study of 1907, she invited teachers to make themselves familiar with regional ethnology since she believed that the study of the human being in the specific ethnic features of the body and in relation to the geographical, historical and cultural environment can help to better understand the students and to achieve suitable teaching for the context.¹⁷

We have got to 1907. What kind of teaching did Montessori implement in San Lorenzo?

Firstly, from her books and testimonies we get the impression that she was the first to convince herself of what was happening in Children's Houses. A first example, through Maccheroni's testimony: "It happened then that the teacher told the Doctor [Montessori] that the children *worked on their own*. But the Doctor knew fully well that [...], in schools, normal children only do what the teacher compels them to do, and said quite frankly: 'I don't believe it'".¹⁸

A second example, in Montessori's words: "One day there arose in me the idea of taking advantage of silence to experiment the aural sensitivity of children; and so I decided to call them by name with a low voice, and from a certain distance. [...] With forty children, this exercise of patient waiting involved an effort I thought impossible: therefore, I took candies and chocolates to compensate every child that came up to me. The children refused these sweets, however".¹⁹

To convince herself of what was happening, Montessori would experiment, observe, check.

With regard to the first example, Montessori recalled that her attention was caught by a three-year-old girl "who practiced putting in and taking out the small cylinders from the solid insets. [...] I was amazed to see such a young child repeat an exercise many times over with great interest. [...] And I, out of examination habit, started to count the exercises, and then I wanted to see how long this strange concentration could last: I asked the teacher to get all the other children to sing and to move".²⁰

With respect to the second example, Montessori commented: "Much time had to pass before I became persuaded that the refusal of the sweets was for an actual reason. [...] It seemed such an extraordinary thing that I wanted to repeat this test insistently since we know that children are the very ones who are extremely fond of sweets".²¹

¹⁷ See M. Montessori, *Sui caratteri antropometrici in relazione alle gerarchie intellettuali dei fanciulli nelle scuole* [On Anthropometric Characters in Relation to Intellectual Hierarchies of Children in Schools], in "Archivio per l'Antropologia e l'Etnologia", vol. XXXIV, booklet 2, 1904, pp. 243-300.

¹⁸ A.M. Maccheroni, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁹ M. Montessori, *Il segreto dell'infanzia* [The Secret of Childhood], Milan, Garzanti, 1999, p. 168 (1st French edition entitled *L'Enfant*, 1936; 1st Swiss edition in Italian, 1938; 1st English edition, 1938).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

But the children continued to refuse them or they took them, “were grateful for the gift”, but did not eat them. For them, the prize lay in their satisfaction for the activity carried out; their satisfaction had an intrinsic source, and so as Bruner said: the child becomes the official payer of himself”.²²

As a teacher, Montessori thus conducted various experiments: she put the children’s reactions “to the test” and only after they repeatedly responded in the same manner did she welcome the new knowledge on the children’s psychological characteristics. It was this scientific mindset that guided and supported her. The same was true, as you know, for the materials which Montessori proposed to so-called normal children and which she modified according to her observations of these children. Hence, it was these children who actually pointed out the changes to be made, who checked and selected the materials which had, in themselves, the print of the child’s mind.²³ The children were her “teachers”.

Maria Antonietta Paolini recalled an episode which took place in Laren in the 1930s: “I had noted that some children tried to compare overlapping cylinders of the solid geometrical insets – attempts that failed owing to the presence of the pommels. ‘Let’s try to prepare a series of pommel-less cylinders’, the Doctor [Montessori] told me. That is how the ‘colored cylinders’ were born, which aroused so much enthusiasm in the children.

The vitality and the intellectual and didactic productiveness of the years Montessori spent in Laren is also borne out by her grandson, Mario Jr.: “There was nothing static in the way she saw helping the child. I remember how in the schools we had, sometimes at home or nearby, every week the adults would meet and talk of their observations of each child who attended. It was a good analytical task [...]. So I remember very well how, in summer, my grandmother’s house would fill up with people who came from all over the world to grasp whatever was new, to tell others of their own experiences and observations. New pieces, new ideas emerged from different contributions”.²⁴

In her teacher’s role, Montessori constructed or gave instructions to build the materials, always careful of drawing indications from the unexpected, ready for new investigations and welcoming new ‘revelations’.

In conclusion, Montessori in the teacher’s role is the scientist for whom the scientific spirit is intellectual, civil, social and educational commitment.

²² J. Bruner, *Il conoscere. Saggi per la mano sinistra* [On Knowing. Essays for the Left Hand], Rome, Armando, 2005, p. 118 (1st edition, 1964).

²³ See A. Scocchera, *Maria Montessori. Quasi un ritratto inedito* [Maria Montessori. A Story for Our Times], Rome, Edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori, 2005.

²⁴ M. Montessori M. Jr., *Maria Montessori mia nonna* [Maria Montessori, My Grandmother], in “Il Quadro Montessori”, year V, no.19, Autumn 1988, p. 57.

It was Montessori herself who first ‘embodied’ the role of teacher-scientist that she would later describe in her books. It is being a teacher in the first person that enabled her to be principally ‘alongside teachers’ and not in front of them, to understand their needs for training, cultural advancement and social deliverance.

Teacher training would always be close to her heart because she was well aware that a new school for all, and of all, required a new kind of teacher.

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