

## Introduction

The latest issue of “Elementary Education in Theory and Practice” is devoted to the pedagogical thought of Maria Montessori, one of the greatest innovators of 20<sup>th</sup> century education. Her pedagogical concepts, although designed over 100 years ago, seem to carry an unusual freshness, originality and intellectual depth, inspiring new generations of teachers, researchers and parents. As Clara Tornar has noticed,<sup>1</sup> the unique cognitive potential of this pedagogy is based on interrelations between the method of scientific observation and its consequent development and improvement, based on rigidly precise scientific criteria – rationality and objectivity. M. Montessori perceived the classroom learning environment as an exclusive “psychological laboratory”.<sup>2</sup> Not from the behaviourist perspective, however, not as a place where, in rigorously controlled conditions, a researcher is activating a stimulus to induce the proper, preplanned and expected reaction of the child. On the contrary, her vision of a psychological laboratory built and practiced in Casa dei Bambini was based on three cyclical phases, representing the methodology of research in action:

- designing a learning environment prepared for exercising free choice – the place for empowering the child, triggering the free expression of the child’s psychological needs, inner potential and developmental tendencies;
- methodically observing the child’s reactions to this environment and the conditions for free action;

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<sup>1</sup> C. Tornar, *Maria Montessori’s Contribution to Scientific Pedagogy*. Lecture given at the doctoral course in “Innovation and evaluation of the educational systems” of the International Doctoral School “Culture, Éducation, Communication” – Department of Educational Design, University of Roma Tre. “MO.R.E - Montessori Research&More” Newsletter 1-2009 (June), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> N. van Ewijk, *The scientific work of Dr. Maria Montessori: a closer look*, [in:] *Learning in Montessori Classroom – in search of quality in education*, ed. B. Bednarczuk, D. Zdybel, Lublin 2014, p. 59.

- and, finally, reorganizing and transforming this environment to make it serve better to the observed needs and possibilities of the child, to make the stimuli included in this environment facilitators for the child's development, for constructing his/her own developmental potential.<sup>3</sup>

This scientific procedure, based on inductive thinking, where the observation of a child's behaviour becomes a necessary introduction to the work of the teacher, providing important content for theoretical reflection on one's own pedagogical conduct – should be seen as a cornerstone of M. Montessori's pedagogy. This is also the most precise description of the Montessori teacher's role – a researcher in action, a reflective practitioner, following the child, allowing him/her to make independent decisions, offering help in development, and at the same time, learning from the child. A particularly impressive description of the tasks of the teacher was provided by M. Montessori by means of the metaphor of a... loyal servant (butler): "As a loyal butler serves his master – keeps the cupboard clean, puts the brushes back to their place, but not telling his master when to use them; he is serving the dinner but not forcing his master to eat, just leaves everything on the table and disappears without a word. Such a master to whom the teacher serves is child's psyche (spirit). The good butler, if not asked for, does not disturb his master. When called, he comes: "Yes, sir". When the child is working fully concentrated – we should stay away. We are here to serve".<sup>4</sup>

Although the metaphor seems slightly archaic nowadays (for many readers, perhaps even shocking), these words describe a shift of emphasis which is essential for Montessori pedagogy – from the power of adult to a child's own responsibility for learning process. Unfortunately, following such rules can be much more difficult for teachers than children – the teacher must refrain from using their traditional power, and take the attitude of one awaiting a call. Only then will the child have a right to take independent action, without unnecessary help or intrusion, he will practice his right to work and concentrate, making his own choices and accepting responsibility for the consequences, "to construct one's own potential by one's own efforts"<sup>5</sup>. Only then will the child become the architect of his/her own knowledge, the builder of one's own future identity, exercising and building one's own "mental muscles" to attain the power of self-regulation.

Following these remarks, we invite readers to meet Montessori pedagogy – we invite both enthusiasts of the approach, those setting out in the pedagogical

<sup>3</sup> C. Tornar, *Maria Montessori's Contribution to Scientific Pedagogy*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> M. Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*, Oxford, England, 1989, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> P.P. Lillard, *Montessori Today. A Comprehensive Approach to Education from Birth to Adulthood*, New York 1996, p. 98.

profession who might have never heard about Montessori, and also parents searching for alternative solutions for their own children. On one hand, we offer the possibility of revisiting original sources and studying Montessori's own words, while also inviting readers to re-read and re-interpret Montessorian pedagogical concepts from a personal perspective, and from the latest pedagogical and psychological research results. We invite you all to undertake the effort of critical reflection on one's own pedagogical knowledge and the possibility of learning from experts, to search for new dimensions of meaning as yet undiscovered in the pedagogical thinking of Maria Montessori.

We hope you will enjoy this issue!