

The profile of the Montessori assistant: historical paths and new education projects

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1. *The power of the psychic life in childhood*

“The new child already reveals himself in the first few months after his birth. It is in fact clear that if we were used to considering only conscience and language expressions as psychological facts that can be used in education, then the education of very small children should have been completely ignored. The belief that all a new-born child required was hygiene has managed to conceal facts of primary importance. Preparing the adult, however, to embrace psychic events instead of suppressing them, has made it clear that a child’s psychic life is far more intense and precocious than was previously thought. It has been clearly seen that a very small child’s psychic life, and his efforts to relate to his external environment greatly precede motor development, meaning that there is a live spirit needing help and psychological care, at a time when the gross motor system is not yet functioning and language has still to develop”¹.

It was 1923 when Maria Montessori, in work specifically dedicated to the parent-child relationship, directly approaching adults and appealing to their sense of responsibility in the process of their child’s growth, clarified the need to look deeper at the subject of birth in the light of the central nature of this stage in human life and development. *The Child in in the Family*, rightly called “a substantial lesson in theoretical and practical family pedagogy”², is Montessori’s initial thoughts on birth and an early outline of her project about “adherence to life” that would be further developed, thirteen years later, in *The Secret of Childhood*³, before finding a more complete theorisation in *The Absorbent Mind*⁴. In this work, first published in 1949, Montessori redeveloped the concept of “adherence to life”, giving space and a central position to a broader look at “education” from birth.

¹ M. Montessori, *Il bambino in famiglia* (1923), Garzanti, Milano 2010, pp. 135-136.

² G. Cives, *L’«educazione dilatatrice» di Maria Montessori*, Anicia, Roma 2008, p. 67.

³ Cfr. M. Montessori, *Il segreto dell’infanzia* (1936), Garzanti, Milano 2009.

⁴ Cfr. M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), Garzanti, Milano 2009.

To truly understand a human's need to develop and to rethink his education it is necessary, on a pedagogical level, to reclaim the earliest period of his life. This is in fact when these needs are shown for the first time, when the child has an intense interest towards the world, when he has a strong propensity to seek time and space that will guarantee his process of autonomy, while still respecting the protection of the ties that from the prenatal period onwards helped the child to learn to build his own personal view of the world.

The human process of becoming autonomous in fact commences during gestation when the foetus prepares the necessary conditions for its survival and its birth. These conditions - wrote Montessori in *The Child in the Family*⁵ - are regulated by a hormonal process, produced by the placenta and, therefore, by the foetus itself. Thus it is the mother's task to learn to recognise the foetus' development mechanism, preparing to respond to his demands to grow⁶. This all requires the adult to be suitably trained in the ability to listen to the child's creative powers, care for the child's mental development and, more in general, support this first age of man⁷.

From this comes a need for medical and educational sciences to work together. Montessori had already spoken about this combination at the turn of the 20th century, when as a doctor interested in anthropology she already began to show specific interest in a more "humanistic" approach to medical science which, in her opinion would have guaranteed a positive evolution for studies of development in early childhood.

⁵ M. Montessori, *Il bambino in famiglia* (1923), cit.

⁶ The first confirmation of these theories, developed by Maria Montessori as far back as the 1920s, can be found in the 1980s, when state-of-the-art medical research began to become more widespread, including studies by Thomas Verny, one of the first psychiatrists to stress the child's active participation even in pregnancy. For more information about this subject see T. R. Verny, *Vita segreta prima della nascita* (1981), Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1981.

⁷ Perhaps it is no coincidence that the mother's womb is also known as the "birthplace of origins". The expression, referring to an image of the earth welcoming the "seed" that, if cared for, will be able to bring its "fruits" to humanity, renewing it, seems once again to place a central focus on early childhood. Montessori, using biological and organic metaphors, continued to refer to this image throughout her life, considering it the fulcrum of human "creation" and inviting adults therefore to "cultivate" the earliest years of human life. On this subject, there is an important extract from one of the four talks given by Montessori at the 8th Montessori International Conference in San Remo, 1949. In the extract, Montessori returns to the meaning she often gave to the verb "cultivate" with reference to people, which needs help in order to "trigger the hidden mental energies existing in the child, in order to give this flower of humanity a richer, more beautiful shape". M. Montessori, *La capacità creatrice della prima infanzia*, in AA.VV., *La formazione dell'uomo nella ricostruzione mondiale. Atti dell'VIII Congresso Internazionale Montessori*, Ente Opera Montessori, Roma 1950, p. 33. The conference speech was published with the same title in A. Scocchera (a cura di), *Maria Montessori. Il metodo del bambino e la formazione dell'uomo. Scritti e documenti inediti e rari*, Edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori, Roma 2002, pp. 133-138.

With the exception of a little sporadic research⁸, dating back to a decade or so after Montessori's already discussed thoughts on the central nature of birth in the human development process⁹, 1920s knowledge of child development was still very superficial and incomplete; in the same way, on a scientific level, the awareness of a child's mental behaviour and its influence on the physical and physiological development of the human adult was also insufficient. In the same year as the theories of Alexis Carrel began to be known throughout Italy, in Spain Montessori continued to stress the superior nature of human intelligence compared to that of other living creatures and the need to "educate" the "spiritual life" of the child to make him a "new"¹⁰ man in adulthood. This was a concept that she would stress until the end of her days, when in spite of her tiredness and the weight of her years, she maintained a strong faith in the renewal of humanity and a love of childhood, the age that drives the real transformation in the human adult: "the important task of education needs to consist of trying to save the normality that, with its strength, tends towards a centre of perfection (...). The greatest danger lies in our ignorance, in the ignorance of us who look for pearls in oyster shells, for gold in rocks, for coal in the very entrails of the earth, but ignore the spiritual germs, the nebulae of creation, which the child hides within himself when he comes into our world to renew mankind"¹¹.

What was needed was focus on a new progress, which in some posthumously published conferences Montessori had called "spiritual"¹², because of its ability to recognise and capitalise on the "superior" abilities of the child between ages zero and three years, in which it is often easy to capture "something more than three years of age"¹³, since at this time the child is already "a [great] hero (...) who has fought and won many battles, who has been injured

⁸ The reference here is to the theories of Alexis Carrel, mentioned by Montessori in *The Absorbent Mind* as one of the few scholars who, towards the middle of the 1930s, had begun to realise the existence of mental energies in children, promoting research for the purpose of recognising the importance of the human's spiritual dimension in order to better understand the relations that "link him to the cosmic world on one hand and to his fellow man on the other; the relations between consciousness and bodily matter". A. Carrel, *L'uomo, questo sconosciuto* (1935), Bompiani, Milano 1967, p. 9.

⁹ M. Montessori, *Il bambino in famiglia* (1923), cit.

¹⁰ Cfr., specifically, the text which is from a conference held by Montessori in 1936 for Ràdio-Associaciò de Catalunya, in Barcelona, published for the first time in Italian by Opera Nazionale Montessori with the title *Cittadinanza bambina e cittadinanza adulta*, in A. Scocchera (a cura di), *Maria Montessori. Il metodo del bambino e la formazione dell'uomo. Scritti e documenti inediti e rari*, Edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori, Roma 2002, pp. 99-110. The title of the text is by Augusto Scocchera, editor of the book.

¹¹ M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit.

¹² Cfr. M. Montessori, *What you should know about your child. Based on lectures delivered by Maria Montessori* (1961), The Clío Montessori Series. Volume 4, Clío Prèss Oxford, England 1998, p. 19; M. Montessori, *What You Should Know About Your Child*, Bennet & Co., Colombo 1948.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

more than once, who has suffered and who was then reborn”¹⁴. The greatest “power in the world”¹⁵, a genuine “builder of men”¹⁶, the only one able to start up a “human rebirth”¹⁷.

Later Montessori would go on to call her new educational model “broadening”¹⁸, a term not chosen by chance but used to point out the capacity of education from birth to “broaden” the mind, freeing it from the cultural conditioning that often prevents individuals from receiving early childhood as it should be received.

2. *The secret of birth*

Taking care of earliest childhood therefore means taking responsibility for the process of generativity, which takes place during the birth, where the child’s initial relations with his surroundings are built and slowly take shape. The more welcoming the birth room, with many stimuli and care for the child and all the other stakeholders involved, the more creative and constructive the child’s adaptation to life will be.

Montessori was always convinced that peace was a genuine human “cognitive posture” and she was also equally aware of the need to create a peaceful environment, beginning with pregnancy, to boost cognitive and emotional development within the child, which would be coherent with his potential and orientate his personality towards human greatness, with a view to cosmic, universal evolution¹⁹.

“Grant this moment its slowness and its gravity” - Frédéric Leboyer would write later²⁰, referring to the need to slow down the timeframe of the generative process and to allow the new-born to adapt to his new surroundings, making it easier for those around him and who welcome him, to support him in this delicate stage of adaptation, respecting his needs, which in some

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit., p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ M. Montessori, *Il segreto dell’infanzia* (1936), cit., p. XIII.

¹⁸ Cfr. M. Montessori, *Formazione dell’uomo* (1949), Garzanti, Milano 1970. We should remember that the concept of “broadening education” had already been discussed by Montessori in the late 19th century when, during her feminist battles to protect marginalised persons, especially women and children, she spoke of the need to establish a “new humanity”, based on a new education for all and orientated to “broadening” the mind in order to build new relationships between human beings and the world, with greater solidarity and more respect for mutual rights and needs.

¹⁹ Cfr. M. Montessori, *La Pace* (1932), in Id., *Educazione e Pace* (1949), Edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori, Roma 2004., pp. 1-26; Id., M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit.

²⁰ F. Leboyer, *Per una nascita senza violenza. La nascita, il venire al mondo, il parto, dal punto di vista del bambino* (1974), Bompiani, Milano 1975, p. 72. For more information cfr. also F. Lamaze, *Qu’est-ce que l’accouchement sans douleur*, Édition La Farandole, Paris 1956; G. D. Read, *Childbirth without fear*, Heinemann, London 1950.

ways are completely unknown to the adults who will be caring for him. To facilitate this mutual adaptation process – between the child and his surroundings and vice versa – attention needs to be shifted from medical and treatment levels to a psycho-pedagogical one, placing specific importance on the role of education, in this and in all of the stages through which the child and adults of reference will pass during their respective growth processes.

The stages following birth are equally delicate and often difficult to manage because the adults' duty of care for the child – and that of the mother in particular – is not just biological; it involves other forms of relationship and communication which play above all on the creative skills of all stakeholders in the generative process²¹. It was no coincidence that Montessori used the term “growth” to describe the power of the human mind that allows the preservation of life. From this comes the idea of the spirituality of human intelligence and the need to distinguish between the two stages of human life, both of which need accommodating surroundings in which to develop: an embryonic, prenatal period during which the child's body is formed, and a post-natal environment in which “spiritual gestation”²² can take place and in need of equally skilled care.

Montessori called this gestation a form of “incarnation”, intended as the “mysterious process of an energy that brings the inert body of the child to life, giving him use of his limbs, speech, and the ability to act and express himself according to his will”²³.

In 1952, at the end of a life spent valorising the “secret” of childhood and spreading a new model of humanity, she wanted to point out that “true freedom, inner freedom (...) can only be built inside as part of the personality”²⁴. To foster this growth, which must begin with birth, it is necessary to remove all conditions that oppose freedom or cause submission. If this is not done,

²¹ Cfr. M. Montessori, *La capacità creatrice della prima infanzia*, in A. Scocchera (a cura di), *Maria Montessori. Il metodo del bambino e la formazione dell'uomo. Scritti e documenti inediti e rari*, cit. It is significant that in the final years of her life Montessori continued ceaselessly to refer to the psychic energy of early childhood and to its ability to “create” the adult human.

²² Cfr. M. Montessori, *La Pace* (1932), in Id., *Educazione e Pace* (1949), cit., Roma 2004. To understand fully the concept of gestation as applied to human spirituality it is necessary to point out that Montessori's text in which this subject appears for the first time is one of her many conferences – later collected in the volume *Peace and Education* – held in Europe in the period 1932 to 1939, in an attempt to collaborate actively and tenaciously with the campaign for disarmament, which obviously did not strike much of a chord with people who were probably already intent on declaring war on one another. The reference to human spirituality certainly has its charm, above all if seen in the light of the imminent world war and the social and political disorder of the times. To defeat evil – Montessori explained – it is necessary to appeal to human intelligence and its mental powers, which conceal the great weapon of solidarity, of transforming the world and of the rebirth of humanity.

²³ M. Montessori, *Il bambino in famiglia* (1923), cit., pp. 25-26.

²⁴ The text, published for the first time in English in Amsterdam, is currently available in a volume by G. Honneger Fresco (a cura di), *Montessori: perché no? Una pedagogia per la crescita*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2000, pp. 347-349.

then unfortunately, different forms of physical and mental pressure come into play, preventing a person from recognising his mental power, which is creative strength, a vital impetus that cannot, for this reason, become hardened, fixed in rigid, stereotypical mental categories or crystallised in destructive, incapacitating prejudice.

3. *Assisting life and welcoming birth: Montessori's new professional figure*

Montessori had the opportunity to set out her theory concerning the need to educate the child from birth during her later life; this led her to write her already mentioned masterpiece on child development: *The Absorbent Mind*²⁵.

Autonomous human development – she would write in this work – begins during pregnancy. This knowledge invites one to look at birth as the child's first creative act, since through the transformation process inherent to the act of being born makes him the active protagonist in the creation of a “cosmic order” that, in Montessori's terms, is renewed each time that a new life comes into the world and begins his process of adaptation. The reference to a cosmic order is not coincidental, since *The Absorbent Mind* is a collection of the conferences Montessori held as part of the first training course for assistants organised in Ahmedabab, in India. During this stay she obviously had means to arrive at a new vision of her teaching project, which was “broadening” systematically, aiming to recover the moment of birth in a phylogenetic key. This systemic approach, which is a central part of Montessori's later line of pedagogical thought, forced a reconsideration of human development with regard to the continued process of transformation, made of progressive, autonomous adaptations that start while the child's mental development is more spontaneous and therefore, during the birth “process”, which also includes pregnancy.

The title of the work is also important, revealing the need to guarantee the child's right to develop the “absorbent” power of his brain. This is an idea that had influenced the direction of her medical studies at the Psychiatric Clinic of Rome University many years before. It was immediately after her degree, working which children hurriedly diagnosed as “mentally challenged”, that Montessori was able to see so much evidence of the negative influence of “sterile” environments in human cognitive development. If children are forced to live in poor environments with very little to interest them and therefore, incapable of arousing their intellectual curiosity, it is more likely that over time they will present mental problems often incorrectly associated with physiological problems of an organic nature. Thus there was no need for medical intervention, but rather for pedagogical action able to recover a child's latent potential and “uncover the child”²⁶, as she was able to explain later: “it is the surroundings that reveal what is new and then intuition and interest

²⁵ Cfr. M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit.

²⁶ Cfr. M. Montessori, *La scoperta del bambino* (1948).

are able to open a new route to progress”²⁷. It was this “spark”²⁸ that led her to see a need to organise environments for children so that they were really “child friendly”, aware that the places in which children grow and form do not need to educate, but they do need to become an aid to life, contributing to the formation of a child’s mental powers and making it easier for these to burst forth. “An aid to the construction carried out by the human soul, (...) development of all the immense potential with which the new-born child is endowed”²⁹. This is and what makes a child-friendly environment, which accompanies the child’s psychic construction, without forcing it. This is why the process of birth, which is a process of psychic construction, requires precious, loving care that not everyone is able to guarantee and for which meticulous theoretical and practical preparation is required. According to Montessori, this process needs trained professional figures: experts somewhere between medicine and pedagogy, highly experienced in the psycho-pedagogical sector as well as in medicine, and able to recognise and respond to the mental needs of children.

The educator – as she defined it – was to work in all areas of early childhood, especially in pre-school institutions. In actual fact Montessori did not exclude – on the contrary she worked in particular to implement this – the use of such figures in hospitals. The purpose was to “double assistance”, as she had pointed out to one of her closest pupils³⁰. In fact the assistant was to work with the paediatrician from birth, taking care of the child, who was unwittingly neglected as a result of needing to care for the mother who, in her opinion, was also given little support on an emotional level. Montessori was in fact convinced that the mother’s emotional wellbeing had a natural influence on the physical and mental health of the child. The Montessori assistant would have the job of helping the woman to become aware of her role as mother and to recognise the needs of her child according to specific age-linked requirements.

Pedagogical education for mothers was always a part of Montessori’s studies and from the 1920s she implemented an information campaign on the need to educate mothers so that nothing would be improvised or left to chance. This applied not only to physical care, but also to the child’s “mental hygiene and the health of his inner life”³¹. This was the new mission for

²⁷ Ivi, p. 35.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit., p. 16.

³⁰ The reference is to a letter that Montessori wrote to Adele Costa Gnocchi in 1950 on occasion of the establishment of the Montessori educator training school, inaugurated the year before to train these new professional figures scientifically. In her letter, Montessori set out the role she wanted for her educators and the reason they needed to work in hospitals, alongside doctors and midwives. The contents of the letter were published in G. Honneger Fresco, *Il neonato, con amore*, Ferro Edizioni, Milano 1987, pp. 270-271.

³¹ This text, from a US conference in 1916, is currently published in A. M. Ferrati (a cura

the mother, the new duty of a “new form of pedagogy, based on reliable scientific discoveries”³².

Also important is the next text from the same conference: “the girls who yesterday attended hospital courses to become better mothers, will tomorrow go into kindergartens to learn the art of protecting the new lives that nature has entrusted to them”³³. A form of social work, as defined by Montessori back in the late 19th century, during her well-known campaigns to safeguard women’s rights, when on several occasions she stressed women’s ability to contribute to civil progress through the education of younger generations and the “socialisation” of maternal, female skills.

4. *The new-born child, father of man*

Heading this project with the responsibility of training this new professional figure while Montessori was abroad was Adele Costa Gnocchi, who met Montessori in 1908, in Città di Castello³⁴, where both had moved for reasons of study. The following year Costa Gnocchi decided to attend the first Scientific Pedagogy course organised and run by Montessori, marking the start of an indissoluble collaboration between the two, which led Costa Gnocchi to organise courses, under the supervision of Montessori, who was often out of the country. In the 1920s she set up the first Children’s House in Rome. The school was founded with the aim of creating a “child-friendly” place, but it soon became somewhere in which to welcome parents with problems or who were simply seeking useful advice to better deal with the processes of their children’s development. These consultancy initiatives for families would later lead, also in Rome, to the establishment of two services, specifically devised for the improvement and specialisation of adults who, for different reasons, had responsibilities for children’s education: the Montessori Assistant Training College in 1949 and the Centro Nascita Montessori in 1960. The first was created in order to train the new professional figure wanted by Montessori, who would be highly specialised in looking after children; while the second institute, which is still active, was to refresh the training of assistants post qualification.

The assistant training college was revolutionary in its approach to the psycho-pedagogical training, since it was set up as the first school for assistants

di), *Nido Montessori e Casa dei Bambini a Chiaravalle. Un aiuto alla vita*, Edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori e Comune di Chiaravalle, Ancona 2000, p. 7.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ In this period Montessori had been invited to Città di Castello by Leopoldo Franchetti and his wife, Alice Hallgarten, with whom she had been working for years, to collate the results of her teaching experiments in a single volume. The book itself was published by Scipione Lapi in 1909, with the title *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all’educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini* [The Discovery of the Child].

of children aged from 0 to 3 years. On this subject, doctors Giuseppe Vitetti and Cesare Pignocco³⁵, lecturers at the school, gave interesting papers at the International Montessori Conference in San Remo, in 1949. Starting with the school's early training experiences, both underlined the progress that the new professional figure being developed would be able to guarantee with regard to births, starting with a different, more significant relationship between the medical and psycho-pedagogical fields. "The research we are seeking to undertake – they pointed out on this occasion – involves collaboration between Medicine and Psychology. Medicine is understood here as being of the preventive kind, the biological and constitutionalist study of development. Psychology since we do not intend to continue with the error that has persisted for so long, in the field of medicine, to look exclusively or almost at the somatic factor of the child's growth, while ignoring the other, divine aspect of development, where the child creates the man"³⁶.

The considerations of Vitetti and Pignocco focused on a need to combine the psycho-pedagogical sciences with medicine, taking them in a preventive direction rather than a diagnostic one. What was essential was a more global approach to training the people who would be working in childcare, as well as providing specialist training for the professional figures with the task and responsibilities of receiving and then being responsible for the manifold dimensions of human life, referred specifically to early childhood.

5. *Help me to be born by myself*

To be able to enrol for the Montessori assistant training college, which was private but recognised by the Ministerial Consortium for Technical Training, it was necessary to be at least 18 years of age (up to a maximum of 35) and to have a high school diploma. Although initially a two-year course, it became a three-year course as the college's organisers wished to extend the work experience period in order to boost its effectiveness.

What was the role of the Montessori assistant? To understand this role and its central nature in full, especially with regard to birth, we need to start from the analysis and description of their duty to educate the mother, which preceded the subsequent care for the child. This meant that the Montessori assistant would have the duty of accompanying the child before its birth, supporting the mother during the long period of gestation. There were numer-

³⁵ It should be pointed out that both worked actively with the Teacher Training College from the time of its founding, fully embracing the ideas of the founder, Adele Costa Gnocchi, and the creator, Maria Montessori.

³⁶ G. Vitetti, C. Pignocco, *Prospettive per uno studio unitario dello sviluppo*. Paper by Prof. Dott. Giuseppe Vitetti and Dott. Cesare Pignocco, from the Scuola Nazionale Assistenti all'Infanzia Montessoriane di Roma (Italy), in AA.VV., *La formazione dell'uomo nella ricostruzione mondiale*. Proceedings from the 8th International Montessori Conference, Ente Opera Montessori, Roma 1950, p. 159.

ous theories in support of the need to limit the mother's emotions during pregnancy; one of the best known of these is the theory of the trauma of birth, developed by Otto Rank³⁷ in the 1920s. Rank was convinced of the link between pathological behaviour in adulthood and the potential trauma going back to the period of birth. Besides the impossibility for the period to base this link on science, Rank's idea pointed to the existence of the child's psychic life during pregnancy and due to which he invited mothers to pay particular attention at this time to avoid emotional trauma that could have serious effects on the child's mind.

Rank's theory was later used by Montessori at a series of conferences during her stay in Kodaikanal, India³⁸. Montessori spoke of "violent trauma caused by terror"³⁹ linked to giving birth. The terror of feeling physical pain during labour, common to many mothers, caused emotional outbursts in the foetus that were subconsciously "embodied" by the child and which would emerge after the birth, on specific occasions reproducing the scene of the delivery, subconsciously reminding the baby of the negative experiences linked to it. Montessori called these genuine "psychological regressions"⁴⁰, which forced the child to remain tied to his prenatal period, inevitably blocking his abilities for autonomous development. A mental and psychological illness that can be controlled with special attention to the organisation of the birth environment. For this reason the Montessori assistant would work to allow the mother and child to remain in contact as much as possible after the birth, thereby fostering mutual recognition in an obstruction-free environment.

Each time that preparations are made for a birth it is necessary to remember that the new-born child "has just come out of a place of perfect silence and total darkness. He must be moved and handles with the utmost care, not suddenly lowered into a bath, or dressed with rough, rapid movements (...). The best thing would be not to dress the new-born, but to keep him in a warm room without draughts and to transport him on a soft mattress so that he can remain in a position similar to that before birth (...). As well as the hygiene precautions and the necessary protection, mother and baby need to be considered as two parts of the same body, still vitally connected by animal magnetism, and who, for a certain time, will need isolation and care and attention in all things"⁴¹.

A few years after publication of the Kodaikanal conferences, Montessori, who was still involved in "discovering" childhood and still very drawn to the "mystery" of birth, wrote that the "after birth the child needed to remain in as much contact as possible with his mother, in surroundings that do not strik-

³⁷ Cfr. O. Rank, *Il trauma della nascita. Sua importanza per la psicoanalisi* (1924), Sugarco Edizioni, Milano 1990.

³⁸ Cfr. M. Montessori, *Educazione per un mondo nuovo* (1946), Garzanti, Milano 2008.

³⁹ Ivi.

⁴⁰ Ivi.

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 65-66.

ingly differ (...) from the surroundings in which he formed before birth: not too much light or noise, because the child comes from a warm, perfectly silent and dark place³⁴².

Montessori and Costa Gnocchi pointed out the importance of placing the child on his mother immediately after the birth, even delaying cutting the umbilical cord. This is a process that Montessori, in her medical capacity, explained this process in scientific terms⁴³, referring the reason to psychological questions of essential importance, including the need to guarantee a biological bond between mother and child, even a few minutes after birth, to allow the new-born to develop an autonomous process of separation from his mother.

For similar reasons, well aware that attachment to the mother, even in the moments in which the child feels the physiological need to feed, guarantees him balanced mental development, Montessori assistants recommended breastfeeding “on demand”. This meant not complying with set feeding times but allowing the child to set the times based on his needs which, evidently, are not just physical but also psychological. Meeting his demands for mental as well as physical nutrition, the mother guarantees the child that his need for faith, in himself and in his ability to “conquer” the subject of his learning will be met and in the case of the maternal figure, that he will have support in case of need. This type of faith is what every child needs to construct his outside world, which not by coincidence, is built on sensory conquests.

The first abilities to be safeguarded in building the foundations for a child’s autonomous development are the sensorial capabilities, which develop before birth⁴⁴. This is why it is also necessary to think of décor, since it must not obstruct the child or his tendency to explore, which is active from the first seconds of life. The bed plays a central role, since the child will spend much of his time lying down in it. Montessori assistants insisted on the importance of a small, welcoming cradle, able to hold the baby’s body, also from an emotional viewpoint, giving him serenity. The sides of the cradle needed to be as low as possible, to allow the child to “conquer” his world by looking at it.

⁴² M. Montessori, *La mente del bambino. Mente assorbente* (1949), cit., p. 101.

⁴³ The necessary waiting time before proceeding to cut the umbilical cord is linked to the need to guarantee autonomy to the child right from birth. It is the child who sets the moment in which the cord is cut, which in this case is linked to his ability to breathe. The cut needs to be made at the time and at the point in which it blocks the passage of blood. Both of these moments vary among new-born babies because the development time is different for every human being.

⁴⁴ The intelligence of a new-born baby’s skin is mentioned, among others, by Frédéric Leboyer, who believes that the skin contains the child’s sensory abilities. In the first few days of life this sensoriality reaches its height in some points of the body, especially the back, and it is no coincidence that this is the part of the body through which the baby is most in contact with his mother, since its surface continues to touch the walls of the uterus: “when we say that the past is behind us, we are not using an image. It is a fact. The past is in our spine! And it is to this spine that the world, the mother spoke”. F. Leboyer, *Per una nascita senza violenza. La nascita, il venire al mondo, il parto, dal punto di vista del bambino* (1974), cit., p. 88.

After six months, mothers were advised to pass from the cradle to a mattress on the floor, in order to allow the child the possibility to move freely in the area around him and to reach other places in some way without needing help, which is not possible when in a cot with bars.

6. *The topical nature of the Montessori programme for education from birth*

After the official closure of the Montessori Assistant Training College in 1964, mothers' education and, more generally, the education of parents became the job of the Centro Nascita Montessori. This centre, initially set up in order to guarantee training and updates for Montessori assistants, currently studies new-born babies and their need to grow as well as offering training to parents and families of children of different ages. The seminars organised by the Centro Nascita for parents include antenatal classes.

With the closure of the Montessori Assistant Training College, announced by the school being taken over by the Government⁴⁵, the Montessori assistant began to fall out of use, in particular with regard to delivery rooms or in the home during the post-natal period. This is likely due to the school's transformation into a common professional school for women, which then admitted students from middle school, who were too young and without the experience required to deal with the courses in support of mothers and child education from birth. A mother, and more so a woman preparing to become a mother, needs solid emotional support that only an adult woman with experience in birth, including personal, is able to guarantee.

In Italy we are currently seeing a comeback of the non-healthcare professional figure specialising in welcoming new-born children. These are professionals with a social and welfare role, far closer to the psycho-educational field than to that of the doctor and purposefully known as "doulas" to remind us of the Greek origins of their role⁴⁶. Doulas, professionals found all over the world, are women, usually mothers, who place their parenting skills at the disposal of other women, aiding them along the path that will lead them to become parents in their turn, together with their partners. Doulas respond to all the needs of the new parents, supporting them in the more delicate stages of their journey into parenthood. These include the gestation period and the stages of labour, during which, based on personal experience, as well as on

⁴⁵ Its transformation into a state school, which happened in the late 1950s, led to its gradual closure. This is because within a short time the school lost the training characteristics for which it stood out previously, due to a preference for programmes that gradually took it further and further away from the Montessori teaching method.

⁴⁶ In spite of its Greek origins, the term "doula" was used for the first time in the 1970s, first in anthropological circles and then in medicine and healthcare, referring to women, already mothers themselves, who assisted women during labour, birth and the delicate stage of breastfeeding.

their psycho-educational training, doulas also provide physical and emotional support during birth, above all meeting the mental needs of the woman giving birth⁴⁷.

Due to a series of affinities in terms of interests and skills with the Montessori trained assistant, we cannot discount that doula training or that of other professional figures, will not include specific specialisation modules based on Montessori training in future; nor does it exclude the possibility to bring back a more specific line of study that includes the professional Montessori trained assistant, also in view of increased demand by families and the area in general.

For this reason too, with regard to the possibility to rethink the specialist training of Montessori assistants, both as a social and healthcare workers and also as educators for early childhood, the aim here has been to look back over the educational process, returning to the scientific basics of pedagogy which in some cases are habitually put into practice by childcare services, but which nonetheless need to be strengthened and scientifically based, by rebuilding and recovering an epistemological framework that is deeply rooted in both historic and methodological terms. The return of this Montessori-trained figure and therefore, the ability to capitalise on specific childcare and educational skills in the field of education from birth, would also help to qualify services for early childhood, including those provided within a hospital environment, such as crèches and neonatology wards. Specialist services, where roles and positions are well-defined and using solid pedagogical and methodological skills based on Montessori training, scientifically based and accredited on an international level, may move in the direction of a possible institutional validation of training.

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⁴⁷ The Associazione Doule Italia, founded in 2010 is capitalising on the return of this type of birth assistance in Italy. The aim of this association is to promote the legal, cultural and social recognition of the doula, whose professional skills are guaranteed by the association. It also provides training and supervision for the activities carried out nationally and internationally.

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