

«Follow a rule of life». Classroom management and positive discipline in an Apulian Children's House

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Abstract

This article aims to compare Montessori's perspective of the classroom as community of self-regulated learners to the current research on classroom management, highlighting the importance of the teacher's attitude in promoting an inclusive and cooperative school setting. The methodology used is a semi-structured interview administered to a Montessori teacher who works in an Apulian Children's house. The data were collected in order to capture the teacher's opinion about the topicality of Montessori's idea of discipline and classroom management in early childhood education.

Il presente articolo mira a comparare la prospettiva montessoriana della classe come comunità di alunni autoregolati con le recenti ricerche sulla gestione della classe, sottolineando l'importanza dell'atteggiamento del docente nella promozione di un ambiente scolastico inclusivo e cooperativo. La metodologia utilizzata è un'intervista semi strutturata somministrata a una docente di una Casa dei Bambini in Puglia. I dati sono stati raccolti per fare emergere le opinioni della docente rispetto all'attualità della idea montessoriana di disciplina e alla gestione della classe nell'educazione infantile.

Keywords: positive discipline; classroom management; normalization; self-regulation learning; Montessori education

Parole chiave: disciplina positiva; gestione della classe; normalizzazione; apprendimento autoregolato; pedagogia montessoriana

1. Classroom management and *positive discipline*

In over fifty years, researchers have concluded that classroom management is a powerful component of the overall classroom climate that affects student behavior, engagement, and the quality of student learning. Classroom management has also relevant impact on teachers' stress, burnout, job satisfaction, and intent to leave the profession (Chang, 2009). Despite its important implications for practice, the construct is described with difficulty because of the complexity of the concept of classroom to which it is linked.

«The classroom is not simply a background or a container for teaching and learning, a neutral and synthetic space in which teachers and students happen to be. Classrooms, rather, are systems of interrelated activity segments that are tangible and powerful partners in constructing what happens in these environments. [...] What we see when we watch teachers and students going about their work is the product not solely of individual dispositions or intentions, but also of the demands of a very complex behavior setting» (Doyle, 2009, p. 157).

To make *visible* all these aspects of the classroom, a large amount of investigations were carried out, setting different perspectives on classroom management. For example, Emmer and Sabornie (2015) underlined the role of teacher emotions in the classroom management; Wubbels (2016) defined a relational approach of classroom management, characterized by teacher-student relationships based on a combination of a rather high degree of teacher authority and care. From a sociocultural perspective, Hickey and Schafer (2006) identified the goal of classroom management in the development of an effective learning community where students (and teachers) learn to be active participants. Trying to make a synthesis of these perspectives, we can say that classroom management is based on some essential elements: positive teacher-student relationship, clear rules and routines, classroom space arrangements that facilitate students' learning and reduce opportunities for undesirable behavior, and management of disruptive behaviors (Stevens & Lingo, 2013). As we can see, some of these elements refer to a preventive approach (focused on relational conditions), while others refer to a reactive approach (focused on behavioral consequences).

Based on the studies of Evertson and Weinstein (2006) who defined classroom management as «the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning» (p. 4), Martin and colleagues (2016) demonstrated that teacher actions are preceded by their belief systems regarding both child development and cultural responsiveness. These two sets of beliefs frame the nature of teachers' actions in two components of classroom management: behavior management (BM) and instructional management (IM). The distinction between these two dimensions of behavior management and instructional management is particularly important in order to analyze Montessori's view of classroom management. While BM includes establishing rules, forming a reward structure, and providing opportunities for student input, IM refers to teachers' educational aims and methodologies, and includes monitoring seatwork and structuring daily routines in teachers and students practices.

This second class of strategies fits the Montessori way to manage class interactions. In particular, Montessori classroom management is characterized by a proactive approach that gives rise to pupil self-regulation and

school connectedness rather than external rewards and punishment. Based on that, the purpose of this article is to associate recent research on classroom management to Montessori's ideas about the school setting, highlighting the importance of the environment and of teachers' educational styles in promoting discipline and self-regulation in pupils.

«Every educational action that the teacher practices helps to create the conditions for an effective classroom management, even the spatial arrangement of the benches, the choice of the colors of the walls and the type of material present in the classroom. Even the non-verbal language, the position of the teacher, his dialectic ability, the tone of voice, are decisive in managing the classroom» (d'Alonzo, 2012, p. 15, *auth. trans.*).

In line with the revolutionary idea of education promoted by Ellen Key at the beginning of the last century, the best constructive elements of Montessori educational spaces are order, peace, and beauty. These elements lead from school to family and society. Thus, a clear and calm atmosphere should affect every environment in which children live, in order to create a community based on altruism and self-love at the same time, in which everyone is helped to be free and respectful of the rights of the others (Pironi, 2010).

Montessori is actually famous for stressing the role of the preparation of the environment, and this is a key element of classroom management. However, she considers important another characteristic of the school setting: the psychological and philosophical preparation of who has to prepare the environment: the teacher. «Thus, the preparation of the environment includes the order and cleanliness of the furnishings and equipment as well as the order and awareness of the teacher's mind» (Albanesi, 1990, p. IX).

The emphasis on the teacher's attitude doesn't mean that the adult is the protagonist and the only responsible of what happens at school. In this regard, Freiberg & Lamb (2009) distinguish between teacher-centered classrooms and person-centered classrooms. In teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher is the sole leader who sets the rules and posts them for the students. Management is a form of oversight and the rewards are mostly extrinsic. In person-centered classrooms, leadership is shared, management is a form of guidance, rewards are mostly intrinsic and discipline comes from the self.

Contemporary research on classroom management demonstrates that person-centered classrooms facilitate higher achievement, and have more positive learning environments with stronger teacher-student relationships than teacher-centered or traditional classrooms.

From Rogers' studies on the importance of *freedom to learn* (1969), the role of person-centered environments was highlighted by authors such as Resnick *et al.* (1997) and Mc Neely *et al.* (2012), who observed for example significant correlations between school connectedness and student empowerment. The Montessori view of classroom management anticipated this approach because it provides social and emotional wellbeing, positive school and classroom climate, and student self-discipline. Let's see in detail Montessori's idea of discipline and how it can be associated to a proactive approach to classroom management.

In classroom management, the role of discipline is very important to provide a calm and productive school context, in which pupils know what is expected of them to do and are able to work autonomously and responsibly.

Unfortunately, in professional literature the concept of discipline is full of misunderstandings. The traditional concept of discipline views it as the repressive method through which the adult makes the children obey. In turn, this depends on the image of the child, considered a passive and inert being, victim of his instincts. «We do not believe that one is disciplined only when he is artificially made as silent as a mute and as motionless as a paralytic. Such a one is not disciplined but annihilated» (Montessori, 1909/1992, p. 54, *auth. trans.*). The stereotype of a child with an unstable nature had always justified an educational intervention based on obedience and submission. With the advent of positivism «the saying of Solomon had only been mitigated, limiting itself to soften school work, with the insertion of external remedies (play, gymnastics, recreation, etc.), without however affecting the state of dependence and impersonal adaptation» (Pironi, 2014, p. 26, *auth. trans.*).

On the contrary, in Montessori education, the adaptation of the child to the environment is a constructive activity helped by the teacher's proactive practice. Actually, it would be more correct to say that for Montessori it is the environment that is adapted to the child and not the opposite. In fact, Meazzini (2017, p. 13, *auth. trans.*) speaks of *positive discipline*, referring to «a particular style of educational intervention, in which positive behaviors, such as motivation, self-control *et similia* of the student are clearly encouraged with strategies fully respectful of his dignity». Teachers' ability to promote this kind of *positive discipline*, based not on prizes and punishments but on deep respect of the individual personality and collective educational activity, for work, for good, is an important characteristic of an inclusive school context. Thus, in Montessori education every child is invited to collaborate and not to compete with peers, following the natural way of development of the human race, in a perspective of *positive coexistence* (Rossini, 2018). So, Montessori's idea of discipline is not only an individual trait that the pupil expresses in class, but a key element of society, that children have the mission to build. «When a child is interested in an occupation and concentrates on it, pursuing it with constancy, he is on the path of discipline. [...] A community in which everyone is absorbed in his work, and this one is spontaneously chosen and can be realized or abandoned spontaneously, is a free community, but disciplined» (Montessori, 1927, pp. 111-112, *auth. trans.*). In Montessori education, the deep concentration shown by the child in the Children's Houses reveals the essence of human being, which is the main prerequisite to social life: as it is, Montessori (1909/1992, p. 54, *auth. trans.*) called «disciplined who is the master of himself and therefore can dispose of himself where it is necessary to follow a rule of life». In this way, *follow a rule of life* means to be able to internalize a *discipline of freedom* that cannot be imposed, but only stimulated. *Discipline of freedom* is a form of self-discipline, by which the child learns to know himself and to determine the appropriate actions needed to grow and develop as a person, without someone monitoring him (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009).

2. *Normalization and self-regulation learning*

The keyword of Montessori's thought about the role of discipline in classroom management is *normalization*: in the first edition of *The Method* (1909), she used the word *conversion* to indicate the acquisition by children, initially disordered and rebellious, of a disciplined and dignified behavior. The transition from one state to the other always follows a part of manual work managing real things, work accompanied by mental concentration.

Through normalization, the child replaces the “vices” of sloth, timidity, and caprice with the “virtues” of work, sociability, and concentration (Cossentino, 2006).

«The term *normalization* indicates the change that occurs in the child when the educational conditions allow him to freely express his potential, finding in the environment activities that satisfy his inner needs, because it is through work, the orderly way of doing things, in which the hand guided by intelligence is the protagonist, that the child «normalizes», that is recovers his state of health and balance. The change that takes place with *normalization* is the unveiling of the natural qualities of the child when he can build himself according to his own laws of development; it is synonym of freedom, independence, love, joy, self-improvement» (Trabalzini, 2018, p. 161, *auth. trans.*).

Normalization is an essential element of the school climate because it refers to a special atmosphere of discipline, tranquility, satisfaction and grace that characterizes the school environment, where both individual and collective doing are certainly directed to a purpose that attracts and guides the quality of the educational activities, but they are ordered to an even more vital purpose, that of knowledge and perfection of pupils through a tireless work of trials, efforts and achievements (Scocchera, 1990). The process of *normalization* is being investigated by neuroscience, particularly focused on the role of attention in learning. As stated by Regni (2019, p. 163, *auth. trans.*), «concentrated work is at the basis of every development of the child, of every simple discovery as well as of every possible form of collaboration, empathy and dialogue with other children». A distracted child is dependent on the environmental cues because he cannot govern them, while a concentrated child is master of himself and can follow his intimate transformation. An environment characterized by a great quantity of stimuli doesn't promote concentration: the abundance of information creates poverty of attention because it forces the child to distribute his attention among too many information sources. Frequent interruptions and abrupt transition from one activity to another also hinder concentration. «The brain consumes time and energy every time it suspends a process that involves attention to initiate another, it is called “switching cost”. Turning on and off the attention switch continuously seems a harmful exercise» (Regni, 2019, p. 170, *auth. trans.*). Let's see how attention and concentration work according to Montessori. Primarily, we must distinguish between attention span, also called concentration, and attention. «To the degree that a child stays with his/her task, without being distracted or interrupted by other events and activities in the classroom, we may say that one's attention span is long or short, within the normal range or not» (Albanesi, 1990, p. 96). The attention is a more complex process, that requires a broad awareness of own needs and sensitivity for the environmental conditions.

Pecori (2017) studied the normalization of attention in Montessori schools, which corresponds to the restoration of focused attention or selective normal function and is biologically expected/designed, and to which the control of bodily impulses is related. In a situation of free choice, the children seemed to fix themselves in an unusual and repetitive way on an apparently simple activity, concentrating to the point of totally detaching themselves from the surrounding world. After three months, this bizarre behavior disappeared, leaving room for laborious and calm conduct, dictated by an inner order that made the child smiling, joyful, and able to make decisions. The normalization of attention leads to the normalization of the personality which allows the child

to acquire spontaneous discipline, alternate the circadian rhythms of activity and rest, spontaneously self-correct the error, be guided by the sensory periods typical of different age groups.

Normalization is related to two important psychoeducational issues. The first concept related to Montessori's idea of *normalization* is the *optimal experience theory* which explores the role of subjective experience in the development of a person's skills and talents. This experience is known as *flow*, an intrinsically motivated, task-focused state characterized by full concentration, a change in the awareness of time, feelings of clarity and control, a merging of action and awareness, and a lack of self-consciousness (Gsikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is the full involvement of flow rather than happiness that makes for excellence in life because it provides flashes of intense living against the dull background of everyday life.

Secondarily, Maria Montessori anticipated what is now called *self-regulated learning*, a concept introduced by Zimmerman (1986) to indicate the processes of self-direction that can significantly increase school achievement, motivation and competence. Self-regulation learning refers to the degree that students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process.

Self-regulated students are able to regulate motives, methods, performances, outcomes, and the social and environmental resources they use for learning. Montessori education has a strong connection with this approach because both have the same hallmarks: choice and control (Schunk & Ertmer, 2012). Montessori education helps pupils to develop self-regulation learning, offering a prepared environment where children feel safe and can demonstrate creativity, intellectual curiosity, and higher-level thinking. To achieve this kind of skills, pupils have to be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them to grow socially and emotionally. And this is what happens in the Children's Houses. Clearly, self-regulation becomes a competence able to guide the self-education of the child in his whole life, and not only at school. By exercising what Bellingeri calls the "virtue of attention", the child enters into an ethical and affective dimension that puts him in close relationship with the deepest part of himself but also with the external environment and others. From this point of view, attention is a powerful tool of the mind and it is strictly connected to memory. The distinction between what we remember and what we forget depends on the degree of the attention we pay to the events of our life and to the care we give to others. Substantially, it's an ethical and affective matter, like some kind of *mindfulness*, intended as the opposite of carelessness, indifference, and contempt (Regni, 2019).

We can see a sort of reunion between two types of order that are quite different, yet similar: the order of outer space/environment and the inner order that, reflecting (one in the other) seem to lead to the overcoming of a possible chaos, whether it is internal or external, also prefiguring the genesis of a higher order that, ultimately, translates into a living (to be sought, maintained and recreated) of well-being and harmony (Gallerani, 2010, p. 9, *auth. trans.*).

3. A case study in a Montessori Children's House

In order to capture the teacher's opinion about the topicality of Montessori's idea of discipline and classroom management in early childhood education, a case study was conducted in an Apulian Children's House. Case studies are a qualitative research method that focuses on one unit of study. According to Merriam (1998), the

most single defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, that is the case. Boundaries require researchers to scope their study. In this kind of qualitative methodology, the possibility of generalization is not important because the researcher aims to a deep comprehension of a bounded context which can contain a person, an organization, a class, a policy, or any given unit of study.

Case studies are particularly useful as preliminary research that provides a fresh perspective and sets the stage for future: related research case studies fit well when «a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control» (Yin, 1994, p. 9). In this case, the Covid-19 pandemic emergency didn't allow the use of a combination of research methods as previewed in the research design. So, we later aim to compare data gathered through the interview with direct observation and document analysis, in order to build an intensive and thick description of the case study.

As the case study offers a framework for investigating complex social units containing multiple variables, the impossibility to use different methodologies and to carry out a field research hindered the development of the fullest picture possible of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1985). However, we used data collected as a good means of studying knowledge utilization, able to expand the experiences of participants.

The teacher who was interviewed is 44 years old and has a teaching experience of 20 years. For 6 years she has been teaching at the Comprehensive Institute Mazzini-Modugno in Bari, in one of the Children's Houses. The school is located in the center of the city of Bari, and pupils come from families with a medium-high social and cultural background. In line with National Indications, the activities are carried out in continuity with those of primary school and in collaboration with families. The Montessori curriculum is oriented to the educational design of the whole institution, which is aimed to develop its own educational action in consistency with the principles of inclusion of persons as well as cultures. The educational approach in the Children's Houses is based on the following activities:

- practical life and sociality;
- sensory education;
- language;
- logical and mathematical mind;
- cosmic education.

The kindergarten consists of eight classrooms, four Montessori-inspired and four with a traditional curriculum. The Children's House in which the participant works consists of 19 children, 13 boys and 6 girls; it is heterogeneous in terms of age, there are, therefore, children of three, four and five years. The parents choose in a conscious way to enroll their children in the Children's House and they are attentive, sensitive and open to peaceful dialogue with the teachers. Assuming that classroom management deals with the teacher's ability to motivate and interest pupils in learning activities and to encourage their commitment and participation, including the actions taken by teachers to establish the order in the classroom, involve pupils and stimulate their cooperative attitudes (d'Alonzo, 2012), we selected some keywords to encourage teacher's reflection. The keywords were: school inclusion, classroom management, cooperation and participation, self-regulated learning and

motivation. These words were the central topic of four questions, administered online, to which the teacher answered in December 2020. Here is the transcript of the answers, translated from Italian.

- 1) School inclusion: «Maria Montessori was responsible for a special contribution to the construction of an inclusive school, since her battles made education a right for all» (Rossini, 2020, p. 137, *auth. trans.*). Do you think that statement could still be valid in today's school?

«I firmly believe that the Montessori method is useful in a school inclusion perspective. In my daily work as a Montessorian support teacher, I observe how important the use of sensorial material is for the development of children with disabilities or special educational needs. Montessori sensed that it was the school that “did not work” and not the children who, at the beginning of the 1900s, were defined “deficient”, and she was right! All my young pupils, *all of them*, use in *autonomy* “their” material, which allows a sensorial education and has as its purpose the order among the many (too many?) impressions received by the child in the environment. The child can distinguish *by himself* the essential from the superfluous: the material stimulates the activity of the senses and calls to work the intelligence of *all*. In the classroom, the young pupils know perfectly where the material is stored, because it is exposed to their *free choice* and it never happens that they come to me to be helped to take it; this makes them autonomous and *safe of their own abilities*. For me, the material is a precious and irreplaceable ally, it *denounces the error* so I do not have to intervene in the work of the young pupil, maybe interrupting and causing frustration. Then, the material assures that there is no competition among children, it does not allow judgments, there are no first and last ones: in classroom reigns work and serenity. Also this is *inclusion* in my little Children's House».

- 2) Classroom management and discipline: How do you define the link between the idea of normalization and class management in the Montessori class? What strategies do you act to promote “self-discipline” in children?

«It happens very often that I and “my” young pupils receive welcome visits in class, by students of the psychopedagogical high school or university trainees of primary education sciences interested in the Montessori method. One of the first impressions that capture the visitor is the *silence* and *concentration* that reign in the classroom. The children are intent on the *work* and almost (rightly!) those who enter remain by the door and do not want to disturb. How far is the image of the chaos of children screaming! It is so and the “secret” is in the *work itself*, in the sensorial material that the child is using, and in the *environment* itself that is *educating* and invites to inner quiet. I usually have a place in my class where pupils come when they need help or I am the one who comes closer (but I am not too “intrusive”); my voice too is low and calm and I invite colleagues and school staff to maintain the same attitude. The child, guided by his inner interest, chooses the material and goes to work at the table, feeling that he needs silence and quiet to be able to use it; the classmate who is maybe next to him can't interrupt the work, he may observe and wait for the classmate to finish, but without interfering or hastening or generating confusion and anxiety. All these rules that normalize the child and consequently the relationships in the class are immediately implemented by me, through example, precise execution and control of movements, and care for the environment before the beginning of the school day. Every day of our (beautiful and satisfying) school life!».

- 3) Cooperation and participation. What features does the Montessori school have as a community of learners? What strategies do you act to promote cooperation and participation among children in the classroom?

«It happens frequently, during the first meetings at the beginning of the school year with the parents of the children attending the first year of the Children's House, that parents ask me the following question: "Is there a risk that peer-to-peer socialization might be underestimated in the Montessori classroom?" My colleagues and I reassure the parents by explaining that, after a first period of serene adaptation in a well-structured environment, the class becomes a small community of learning children where each one learns according to his own rhythms and his own natural inclinations. Thanks to the prepared environment, the young pupils move freely following the activities suitable for their maturation and their personal style. In small groups, in pairs or even just alone, the children, having at their disposal the sensorial material, exercise over and over again following their own interests and inner needs. The quiet, harmonious, well-kept and - why not! - beautiful and refined environment, promotes free expression and a positive psycho-affective growth in the young pupils necessary to build a serene trust in oneself and in others. The serene and respectful relationship with peers is therefore fundamental so that in the class can reign the calm necessary for the work. (Also in this reply the cornerstones of daily work with children come back: environment and material)».

- 4) Self-regulated learning and motivation: What relationship is there in Montessori education between autonomy and self-correction of the child? What educational strategies do you act to promote the motivation and concentration of children in class?

«What I try to do every day in class, trying humbly to stick as much as possible to Montessori's pedagogical principles, is to lead every single young pupil to the path of freedom and independence: I observe with joy that when the child becomes able to do things that he previously could not do without the intervention of an adult, he acquires self-confidence, an essential objective for autonomy and his further growth. My "allies", especially during the early times of the insertion of children in the Children's House, are the *exercises of practical life* that, according to Montessori's pedagogy, are the basis for the harmonious development of the personality: they act as a "bridge" between the first simple hand movements and the complex activities that will follow, allowing the child to engage in learning. The exercises of practical life, I observe it every day, lead the children to a state of inner tranquility, immediately gratify the effort because they end in a short time and can be repeated many times, until achieved satisfaction motivates the child to move on. *The care of the environment, the care of the person, the actions in the social relationships and the refined control of the movements* are exercises that are carried out day by day by the children who, supported by the sensorial material, work to "lead back to themselves", as Montessori says, to *normalize*».

5. Reflections and conclusions

The first results of the case study highlight the role of teacher preparation in classroom management. An effective classroom management requires strong teacher pedagogical skills in order to establish an inclusive setting, able to increase learning and participation in every child (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) considered as active citizen.

Referring to the first topic that is *school inclusion*, the essential element remarked by the teacher is the absence of competition in the Children's House. If every child is helped to develop his own potential at his own rhythms, inclusion is realized by valorizing individual differences and efforts rather than accomplishments and grades. Considering the second topic, which is the core of the research, classroom management and discipline, the interview provides a clear reflection on the authentic meaning of *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), which is a help and never an interference, as in traditional education where correcting the child's behavior and measuring his performances is central. By working independently in an appropriate environment and with suitable material, the children can satisfy their *vital forces* and commit as many errors as they need in order to reach the correct procedure and the correct results. «In such instances, the learning process is as spontaneous and self-gratifying as is drinking cool, fresh water from a mountain spring on a hot summer day» (Albanesi, 1990, p. 16).

The third question, cooperation and participation, introduces the characteristics of an inclusive and democratic class, in which participation is the natural consequence of an ordered environment and a respectful relationship among children. The great misunderstanding about cooperative work in Montessori education arises from the underestimation of the role of self-efficacy and self-esteem as essential prerequisites for social skills and therefore for common work. Only a child who is self-confident can open up to others and make available his knowledge and skills, actively participating in social life.

Here comes the final point that is self-regulation learning and motivation. The teacher interviewed defines normalization as the opportunity given to the child to *lead back to himself*. This statement doesn't mean that the child must be abandoned to himself but that he can learn to take care of himself by taking care of the environment, the material, and the others.

In this way, Montessori's pedagogical principles become universal and imperishable, independently from the strict adherence to the method. In fact, Cossentino argues that the Montessori method is an exemplar of a particular type of "coherent" practice, based on the consistency in language and behavior within as well as across classrooms and schools. In other words, the coherence of Montessori practice – both action and worldview – is located in Montessori culture, which makes the teaching practice a "cultural activity". Consequently, the scripts encoded in the method are enacted in the routines and rituals that punctuate life in Montessori schools. For Montessori, the natural order of the universe is exemplified in the cardinal virtues of concentration, coordination, order, independence, and respect.

«That is to say, the "method," as Montessorians are quick to point out, cannot be reduced to a collection of instructional techniques, curricular objectives or didactic materials. Rather, the practice of Montessori education entails participation in a highly coherent and deeply textured culture. Within that culture – what I understand to be the values, beliefs, and norms shared by Montessorians – members construct the meaning not only of a particular type of teaching and learning but of a particular type of living» (Cossentino, 2005, p. 212).

The analysis of Montessori classroom management leads to identifying two essential contributions in early childhood education. The first is related to the embodied practice that links hand and mind, in a social and situated construction of knowledge.

Moving from a culturalist perspective, the educational model developed by Montessori will find confirmation in Vygotskij's theories: intelligence is largely the internalization of the tools of culture; consequently external organized "means" appear of fundamental importance, such as "support steps" on which the child builds his future thought (Pironi, 2007). Among them, the act of teaching becomes a "window of ritual" (Geertz, 1973) able to promote social skills, ethical values, and intellectual growth in children. We can quote many examples of Montessori's way to ritualize experiences using gestures that enact classroom rules without direct instruction but through the empowerment of the child. A common Montessori classroom ritual is the child's silent placement of a hand on the teacher's shoulder to request attention.

«When a Montessori child places a hand on a teacher's shoulder and waits to be recognized, he is practicing the virtue of patience; he is achieving graceful human contact; he is acting out the value of respect, both for the needs of others and for work itself. The child probably does not understand the dense, symbolic meaning of the gesture at the moment she performs it, but with repetition, the gestures will become automatic, and their meanings will inscribe themselves into the child's consciousness. And, over time, he or she will become a respectful and patient person who is able to achieve a harmonious life» (Cossentino, 2005, pp. 216-217).

The second example is the ritual of silence that marks both an educational exercise (originally born to make visual acuity tests) and a cultural competence. Silence is a test of self-reflection and self-control, it is a *voice* calling children imperceptibly. Describing this wonderful discovery, Montessori said that children learned to move among things without bumping into them, to run without make noise, becoming careful and nimble. «Now they enjoyed their perfection. What interested them was to discover themselves» (Montessori, 1936/1992, p. 169, *auth. trans.*). The exercise of silence is a clear demonstration that an ordered and calm school climate cannot be the consequence of a direct, repressive and authoritarian intervention of the adult because it is on the contrary the effect of a free and spontaneous choice made by the children to satisfy their precise needs.

«If on the one hand we can find in the Montessori method a clear dislike towards silence – when it is the outcome of an outdated educational system that makes use of cumbersome discipline and merely expects docility from the side of the children – on the other hand, the Italian reform pedagogue clearly contributed to a process which we can describe as the educationalisation of silence» (Verstraete, 2016, p. 67).

Another fundamental contribution of Montessori is a conceptualization of classroom management within a complex cosmic vision. Classroom management is not only a technique to manage students' behavior (or misbehavior). We tried to demonstrate that in Montessori's perspective, classroom management can contribute to a cognitive democracy in which the self-discipline is not the price we have to pay to live peacefully with the others, but the tool through which we can express our freedom and, consequently, search our happiness. A

rational education, which ensures the right order and security that children need to grow psychologically healthy, is the most productive way to create a better world and a new mankind.

«To give centrality to the education of intelligence is a necessary condition for cultivating personal autonomy and independence of judgment, understood as necessary competences for an authentic participation in democratic life. The latter requires the establishment of a cognitive democracy in which everyone is guaranteed solid basic cultural skills and unquestionable reflective capacities, since a democratic education is always called upon to reconcile the autonomy and responsibility of citizens» (Gallerani, 2007, p. 53, *auth. trans.*).

In conclusion, we hope that the pedagogical research on this important topic can prove that – in every context of our life – discipline does not necessarily go hand in hand with coercion, but with intelligence. Democratic societies need intelligence to distinguish reality from myth, facts from suggestions, and truth from falsehood. To build them, we have to start from childhood.

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