MARIA MONTESSORI – A REMARKABLE FEMALE PROFILE IN PEDAGOGY AND A LIFE DEDICATED TO ITS MAJESTY: "THE CHILD"

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Abstract: *The article presents relevant biographical aspects of Maria Montessori's life, aspects that marked the construction and assertion of the creative personality of the first female doctor in Italy who dedicated her entire life to knowing the laws of child development and its holistic education. The article explains Maria Montessori's pedagogical theory of education by exploiting some of the most famous Montessorian texts: "The Child – A Divine, but Misunderstood Being", "The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to the Education of Young Children", "The Absorbent Mind" and "The Child in the Family". The practical part of the work supports the understanding of the Montessorian pedagogical concepts about the ability of every child to educate itself, to build itself as a personality under the natural forces available in a rich and stimulating environment, suitable to satisfy the need of the child to assimilate spontaneously what it needs in order to gradually turn into its own substance.*

Keywords: *Montessori pedagogy, holistic education, creative personality*.

1. Paper Rationale

The theoretical and practical value of the Montessori pedagogy is acknowledged in time and space both by the psychological and pedagogical research confirming the understanding and education of the child in accordance with the latter's unsuspected potential and by the Montessori practitioners in different social-cultural, historical, linguistic and religious areas.

Maria Montessori's life story is a remarkable one, one in which the first female doctor in Italy, dedicated to her profession, used all her scientific training and experience to develop a new method of education which challenged conventional models of education that had been in use up to that moment. Maria Montessori's involvement in the national league for education of children with retardation led to her appointment, together with Giuseppe Montesano, in the management of the Ortophrenic School, an activity that produced a change in her professional life from a physician to an educator. Up to that moment, her ideas about child development had only been theoretical, but the Ortophrenic School, conceived as a hospital in which teaching was performed, allowed Maria Montessori to put her ideas in practice. Here she spent two years experimenting and refining materials designed by Itard and Seguin, teaching and observing children every day and writing notes on them. In 1901 Maria Montessori left the Ortophrenic School and dedicated herself to her own studies on

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the philosophy of education and anthropology. In 1904 she became a lecturer at the Pedagogical School within the University in Rome.

The history of the international Montessorian movement sends back in time to the first international course held by Maria Montessori in 1913 in Rome in front of a large group of American professors, in front of whom she talked about her conception of teaching and the results of her scientific research obtained in working with normal children, but also with children with mental difficulties from Casa dei Bambini in Rome. Much later, her educational method became widely known in Italy and worldwide. Maria Montessori travelled extensively, overseeing the system of the Montessori schools around the world, writing and holding conferences. A very important moment was the first international congress of 1929. Then the Montessori International Association was founded, a dynamic body that kept its viability until now, with an outstanding global contribution to the prestige of Montessori education worldwide and a significant contribution to the continued expansion of Montessori education on all continents. Until the year of 1951, Maria Montessori had held over 30 international courses.

The Montessori Method is based on the scientific observation of the learning processes in children, a type of learning that is achieved through all their five senses and also as a discovery process that determines concentration, motivation, self-discipline and love for knowledge. Children learn at their own individual pace and choose their own activity out of several possibilities. Children of different ages are grouped in the same class, forming learning communities in which the older ones share spontaneous knowledge to the younger ones, while having the possibility of strengthening their own knowledge. The Montessori pedagogy aims at a comprehensive development of the child from an intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual and social point of view. According to the Montessorian concept, education is "*an active support for the expansion of normal life ... to turn on each individual observed, taken individually …*" (Montessori M., 1977, p.101), and "to educate" is to teach the child to think and act independently in a responsible manner, but also to create the right environment to satisfy the need of the child to assimilate spontaneously. Through the teacher's caring, the environment adapts to the child, allowing it to manifest free of any constraints. The role of the educator is to observe the child and to prepare the environment, based on observations, in order to create learning situations.

The manner in which Maria Montessori began her medical, anthropological, psychiatric and pedagogical studies on children with defficiencies and on normal children is memorable. Conducting experimental research on children aged 0-6 years, Maria Montessori proved that measuring the children's intelligence, skills and knowledge using tests shows the levels of education and of pursuit of native capacities. She believed the human personality to be primarily a social product of the social relations, of the material and of the cultural conditions in which the person is developing. In her view, the growth period of the human being, especially the first period, is marked by short stages dominated by special sensibilities called "*critical periods*". If, during this period, the child is given the possibility of activities appropriate to domestic necessities, then conditions that are favourable to the physical and mental development are created. The physical and psychic development of the child is dependent on the degree of satisfaction of its instincts. Stimulated by its inner instincts, the child "absorbs" from the surrounding

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environment what it needs. The educator needs not interfere, but rather needs to create an environment favourable to the necessities of the child, to see that each "sensitive period" provides the external stimuli from which the child will freely "absorb" what it needs, i.e. what is necessary to it. From birth till the age of 6, children learn through play, through direct experience with things, through implication. They form their intelligence "absorbing" images, sounds, smells. At first, the "absorption" is effortless, gradually the voluntary effort appears. The child is challenged to self-construct. At this stage, much of the character is formed. From 6-12 years old, children begin to understand the world and use the mind, not only the senses, they become equally interested in what they do not see, and they need explanations and demonstrations. It is a time of power and mental strength, a period of labour and social development. From 12 to 18 years, children go through a period of profound crisis due to puberty and have to face many difficulties. The teen needs a special environment to pass this stage. It is this period that defines character. From 18-24 years, the adult should never do for the child what the child can do alone because this induces the child's addiction to the adult. Maria Montessori believes that these stages are the four key stages in the development and evolution of the child to adulthood, and each stage has its own objectives: development of the self as an individual being, development of the social being, the birth of the adult and finding of the self, strengthening the mature personality and acquiring the status of a specialized explorer.

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

The evolution of the Montessori movement in our country is linked to the contributions of great Romanian teachers and cultural personalities, among which we could mention Ilie Șulea Firu, Ion Rădulescu Pogoneanu, C. Bușureanu, C. Rădulescu Motru, Nicolae Titulescu, Isabela Sadoveanu, Elena Rusceac, and others. Between 1913-1931, many Romanian educators attended the Montessori international courses, one of them being Ilie Șulea Firu, a remarkable teacher with a significant contribution in what the Romanian translations of important pedagogical Montessorian work is concerned, a close family friend of the Montessoris, secretary and then president of the Montessori Association in Romania (1933, 1990). After the '90s, there could be noticed a growing interest in the affirmation of the Montessori pedagogy and in the extension of the alternative Montessori education in our country by: enhancing scientific concerns (Felea, 2002), profile research and studies of the Institute of Educational Sciences in Bucharest (Cuciureanu M., Negreanu E.), doctoral theses in the field (Herseni I.), translations of important works of Maria Montessori (Căpraru M.), teacher training for Montessori education (Brezniceanu A.M., Ulimță M.), symposiums, conferences and private initiatives of applying the Montessori method in preschool and primary education.

The Montessori education presents the characteristics known to improve the process of learning and integral development of children (Glenberg, Jaworski, Rischal & Levin, 2007, Lillard, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013, Lockhorst, D., Wubbels, T., & Van Oers, B. 2010, Ross, S. 2012). There is an emphasis on the importance of Montessori education in winning the individual autonomy of each child, the focus laid on respect for the individual child and its family and cultural environment. Recent research (Debs M.C. & Brown K.E.,

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2017) presents relevant data on the efficacy and limits of Montessori education to Black American students. Other researchers (AP Setari & Bradley K.D., 2017) have shown interest in the importance of determining the quality of teaching and rigorously examined the quality of the teaching assessment tools used by students in some American Montessori schools. The researcher Lillard A.S. demonstrates in the paper "*Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*" (2005) the manner in which current research validates Maria Montessori's observations of how children learn, especially in terms of movement and knowledge, the harmful effects of external rewards on learning motivation, the beneficial effect of the environment policy and the academic and emotional benefits of freedom of choice. Diamond A., professor of cognitive neuroscience at the University of British Columbia, is one of the leading researchers in the world in the development of cognitive function and a supporter of Montessori education. In a study conducted in 2010, Diamond A. underlines the importance of educational programs addressing the child as a whole (its cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs) and explains that the most effective strategy for achieving academic results is primarily meeting the social, emotional and physical needs of children.

Rathunde, K. (2003) shows in a comparative study entitled *"A Comparison of Montessori and Traditional Middle Schools: Motivation, Quality of Experience, and Social Context"* those strong differences between Montessori students involved in various activities that feel more active, more interested in what they were doing, stronger, more enthusiastic, happier, more relaxed, more sociable and wanted to do more than students in traditional schools.

At the end of 2015 the Montessori Research Journal was launched, published by the American Montessori Society, which presents twice a year studies, analyzes and important empirical research on Montessori education today.

3. Methodology

This study was aimed at capitalising Montessorian pedagogical texts for highlighting and clarifying some pedagogical meanings, extracting those ideas-force that are of interest for current education in the context of curriculum reconsideration and educational pluralism in our country. Pedagogical hermeneutics was used as a universal method of knowledge and multidimensional investigation that *"... seeks a comprehensive interpretation at the level of subjective dimension expressed by the aims of education. It involves a teleological determinism specific to social and human sciences; it calls for the creation of conceptual models/ideal-types that provide an understanding of the internal connections of education, in an open environment, in a continuous confrontation with what we want to learn and we can learn, as a novelty, about the immediate reality*". (Cristea, 2007:40)

The starting point was the fact that "*any educational activity requires a hermeneutic, personal decoding, followed by communication and interunderstanding. The pedagogical aspects make up a vast and complex hermeneutic field"* (Ionel, 2002: 101). Therefore, *"the context of hermeneutic pedagogy offers the chance to emancipate theoretically. It mediates between pedagogical thinking and educational ontic which it*

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carves conceptually and moves in an individualized and differentiated speech" (Ionel, 2002: 101). Comprehension is the purpose of any hermeneutic approach and *"the art of interpretation consists precisely in critical reflection, in the discovery of the continuity hubs, of the development potential*". (Ionel, 2002: 102).

Montessorian texts are a treasure trove of pedagogical poetry *"...by means of which a pedagogical theory gets more aesthetic, wins in charm and subtlety"*, being *"a game of shades and a propellant mechanism"* that resorts, in terms of form, to "polisemantism, to partial synonymies, to figures of speech (comparisons, metaphors, analogies), whilst in terms of content *"the new pedagogical ideas are risky, they venture into the hypothetical and problematic and are supported by intuition and inspiration".* (Ionel, 2002: 103).

4. Author's contribution on the topic

The applicative part of the paper submits to pedagogical review and reflection certain pedagogical Montessorian texts that support the understanding of the "prelude of a child's life", i.e. its birth, and then of every child's capacity to educate oneself, to build oneself as a single personality under the natural forces it possesses in a rich and stimulating environment that is suitable to satisfying the need of the child to spontaneously assimilate what it needs to transform in its own substance. The selection of these pedagogical Montssorian texts was made based on psychological and scientific value criteria in order to highlight the timeliness of pedagogical thought and the value of certain Montessorian ideas for the theory and practice of education today.

Table no. 1. Pedagogical analyses and reflections based on pedagogical texts selected from representative Montessorian works

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Pedagogical text Maria Montessori/ *The Child/The Child, Divine but Misunderstood Being*/1991, pg. 4	Pedagogical analyses and reflections
A poet could write about the child like this (actually, this is not a story, nor a poem, it is only a description: the prelude of a child's life, misunderstood since birth): *"I was told about a man who lived in the most impenetrable darkness, his eyes have not seen even the slightest ray of light, as in the depths of an abyss".* *"I was told about a man who lived in silence: no noise has ever reached his ear."* *"I heard about a man who truly lived only in water, water of a strange composition; and suddenly found himself among ice".* *"And he grew lungs that had never breathed before... (even the greatest pain would be easy if we compared it to his own ... but he succeeded)".* *"The air suddenly filled his lungs folded up from the beginning; and then the man shouted!"* *"And then an earth-shattering cry was heard that had not been heard coming out of a throat, which then vibrated for the first time". It was the man who had rested".*	The miracle of childbirth is described as a memorable passage from darkness to light, from silence to noise, from the status of "rest" in the sense of waiting to the status of vitality and functionality of the body ready to see, hear, breathe or cry. The careful observation of the child must start from birth. The child is ready for the big trip of life and from the first moments it possesses great constructive energies that guide the formation of its mind and the coordination of its body. The child waits in a water "of a strange composition" as Jonah in the belly of the fish or Christ in the womb of Virgin Mary. Maria Montessori invites to pedagogical reflection on the intrauterine life of the child in the amniotic fluid that protects the fetus from external shocks and provides it with an environment at a stable temperature. The birth of a child is so suggestively described that the poetic sentences used by Maria Montessori to explain the prelude of a child's life and then the miracle of birth led many critics of her time to reproach to her that she does not comply with the strictly scientific expression, as Ilie Șulea Firu confessed (1991) in a foreword to one of the major Montessorian works.
Pedagogical text Maria Montessori/ *The Absorbent Mind*, 2006, pg.94.	Pedagogical analyses and reflections
*"During the first year of life there are different periods, each requiring a special care *. The first, very brief, is the dramatic episode of childbirth.*	In every child there is a natural impulse for growth, for its own formation. Each stage of development is characterized by a certain critical need, whose satisfaction paves the way for the emergence of another. The first period, childbirth, is considered short, but

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Without entering into too many details we can enunciate certain principles. The child should remain as much as possible in contact with his mother and the environment must not present obstacles, such as great differences of temperature from that to which the child has been accustomed before birth. Not too much light, not too much noise, for the child has come from a place of perfect silence and darkness. Today, in the modern Nursing Homes, the mother and child are placed in a glass-walled room where the temperature is easily controllable, so that it may be gradually assimilated to that of the normal temperature outside. The glass is blue so that the light entering the room is very subdued."	dramatic because it is an offering related to the birth in pain of the infant whose mother must provide environmental conditions as similar as possible to those before birth. Therefore, Maria Montessori draws the infant's contact with its mother in conditions of reduced heat and light and protected from noise as a basic principle in infant care immediately after birth. The Montessori education provides children with an environment suitable to each stage of development; this allows children to answer the inner calls of specific sensory periods and allows them freedom to act according to their innate human tendencies. If education is viewed as a way to complete the child's optimum potential in every aspect of its personality in development, the results will soon appear.
Pedagogical text Maria Montessori *The Child in the Family*, 2015, p.20	Pedagogical analyses and reflections
The spiritual embryo is the Newborn, considered as a spirit closed in the body in order to come into the world ... The figure of the newborn is the impressive starting point. The child is born inert and remains like this for a long time, unable to keep straight, it needs care like a patient, like a paralytic; the child is mute and for a long time its voice will not be heard, other than when crying, when expressing its suffering. It will lead us to it as to a person who asks for help. It is only after a long time, after a few months, one year or more, that it will cease to be disabled; it will be the body of a man-child. And it is only after	Montessori metaphorically invites one to the study "of the spiritual embryo", that is to know the particularities of the fetus in the stages of its embryonic development, anatomic and physiological aspects that are important in early education. The presence of the "spirit closed in the body" rather sends to dogmatic, religious reflections. The inertia Maria Montessori is speaking about is related to the first years of growth, of coordination of body movements and gaining autonomy by walking, talking, eating, etc. The child's addiction to the adult in the early years, its state of helplessness and of a being "who asks for help" is considered by Maria Montessori as a morbid condition, suffering and even disability of the child. Having gone over this period of the primary needs satisfied by an adult, the child will become a "man-child", that is it will succeed on its own to feed itself, to dress, to act independently and to be heard ever more. Education is a process that accompanies and helps the individual's life from birth, continuously and in differentiated stages. Every human being is unique and comes into the world endowed with those capabilities to

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a few other months and even years that it will become the voice of a human being.	serve the fulfillment of their meanings.
Pedagogical text Maria Montessori/ *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to the Education of Young Children*, 1922, p.61	Pedagogical analyses and reflections
"An effective pedagogical action will help children along the road to independence. Helping them to go alone, to run, climb or descend stairs, pick up fallen objects, dress and undress, to wash, to express their will by means of understandable words, this is the independence of education."	Education is differentiated and successive, specific to the individual and conducted in stages so that it can be appropriate to the stage of development and specific to personal development. The child's independence and its education in the sense of gaining independence in movement, action, thought, will and feeling is very important in Montessori education. To become independent and capable means to be free to explore and develop oneself. Independence does not come from staying for hours at a desk and memorizing facts. Freedom is based on knowledge and also on the function of will, it is part of the mental and intellectual faculties. One cannot be free without first obtaining a first level of independence. Independence is a starting point (practical life activities do this thing, these activities help the child achieve independence). Freedom is an endpoint. We can start by asking children to sit. An atmosphere of freedom is important for personal development. It is impossible for a person to develop fully without individual freedom. Freedom is the key to the whole proces. In Montessori pedagogy, children learn to be quiet and respectful, they gain confidence and independence, i.e. they build the inner freedom that is called *normalization* on their own.

5. Conclusions

Maria Montessori was one of the most popular and admired figures of the first half of the twentieth century, with a remarkable contribution in many fields such as medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy, anthropology, peace promotion and empowerment of women, children's rights, reform in education to contribute to social progress. Maria Montessori believed that every human being is unique and comes into the world with capabilities that can fulfill its purpose to contribute to human progress. Education should help this purpose be undertaken with responsibility and be carried out freely. In Montessori education, autonomy is supported by a strong sense of personal and social responsibility for learning. The Montessori pedagogy lays special emphasis on respect for the child and recognition of the uniqueness of each person, on the increase of the role of educative environment in all that the education, family and community entails, on supporting the child in the development of its senso-motor skills and of its judgment capacity, on developing self-

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confidence, self-discipline, sense of order, caring for themselves and each other, respect for oneself and for others.

The study carried out in the paper highlights some valuable ideas of Maria Montessori's pedagogical thinking which show the increasing importance of knowing the child since conception, the pre-natal life, and then the development of the human being as a natural consequence of some inner impulses, acting under the influence of certain laws. The growth period of the human being, especially in its first part, is marked by short stages dominated by a special sensitivity that a good teacher should know and take into account in the design and implementation of education, in accordance with the age, the capacities and the needs of physical, mental, cultural, spiritual development, consistent with the scientific and quality standards that currently apply to education.

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