



*REciprocal  
maieutic Approach  
pathways enhancing  
Critical Thinking*

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# REACT MODEL MANUAL

An innovative Reciprocal Maieutic Approach  
for a critical thinking skills acquisition in  
secondary schools



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# 1. Chapter 1 – The heritage of Maria Montessori

## 1.1. Introduction to Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori is known for her contribution to the development of children and for her innovative Method based on a continuous observation of the behaviours. Teachers play a guidance role, avoiding direct and overwhelming intervention as well as strict indications and obligations. The popular motto “help the children do it alone” is meaningfully explanatory of the idea she has about the educative relationship with the children in a specific and “prepared” learning environment. To understand what “prepared” can mean in a Montessori context is one of the scopes of this document and will serve as a concrete and operative basis for all the subsequent work.

“Montessori” name is meant to be related to the “Montessori Method” that is practiced and applied in the Montessori schools all over the world. The generally accepted and widespread perception about “Montessori World” indicates that once we have chosen a Montessori school for our children, we will be sure that the related learning environment will be full of Montessori indications and principles, in a well-defined and exclusive “Montessori-featured learning space” that is commonly perceived to be much different from the rest of the educative public system.

This idea is partially true: in the Montessori schools, the Method is applied in its integrity by Montessori certified teachers and in a good and proactive Montessori’s educative learning environment. The Montessori teachers are properly trained to introduce and exploit the Montessori materials, as well as to keep all the Montessori authenticity and correspondence to the original ideas of the pedagogue born in Chiaravalle.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the “Montessori Method” could be seen as a branched network of ideas, full of innovative suggestions that can be inspiring, even today, for all the teachers at any level and in any categories of schools.

So, why not introducing the main ideas to all the teachers? In this idea Montessori is for all. It is worth mentioning that in doing so, we must respect a certain “Montessori authenticity”. However, we are also called to disseminate the revolutionary ideas to the educative world.



In the framework of REACT project, a contribution in this perspective is proposed, suggesting educative influences in four main areas:

- The contribution of Maria Montessori approach to the development of Critical Thinking skills for the actors of the Educative system (students, teachers and parents).
- the Montessori's contribution to the changing of learning environment spaces.
- The role of education as social context changer able to drive innovation.
- The role of education in the development of the social and soft skills for the actors of the Educative system (students, teachers and parents).

These four areas pose inspiring challenges that seems to include some of the main social issue related to innovation and the role of education that our societies are in need to face.

During the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the difficulties faced by our educative systems have arisen in all their clearness, depicting blurred perspectives for next future. Data shows that inequalities in education are growing, as well as the functional illiteracy is expanding. Can we really limit the impacts of a Method based on freedom, autonomy and self-consciousness of students to determined schools with a specific label?

In the REACT project's framework partners are committed to exploit the Montessori's contributions to promote a positive challenge in all the educative systems, or at least, to give a little influence in this enormous effort.

## 1.2. The four pillars of Montessori pedagogy

The Italian pedagogue Don Lorenzo Milani, who operated in a small and poor mountain village nearby Florence with sons of small-scale farmers, was very clear in declaring that the social and pedagogic contributions must be not just related to their authors. On the contrary, those contributions must be autonomous from their authors to give a floor to further and future innovations. Milani was a revolutionary Christian-Catholic priest that fought for the freedom in teaching and for the eradication of any inequality in education. Following the indication of Lorenzo Milani, this paper is based on the analysis of the work of Maria Montessori and on its visionary connection with the social approach of Danilo Dolci, going through their innovative contributions to the social pedagogy. The two pedagogues inspired a



revolution in the field of education, and as Lorenzo Milano affirmed (*Esperienze pastorali*, 1958) were not happy about the inadequate use of the word “Method”. Even though this is the way the Montessori pedagogy is popularly defined, the Italian Pedagogue was convinced that, the “Method” must be used in its proper meaning, the focus having to be on seeing the soul of the child who, free from obstacles, acts according to his nature (Montessori, 1990, p. 187). This would hopefully help to overcome the common meaning that «Method» generally acquired over time and allow us to replace it with another “conceptual” definition of the Method. According to Montessori herself, we can consider the Method as a help to the human personality to conquer its independence, from the oppression of ancient prejudices on education. (Montessori, 1946)

What emerges clearly from Montessori’s statement is that at the centre of the Method there is the human personality, and it is not composed by just a set of tools and principles to be applied and exploited. In the Montessori’s perspective, the central point is “the defence of the child, the scientific recognition of his nature, the social proclamation of his rights that must replace the fragmented ways of conceiving education” (Montessori, 1993, p. 11, our translation).

The four basic ideas of the Montessori pedagogy are posed, flowing from the above-mentioned premises, starting from the idea of the human being in an educating process. Montessori considered the child as a subject of rights more than an object of law, that is - she said - a "spiritual embryo", an "absorbing mind" and a "forgotten citizen" - we could add other evocative definitions such as those of "living worker" and "new teacher". All these definitions tend to highlight the legitimate dimension of the protagonist, which is at the real and effective centre of the educating process. This “educating process” includes not only the development of the child, but also extends to the progress of society and mankind. Consequently, even the role of the educator must be meant in a renewed way. Rather than assume the "positive" function of the educator who intervenes on the child, it is important to focus on the "negative" function of the educator: he/she observes the child and does not intervene on them, preferring to act on the learning environment. The objective of this approach is to remove eventual obstacles and promote the right conditions for the development of the child. As for the educative process, the same is said for this development:



it is meant in an extensive way and concerns all people that are involved in an educating process. Seen in this perspective, the environment acquires an important function for which it must be "suitable" to foster the development of the child. The interactions with learning environment, once observed in a Montessori perspective, must be the measure of the child development. Finally, in the Montessori Method the traditionally called "didactic material" is configured as "development material" implemented following the "education and learning" approach instead of the "teaching" approach. Thus, the "patented" material used in Montessori schools has no function other than to be responsive to the needs of the child's growth. For this reason, it must comply with precise requirements, which are established based on indications from the development sciences, as Montessori indicated and explained in her Californian conferences held in 1915).

### **1.3. Montessori and the social dimension of education**

All this taken into account and basing on the assumptions that: (a) the educative process regards all the actors involved; (b) the educative process is meant as a long-life advance for people as well as a process impacting the whole society; (c) the requirement to apply the Method is to follow the growth of those involved, there are solid premises to extend it to the whole educating community - let's say, students, adults, persons with disabilities or social problematic conditions, all the human beings, in short. Again, it should be noted that the educational renewal, conceptualized by Montessori, has not only an individual scope but a properly social one. In this perspective it meets the Danilo Dolci's idea of education as a social trigger, which is proposed also by other authors, such as Paulo Freire.

In the "Education as a practice of freedom" (1967) and "The pedagogy of the oppressed" (1968), Freire outlines his revolutionary conception: an education realized in communion between educators and those being educated, firmly anchored to reality and to dialogue, with the aim to emancipate the individuals and transform the society. In this view, teaching is something that critically "humanizes" its protagonists and "problematizes" the culture on which build the society, giving people the possibility of overcoming the historical condition of marginalization. As such, it is drastically opposed to what Freire himself calls "depository" or





"banking" education, which limits itself to "filling" the subjects of education with notional content to be memorized in uncritical form.

The "social dimension of education" is a concept that may sound odds against the individual characterization that is commonly attributed to Montessori pedagogy. Indeed, this is not only a *cliché* that does not correspond to the actual conception of Maria, but it is also an assessment that neglects the motivation and the purpose of the entire Montessori work. The Montessori pedagogy, on the contrary, appears to be in accordance with the social dimension of education, considering Maria's pedagogical conception not isolated from her philosophical and scientific thought. With this regard, it seems to be useful to illustrate the ideas proposed by Maria Montessori during the last period of her work of reflection and experimentation.

The literature is used to describe the Montessori view as particularly sensitive to the social question in terms of the emancipation of workers and women. During the last period of her work, since the thirties of 1900, the concerns of Montessori related to the problem of war and peace. The wide spectrum covered by Montessori's reflection has given multiple contributions to the past and present level of research and education - from a philosophical, scientific and pedagogical point of view.

REACT project would propose a motivation to problematize the opinion of those convinced that Montessori must be relegated in a certain growth phase of the individual and limited to the psycho-physical development of the children - and that at the end of childhood the "Method" is simply not valid anymore. Since the publication of "The secret of childhood" (Italian title: *Il segreto dell'infanzia*, in its original French edition *L'Enfant*, 1936) rediscovering childhood is the imperative to which contemporary societies must be called, not only to a pedagogical level but more widely in cultural and social comprehensive way. The Montessori's message should be followed if we want to grasp the "secret of childhood" that is considered as precious for the development of mankind and its future. This was the spirit that pushed the last Montessori's work on "cosmic education", a subject that make clear the horizon within which the proposal is to be placed, being the anthropological perspective that characterize the whole Montessori's work. Such a perspective is fundamental, since it means that only the identification of human nature enables us to work towards its realization. That is why the anthropology developed by Montessori reserves so much importance to the role of



pedagogy, understood as an "aid to life" and as a contribution for the person to achieve his normal development. This idea puts Maria very close to the Danilo Dolci's positions, considering that a "new humanism" is often a subject that yields to a purely rhetorical appreciation of man. Montessori points out an unprecedented consideration of what human beings must do to take up present challenges. Those actual challenges are nowadays quite demanding and newly declined – one thinks of the high scientific, technical and technological developments that mankind has produced. The pedagogy is strictly related to the promotion of the human condition and rights. As a direct consequence of the application of this principle in a school context, it seems possible to strive for a pedagogy respectful in terms of differences, generations and genealogies. Hence the imperative that springs from the Montessorian reflection: to combine the claim of unity with the safeguarding of pluralism, starting from the individual level and arriving to the communitarian level. In doing so, we should be aware that the equal dignity of the human person is not a mere statement, it must be recognized, instead, and respected in a context where personal and relational diversities are present. This conception recalls to an active pedagogy that promotes both the multicultural approach and an active set of didactical models, not just a passive idea of respect but considering the diversities as enriching values. At a very root level, the essential character of the new anthropology according to Montessori is the statement that there are no races but a single race, the human one. Basing on such beliefs, the differences between men constitute a plus and thus mankind is called to work cooperatively for the construction of a properly civilization.

#### **1.4. Conceptual linkages between cosmic education and soft skills development**

The Montessori "cosmic education" promotes the need to grow up a man aware of his responsibility and able to consciously participate to the cosmic evolutionary process. The "Principle of responsibility", supported by Hans Jonas thirty years later in the homonymous book, is already present in the Montessori's teleological character of reality, in terms of the



conscience of man and the ethical responsibility that derives from it: critical thinkers defend their beliefs without prejudices. At the level of social impact, the “cosmic task” can support the development of the human understanding and solidarity that are nowadays defined as “soft skills”. At the level of pedagogical impact, the cosmic education must be based on the child’s/man’s knowledge which will be time by time organized and made systematic. According to Maria specifications, this “vision of the whole” should be part of the education and learning activities. In this way, the intelligence of the students and the collective intelligence of the school educating communities will be helped to fully develop. This support is efficient because the interest spreads towards everything, and everything is connected to the others and has its place in the Universe. Therefore, the main question the child must answer to, is the knowledge of the “immense world” (ibid. Montessori). Concretely, “cosmic education” involves "giving the child an idea of all the sciences, not already - *Montessori stresses* - with details and clarifications, but only with an impression: it is a matter of sowing the sciences" to accompanying the child toward a new mentality and making them able to cultivate the sciences with technical spirit no less than ethical (ibid. Montessori).

## **1.5. The contribution of Maria Montessori to the development of critical thinking**

The education of mind and body (of mind and heart, of intellect and hand) merges in the educational proposal of Montessori to strengthen the personality of individual, the greatness of humanity and the promotion of all human beings. It moves steps from a new consideration of the nature of the child that is considered the creator of their own development and author of a repeated and precise work in a learning environment that is ordered and arouser of interests. The aim of this section is to highlight the aspects and dynamics that contribute to the formation and enhancement of human personality for Maria Montessori in the perspective of "education as an aid to life". Montessori stated that independence is the first basis of the concept of “personality”. Personality begins when the ego has dissolved from the bonds of the others’ ego and begins to function alone. The personality, then, is driven by the perception of



its own value and to confirm and improve this perception the individual is pushed to look for increasingly important tasks to be carried out. It implies that, although child-adult relationships are asymmetric (children-parents, pupils-teachers, etc.), such relationships must always be based on equality. Hence the awareness that the person, through a process of personalization, conquers his own personality (Maria Montessori, *Il metodo del bambino e la formazione dell'uomo, scritti e documenti inediti e rari*, Augusto Scocchera, edizioni Opera Nazionale Montessori, Roma 2002, Italian only). In Montessori view, personality implies independence. Learning to do for oneself is indispensable to learn to be, to do and to do with others, contributing to the social organization of community life. For Montessori, without independence there is no integration of functions and processes, no self-control neither constructive openness to others nor to the environment.

For a six-month-old child, for example, moving steps on the path of independence may mean freely leaving his low bed to go and look for the mother or the person who looks after them whenever is needed, without asking for external help. The construction of independence requires, therefore, to fully exercising the human potential in a prepared environment that respects the needs of growth and development of the human being: in this case, it is the conquest of successive levels of physical independence. The construction of personality then recalls some concepts such as “prepared environment”, “sense-motor-mental work”, “affectivity” and “sociality”. It requires, therefore, a spontaneous work that should be adequate to the psycho-physical forces of the child but also passionate, tireless and personal. This work should adhere to interests and motivations as it is carried out with freedom and respecting child’s times of concentration and rhythms and because it connects the child (and the adolescent) with themselves, with the others and with the natural and social environment.

Independency is linked to the ability to understand the world around us and to express our opinion with the aim to be understood. It is no possible to be independent without being able to express our critical sense. The Montessori approach promotes problem solving and critical thinking skills in many ways. The children are requested to develop hypothesis around problems and to find their own solutions. In the Montessori approach, the scientific contents are not merely transmitted. Students are not requested to follow the teachers’ presentations



and later to repeat the contents of the presentations. On the contrary, the Montessori approach implies a personal exploration of the topic, an individual consultation of all the materials to develop a unique and well documented presentation of the topic.

The role of the teacher in the Montessori view is to prepare the environment. As we will explain below, the Montessori learning environment is meant both physically and conceptually. In respect to this, a prepared environment relates to an accurate selection of the materials and to a well-prepared methodology of discussion. Methodologies such as those referred to/based on the Inquiry methods can be considered a good way to apply the Montessori *not-transmissive* approach. This new role of teacher and characters of the learning space have an immediate pedagogical impact and profound meaning which must be emphasized, without ignoring what is, perhaps, less evident but not less important. In this regard a quote can be extremely significant: it is necessary that society liberates children as "prisoners of civilization, preparing for them a world suited to their supreme needs, which are psychic needs". (Montessori, *La formazione dell'uomo*, Garzanti, Milano 1970, p.99, our translation) Studying the scientific and humanistic subjects with a critical approach is the way to make the students free and prepared to be active citizens.

## **1.6. The learning environment and learning spaces in the Montessori perspective**

We illustrated above the idea of a Montessori "prepared environment", and we underlined as it is to be considered one of the main elements of the Method that equip the child with materials, both physical and conceptual, to be freely explored in a collaborative way to enhance their cognitive skills. Montessori states: "human hand, so delicate and so complicated, not only allows the mind to reveal itself but it enables the whole being to enter into special relationships with its environment" (Montessori, 1936, 1992, p.81). The specific



gesture and use of the hands is considered, as well known, in Montessori a specific contribution to the development of children.

For Maria Montessori, the cognitive development of children is related to the physical development. According to recent studies (Fogassi, 2019) in this statement Montessori anticipated the relation the development of children has with the presence of “mirror neurons”.

According to “Mirror neurons” theory, the presence of this category of neurons explains why the motor system can respond to the vision of motor acts performed by others and what their function may be. The generally accepted hypothesis is that mirror neurons are necessary for an immediate understanding of the action of others (G. Rizzolatti, L. Craighero, 2004).

The materials of the Montessori learning environment have this purpose: to help the child to absorb the knowledge using the senses of their hands - the repetition of the tasks implies a better understanding of the concepts. The nature of the materials is not permanent, the history of humanity shows that the cognitive reactions can change when the technological set of instruments changes.

As an example, we can mention the cognitive assets related to the use of the smartphone. This tool gives the possibility to carry out any research and to find the desired information in no time. While the rapid access to this huge virtual repository has facilitated the obtaining of information by people, it has been highlighted by several studies (Frith and Kalin, 2015; Özkul and Humphreys, 2015) that the rapid retrieval of information negatively affects personal memory, the ability to remember episodes of their lives, the places they visited and the people they met. In conclusion, if mobile technology increases access to information for many people, in fact it can have negative repercussions on the attention, memory and cognitive performance of individuals (Wilmer et al., 2017). Nowadays teachers can isolate the students in prepared environment where such technologies are not admitted, and they can use only the traditional Montessori materials. But anyone can avoid the use of these materials to students that are however overwhelmed by these technologies. What teachers and schools can do is “to prepare the environment” and to create approaches and methodologies for a correct and positive cognitive use of these devices.



We know that Montessori's purpose of creating materials for children is based on her definitions of the different sensitive periods of child's growth and development, and we know that this conclusion was based on research and observation. In "The Secrets of the Childhood" there is a famous quote where Maria describes a little girl slipping cylinders in and out of their containers. (Montessori, 1936, 1992 p.120-121). She noted how the girl was accurately working and proud of her own work. For Montessori, this was evidence of how the hand is connected to the brain, emphasizing that repetition of movements and actions as well as the use of concrete materials make smooth and easier the assimilation of concepts and skills. In addition, Montessori underlines how the materials are useful to cultivate personal motivations and pathways through self-correction, because of attempts and errors. More than this, materials also have a key role in promoting and developing the child's sense of self-criticism, as well as experiential learning, self-efficacy and independence.

All above considered, mobile and virtual technologies constitute a significant challenge and opportunity if they would be accepted as a fertile basis for adaptation of Montessori materials. From one side, smart technology encourage a personal approach to the knowledge and can be useful tools also in a Montessori perspective. Seen in such a framework, mobile smart devices can be exploited by the students to improve their performances and sustain their self-reflection, boosting the development of new skills. As mentioned above, if the teachers use smart technologies just to maintain students' routine, for shorten the process of obtaining information or for replay the memory's effort the impact of those technologies would be very limited and almost negative for the educative process. However, if the learning environment is technologically prepared and the exploitation of smart devices by students is positively oriented by teachers, students' autonomy would be led by their own developmental needs and interests.

In this sense, preparing the learning environment is a hard task for the teachers but if properly realized, this preparation contributes to the creation of a challenging space of self-autonomy and exploration for students. They must be technologically prepared in advance, owning adequate digital and methodological skills. In this perspective, the use of smart devices within educative processes implies the application of an inquiry and problematic approach to the knowledge.



A paramount concept behind the Montessori approach to the learning environment is the re-definition of the physical learning spaces. We're traditionally used to see our high school students sitting in rows of desks with no freedom of movement, no autonomy in the proposition of the contents, reading and repeating the same pages of the same textbook all together at the same time – and being aware that punishment always lurks in the background if a single word would be uttered. There is nothing more far away from the Montessori idea of a classroom.

An innovative pedagogical branch firmly considers *textbook-oriented* education a passive and outdated approach. In the opinion of those authors, textbooks do not allow to students a free exploration of topics. Moreover, this approach limits the students' ability to express personal choices within the educative process, thus not valorising their active inputs with a subsequent lack of independence and creativity (Bruillard, E., Aamotsbakken, B., Knudsen, S.V., Horsley, M., 2005).

As it is well known, the structure of the textbooks is not so flexible and this rigid nature limits the personalization of the educative path, which should instead be realized based on individualized students' needs. The authors to which we are referring recognize that textbooks satisfy the teachers' need to have a solid reference to rely on when apply the school/classroom curriculum. At the same time, the application of *textbook-oriented* teaching mitigates parents' and principals' concerns to not be in line with the contents.

The Montessori idea of physical and conceptual learning environment is based on the ownership of students' personal work. In this scenario, the Montessori approach to the learning environment encompasses also the sensory performance experienced by children (and older students) when working with development materials as it is essential for the cognitive development of the brain. Thus considered, in a changing social and technological environment, the learning space must be re-conceptualized as well.

If the sensory experience in a traditional Montessori education pathway is enhanced by the materials' exploitation, an enlarged conception of the educative space should consider the relevance of the out-door education as well. The overall physical sensory experience of students would be enriched by activities carried out outside the classical school's internal spaces and moving outdoor would positively impact on educative process - about specific





subjects but also in general terms. As far as example, History is strictly linked to spaces (e.g. status, places, monuments, etc.) and the physical “encounter” with the objects would greatly contribute to trigger a conceptual and an emotional reaction in students.

The evolution of the contemporary pedagogy is following this direction that Maria, with her revolutionary conception of learning environment, contributed to chart. Montessori ideas are the conceptual basis for a wide range of didactic tools counted in the “family” of Project-Based Learning<sup>1</sup>. All the student-centred forms of education that are based on constructivist principles (such as learning as a context-specific process; the proactive involvement of learners; the focusing on social interactions and the sharing of knowledge encouraged by such methods) are considered as a peculiar type of “Inquiry-based learning<sup>2</sup>”. This actual trend and related tools and methodologies can be considered as cultural consequences of posing “observation” and “exploration” at the first line of the pedagogic contemporary effort. Montessori, followed by many constructivists, affirms that learners need opportunities to build knowledge by autonomously facing interactions with real situations, approaching them by their own and conducting investigations and explorations to solve problems and find solutions. Some authors (Wurdinger et al, 2007; Wrigley, 2007; Thomas 2000) claim that freedom of exploration (because of problem-solving attitudes that are developed and exploited for designing and solving problems) is a cognitive challenge that request students a high level of engagement.

To adapt the physical learning spaces does not mean to claim for new schools’ buildings or huge amounts of money: Montessori suggests to immediately acting for a re-thinking of educational spaces, working with what is at our disposal right now. A starting point could be the redefinition of the layout inside the classroom, letting students more flexibility in the change of the desks’ setting, e.g. passing from aligned rows to a circular setting if it is functional to the activities. There are many practical suggestions, quite easy to be welcomed,

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<sup>1</sup> In brief, we can define the Problem-Based Learning is an educational strategy. A method to organize the learning process in such a manner that the students are actively engaged in finding answers by themselves.

<sup>2</sup> The Inquiry-based learning is an educational strategy in which students follow methods and practices like those of professional scientists to construct knowledge (Keselman, 2003)



to make more comfortable the relationship between students, teachers and educative spaces – for example to find some internal places where it is possible to have moments of relax and meditation.

## **1.7. The Montessori “education process” as a driver for social change**

It is widely known that Montessori teachers’ pay a great amount of care to children’s cultural diversities, being their primary facilitation activity focused on a “culturally responsive teaching” approach. Culturally responsive teaching implies that teachers should incorporate students’ home cultures into their lessons (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The valorisation of the different cultures and the reciprocal knowledge implies in Montessori, especially in USA context where the issue is well rooted and thus more evident, that the students’ cultural backgrounds become a part of the common education pathway – and not an individual heritage that student bring to the attention of classmates and teachers, nor a mere celebration of cultural diversity. The students are stimulated to cultivate and show a profound knowledge of the different cultures histories of the communities that coexist in the classroom.

Considering specific learning macro-areas, such as Literature and History, the students are called to reciprocally explore the cultural contents and as affirmed by Maria’s son Mario Montessori, they can describe the school as a culturally marked environment where they become more and more familiar with basic aspects of their own and others’ culture, thus enlarging their cultural horizon (M. Montessori, 1976). The Mario’s indications suggest the need of a focus on the child’s personal background as it is an inherent element of the Montessori Method. This approach is explanatory of the Montessori Method application especially in the USA and in the European northern countries: here, Montessori Method is intended also as a key for the promotion of linguistic and cultural traditions. It is worth mentioning with this respect an experience of integration of the Montessori approach in Hawaiian language and culture-based immersion programs (C. Debs, K. E. Brown, 2017).



Montessori indicates that students should be encouraged to explore the world surrounding the school, where they can find other cultural and social stimuli. This is one of the bases of “culturally sustaining pedagogy” that not only incorporates and describes other cultures but considers them as a part of the whole school-community heritage.

As it is simple to understand, this approach has proper practical consequences. The culturally responsive educative practices emphasize not only the cultural background of each student but also support the teachers in developing the student’s awareness about their own implicit biases and prejudices. The goal is to let the students understand if and why they have such a cultural (and often unconsciously built) prejudicial background, that is an implicit occurrence of the social and cultural environment inside which each person has grown. Culturally responsive education also enlightens how the social structures, that grant privilege to individuals, are overall socially discriminatory and encourages the teachers to make a change in their classrooms and schools according to this awareness. A consistent literature claims that students attending racially, and culturally diverse schools gain from this diversity both academic and social advantages (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015). In fact, students in melting-pot schools can create more expansive social networks and social skills (Braddock & Gonzalez, 2010; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). However, despite solid evidence in this direction, it seems that European public schools have not been progressed in creating curricula basing on a real and effective multicultural approach. The cultural diversity is something that in the EU schools, especially in the Mediterranean countries or in the Eastern ones, continues to be principally linked and limited to celebrative purposes.

In last decades, an increasing number of policy makers at regional and national level worked to lay the basis to welcome and hopefully systematize those cultural diversities in the more general European education framework (e.g. Green Paper “Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems”; “European year of intercultural dialogue”, 2008) to prevent segregation and social exclusion. However, the mind-set underlying this effort is based on the promotion of school diversity (see U.S. Department of Education, 2016) as a tool to prevent something negative that could happen due to this “cultural contamination”. Montessori suggests a completely different perspective: cultural diversity is a great opportunity for changing and improving the contents of the school curriculum,



educating the students on how to critically appreciate perspectives other than their own ones and, overall, is this perspective applies to all the subjects such as History, Literature, Mathematics, Religions.

Some authors (Scoppola, 2007) introduce the value of the national traditions and their relevance in a progressive educative framework. The school has the role, they believe, to be “transmissive” in a positive way. We cannot give floor to this high-level intellectual debate in few lines, despite that we are persuaded that the exploration and the facilitation Montessori indicates as the lighthouse of the educative process, can sensitively increase the students’ freedom in approaching educational contents. If properly prepared to welcome and valorise the cultural diversities, we are sure that a multicultural school context cannot threaten nor affect the role of the regional, cultural and religious traditions: on the contrary, it can be a proactive way to renovate and make more vivid the students’ attitude towards them.

In the USA and EU (Deb, 2012) and let we say not surprisingly, research shows that low-income families are less likely to participate in the choice of school programs. The result is that even programs that are intended and designed to promote diversity as a community value might end up in an exclusion, more than inclusion, of economically disadvantaged families and those with diverse cultural background.

The mere and generic celebration of diversity can become a trigger for the creation of division rather than inclusion: the idea of being in cultural melting –pot, instead, is nowadays a natural part of the student’s feeling in most schools (in the public sectors it seems to be more evident), with a well rooted and specific meant. It is important to mention here how, in most of the EU countries, Montessori is popular in the private sector and Montessori schools are generally considered a non-multicultural network of schools. However, data trends demonstrate how prejudicial this perception is because since the 70s, especially in the USA, Montessori approach has expanded exponentially even in the public schools. This growth has encouraged a specific set of studies whose goal was demonstrating how the original spirit of Montessori was respected. The literature on public Montessori schools has focused till now on two elements: firstly, on examination of how public Montessori educators maintain fidelity to Montessori original approach, and secondly on the evaluation of the effectiveness of the application of Montessori approach regarding the future academic achievements of low-class



students (Lillard, 2006). At this stage, not many authors focused their studies on the evaluation of the socio-economic diversity of specific subgroups of students. We have not sufficient literature to present such results about the impact of Montessori on the sub-groups of social disadvantaged students, but we can present how the spirit of freedom and the research of free exploration can contribute to ease the social issues and to create a communitarian spirit within the school.

## **1.8. The role of education in the development of the social and soft skills**

In recent years, different methods of teaching and different educational philosophies were examined to understand if and how they affect children's self-esteem, self-efficacy, anti-prosocial and pro-social behaviours (Castellanos, 2003). The Montessori children are required to work in group and their daily tasks are related to sharing information and actions. This practice can allow them to develop good and natural social skills, plus their levels of verbal and physical aggression normally tend to decrease. Their ability to work in a group is also related to higher levels of both self-efficacy for academic achievement and self-efficacy for learning. We know that educators and psychologists increasingly focus their attention on the student's emotional learning that should be taken in adequate account in schools (Elias et al., 1997). Emotional learning is always related to emotive style of a person and its psychological capacity to adapt to the context. During the recent pandemic outbreak, entire societies and then students were forced to strong and prolonged situations of stress and isolation. Recent studies demonstrate that the emotional-oriented coping style used to face difficulties by the student has been directly linked to an increased presence of anxious symptoms and changes in mood, sleep, and behavioural as well as cognitive reactions – while task-oriented styles favour psychological adaptation with fewer symptoms (Casagrande, F. Favieri, R. Tambelli, G. Forte, 2020). Even in this actual forced e-learning education, school setting is arguably one of the most important contexts for learning emotional skills and competencies (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The pandemic emergency seems to put everything in



a secondary place, also the emotional educative needs of those who need to improve their abilities in recognizing, expressing and better regulating their feelings. Montessori suggests that the focus on autonomy must be considered a priority in any situation (pandemic or not) and that is a contradiction to simply transmit contents without promoting autonomy. This autonomy has been traditionally equated to “be able choice” (Katz & Assor, 2007): without this soft skill, the intrinsic motivation towards students’ personal interests and goals (Reynolds & Symons, 2001) cannot be achieved, thus creating an “educative non-sense”. Authors argued that students’ autonomy can be translated in organizational autonomy and ownership of learning environment, procedural autonomy and cognitive autonomy as well as proper ownership of learning process (Stefanou and al., 2004). Among these three types of autonomy, the activity of educate to cognitive autonomy (in the traditional and original meaning of *edu-cere*, to support someone and leading him to a place) is considered the most influential in the effort to develop student’s intrinsic motivation. Autonomy support is also in contrast with control, meant as external interventions that undermined one’s autonomy. This process of supporting the motivation as a real first and relevant step of any educative relationship, corresponds to the Montessori philosophy where children are treated as natural phenomenon to be observed and understood (Montessori, 1964). Students must have autonomy to choose “works” within a “prepared environment” that interests and stimulate them (Hainstock, 1997, p. 81). Montessori teachers support student autonomy carefully balancing observation and intervention. This also implies that students can be left alone when they are interested and concentrated on their activities, while teachers intervene to help them make good choices when they become unproductive and disinterested in what in the Montessori language is always defined as “work”. The focus on student’s motivation can also be useful to support their interest in topics about which they do not show attention or a natural attitude for. One of the main consequences of developing autonomy is that the students are led to evaluate the relevance of the topics they have in the school curriculum. This is made through proposing options of new activity (“work”) when it is needed, to avoid disruptive and negative behaviours (Lillard, 2005). Many authors (not only within the Montessori branch of studies) show evidence that, in the educative practice, this balance of observation and intervention is effective for promoting and developing student’s intrinsic



motivation for learning (Rathunde & Csíkszentmihályi, 2005). Experience in the Montessori environment proves that such practices aimed to the promotion of students' autonomy (in the meaning indicated above) are in line with the postulations of contemporary motivation theories. More, these practices could be effective for helping students to internalize external motivation for school education in all the topics presented in the school curriculum.



## 2. Chapter 2 - Danilo Dolci: “Everyone grows only if dreamed about”

### 2.1. Biographical notes

Danilo Dolci was born near Trieste in 1924, son of a devout Slav mother and a sceptical Italian father who worked for the railways and became a stationmaster. Danilo trained as an architect and engineer. As a student he published works on *The Science of Construction* and *The Theory of Reinforced Concrete*. He was hailed as a man with a brilliant future.

He was also a deeply devout Catholic. Instead of immediately embarking on a professional career, he gave up everything to work for a time with a remarkable priest, Don Zeno Saltini, who had opened an orphanage for 3,000 abandoned children after the war. It was housed in a former concentration camp near Modena, and Don Zeno called it *Nomadelphia*: a place where fraternity is law. Danilo Dolci first came to Sicily for the sake of its ancient beauty. He was especially interested in Greek buildings and had decided to spend a week or two at Segesta studying the ruins. But the man with a professional interest in Doric temples was also and above all the man of conscience and loving-kindness. What kept him in Sicily for the rest of his life and made him throw away a lucrative professional future was the island's present wretchedness. During his visit a baby died of starvation. The giant misery of Sicily was a command to him. Something simply had to be done about it.

Thousands lived in holes in the ground and in slums worse than those of Calcutta, without electricity, water, sanitation. They existed on the edge of starvation, weighed down by ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, fear, injustice, oppression by the Mafia, indifference from the Church, and above all with the all-pervasive hopelessness of unemployment. Danilo settled down in Trappeto, a country slum. He married one of his neighbours, a widow with five children. From their small house with none of the usual conveniences he launched his campaign against the misery that surrounded him. Alone he stood, faced by the hostility of the





Church, the government, the landowners, the Mafia. Surely, only with a flame of faith in his heart could he face hatred, corruption, ignorance, superstition, brutality, indifference, poverty, dereliction and despair. But face them he did and won his victories. He lived on the level of those he was trying to help, attempting to leaven the lump with love and knowledge so that it would rise of its own accord.

First there was the giant problem of unemployment. Work, Dolci insisted, is not only a right, but also a duty. Inspired by this idea, he organised his famous 'strike in reverse' in which the jobless protested by going to work. Dolci and the unemployed began work on a local road that was badly in need of repair. They were arrested. There was no violence, for Dolci was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and believed in a non-violent approach as a matter of principle. He provided schooling and education and persuaded parents to allow their children to go to school. As a result of his tireless campaigning three dams were built, bringing irrigation, energy, and new jobs. He persuaded the government to bring new industry from the north, and a new life for the slum dwellers. Fearlessly he exposed and faced down the Mafia, again and again being threatened with prison and death.

"Without charity knowledge is apt to be inhuman," wrote Aldous Huxley in his introduction to Dolci's book *To Feed the Hungry*, "and without knowledge charity is foredoomed to be powerless. Today a new Gandhi, a modern St Francis, needs to be equipped with much more than compassion and seraphic love. He needs to be something of a scientific expert and make the best of both worlds, the world of the head no less than the world of the heart. Only then can the twentieth century saint hope to be effective. Danilo Dolci is one of these modern Franciscans-with-a-degree".

Dolci was a great writer. His books are remarkable accounts of the society he surveys, and their accuracy and insight have helped to give a realistic basis to any schemes for improvement. Above all he has given a voice to the abandoned, forgotten, despairing, nameless, suffering people of Sicily. Unforgettably he enabled peasants and fishermen, mothers and prostitutes, street urchins, outlaws and bandits, police and *mafiosi* to tell their stories. Of the Sicilians he said, "There is God in these people like the fire beneath the ashes."



Prophets are rarely honoured in their own countries. Italians disliked Sicily's dishonour being openly shown to the world. Dolci was attacked and subjected to a torrent of lies and abuse. Even the Church in Sicily failed him. It was suspicious and, incredibly, often seemed more sympathetic to the Mafia than to those like Dolci who so bravely exposed the Mafia's crimes. Dolci left the Church because he found it too narrow, and in its manifestations in Sicily harmful.

Did he cease to be religious? Emphatically no! His whole life was the expression of a profoundly humanitarian religious sense. It is something Unitarians understand and sympathise with. A friend once said to him: "You don't use the word God anymore." Dolci replied: "When I understood that the word 'God' was likely to bring more confusion than clarity, then, I stopped using it. I don't believe in a personal God, not in the old traditional sense anymore. For me the key is creativity. "To create".... how do we create? It can be 'by the will of God' and if there's no fatalism involved then this is also creation in an educational sense. But for me this isn't enough. Man must also intervene to try to change things, to modify and perfect, and this is outside the traditional religious concept. St Paul says we must be co-creators with God - which is the same idea, though Paul doesn't expand it. Jesus was ambiguous, or rather you find both viewpoints in him. In the parables there is the thought of the condemning God. This is the old world. But he also says, "My God is the God of life," and he talks about the seed having to die before it can bring forth fresh fruit. What matters is that people should be creative. There's nothing higher in men and women. But is this religious? Some say it is. Here we're trying to graft this possibility of human creativeness on to a fixed old-world attitude. Western Sicily is our experimental field - to try something which may become valid for the rest of the world." (Quoted by James McNeishe in his *Fire under the Ashes*, p.239)

In the 1960s Danilo Dolci became almost a cult hero-figure in Northern Europe and America. Young people idolised him and committees were formed to raise funds for his work. In recent years all that faded. People found newer and to them more glamorous causes. Dolci did not repine but went on with his work. Indeed, it was a case of "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat these two imposters just the same."



## 2.2. Discovering the reciprocal maieutic approach

Who was Danilo Dolci? A man who spent his whole life trying to transform dreams into projects. Telling such a peculiar life is to reflect; moreover, it helps to create projects itself.

When one hears about his life cannot help but be surprised. They say about him: “He made me realise that you must take care of your dreams wherever you live. I dived into facts and discovered the thoughts and actions of a man who had always had a wise heart since he was a child”.

Danilo risked a lot when he went to Sicily. He sacrificed his whole life in the name of social justice and the things he believed in. The children and the adults who read about him learn to see the world as it is, not as portrayed on TV. They learn how not to be passive and face their fears as it tells a real story from which one can learn a lot. It helps to generate ideas. Danilo’s dream made us understand that you should learn to assess the consequences of your choices and actions. You should learn to “ideate”. It is worth to be wondered: why Danilo is not well known yet and hasn’t received the recognition he deserves after doing so many things?

It is hard to find an answer to this question. It is hard to explain to 9-year-old children how controversial he was. He liberated people from the chains of ignorance (as in the Platonic allegory of the cave), allowing them to become self-aware, capable of thinking and getting together to design their future and be free of being themselves. It is hard to tell them that visionaries and pioneers rarely lead a simple life! It is hard to explain that their thoughts are often considered dangerous; therefore, people try to nip them in the bud.

Talking about great thinkers means rediscovering a method which is still current as it enhances democracy. Some topics have been the main interests of great teachers who lived in those years: from Montessori to Don Milani, Mario Lodi, Alberto Manzi and, of course, Danilo Dolci. They were committed to the job to which they dedicated their whole lives, trying to understand the world and share their path with others. They devoted themselves to the most vulnerable people, people with no voice, and used theirs to present the claim of silent



humanity. They thought of community and cooperation as a method to rediscover oneself. Danilo Dolci wrote, "a meeting is successful when in the end/one is not themselves anymore/and they are themselves more than ever". They were aware of the power of language and its importance to defend yourself and make your voice heard; finally, they believed that education was a political act.

Danilo was an architect, and his professional training pushed him to get to know the territory as the starting point to understanding people. He started from local needs to trigger change within the community. His educational method was a comprehensive one. The territory, in that case, the want of water, helped him stimulate change. The need became desire, and from desires stemmed the dream, which became a life project. All the creatures die without dreaming. That's it; that's the complex task of educators: inviting people to discover their intimate nature to help them grow in a reciprocal process, not to give them crumbs of knowledge but to start a perpetual cycle of research.

One must understand whether, in today's technological society, characterised by fast-paced exchanges and superficial communication, it still makes sense to talk about a method with such an ancient name: maieutic. Educators should always be driven to find meaning. Among children, who still have a natural curiosity which hasn't been yet suffocated, the most recurring questions are: "what does it mean?" and "For what for?" and the answer cannot be "When you grow up, you will understand" or "It would be useful in the future". You cannot go to school and stay still, waiting for tomorrow, when you will miraculously understand the meaning of the things you have studied. It is not enough to talk about "real tasks" to rediscover interests and give a new meaning to didactics. Going to school is meaningful if all its actors, teachers and learners find a purpose in the things they do. It makes sense if we can sense a continuity of thought and action, if thoughts may transform actions, as they give new lymph and regenerate thinking. Instead, school is the reign of incoherence between thoughts, words, and the actions they produce. How often do children complain about the incoherence of adults, yet a few of them are ready to listen while, starting from this need, one could create a new way to experience learning at school. And so, why not talk about the maieutic method



instead of looking for something new that could never satisfy everybody's interests? Why not appreciate the heritage from the past, look behind us, overcome myopic visions, go beyond immediacy, and see further?

In his essay on the "modern" method of flipped classrooms, Tullio De Mauro acknowledges that: "Admit it or not, flipped classroom take on ancient ideas. One needs to go back in time to the squares of Athens where Socrates could shake the certainties of ready-made knowledge and open new paths of conscious knowledge with his simple questions and dialoguing without showing off his wisdom."

Danilo believed that to educate is to communicate and to do so by using a particular form of communication connected to an ancient but current word: MAIEUTIC.

When describing those years characterised by social engagement and nonviolent fights, Danilo decided to rely on the most familiar language to him: the poetic language. Reflecting on the reciprocal maieutic approach means claiming Danilo Dolci's powerful legacy, and using his own words is the best way to do it. As he used to do so during meetings, he resorted to poetry as it can provoke and free thoughts, not only emotions, to rediscover maieutic, which he would later define as reciprocal.

That's how he used to talk about it by using the language he cherished the most, the poetic one.

*Some roads can be found even in the dark  
Some other not;  
I don't want to regret pushing people on other roads  
I cherish the most  
Until one day, they find a void upon them.  
There is a word  
I am almost ashamed to say  
Even though it seems indispensable – it is not used  
And it might sound a bit pedantic:  
maieutic*



Using poetry, an art that never abandoned him even in periods of hard work and nonviolent fights, he spoke about the maieutic approach, defining his method. With these words, he invites us to educate people according to their nature. It is necessary to support them in rediscovering themselves, not follow the paths others prefer in order not to find themselves on the verge of an abyss: when they cannot recognise themselves but help them to revive again.

It takes a lot of responsibilities and commitment to be an educator!

The educational tasks, like any other, require commitment, effort and a great deal of passion. Danilo lived in Sicily for years, in a challenging period when everything was lacking. However, he constructed an educational miracle in this nothingness because people didn't lack dreams about a better future. His maieutic actions stem from people's dreams since, to acknowledge this dream, one should be capable of listening and asking the right questions.

In the end, the art of midwifery was needed.

### **2.3. Education as means of social engagement**

The actions carried out by Dolci in the community where he decided to live can be summed up with three keywords: awareness, work, and school. Awareness is a pillar of his social, educational and political action. Being aware of one's ignorance leads to constant research. Out of modesty, unrequited curiosity, and interest in others, one can develop a searching attitude: the founding value of any educational act capable of determining social change.

To Dolci, education was a means of social, civic and political engagement not limited to the school environment. The school, thanks to the experiment of Mirto's educational centre and the maieutic workshops carried out in Italy and other parts of the world in any educational institution, came later. Education was never understood in academic terms, and when it acquires a universal meaning, it becomes a social and political act.

In his essay, *Esperienze e riflessioni (Experience and Reflections 1974)*, Danilo Dolci compares older and new politicians. One can see how close teachers and politicians are; we only need to



change two terms: the politician's perspective becomes that of the teacher, and we can identify the differences between teachers (older politicians) and educators (new politicians).

Old politician (teacher) → New politician (educator)

dictates → coordinates

centralises → inspires groups and individuals

keeps secrets → communicates

rhetorical → simple and essential

corruptor → educator

violent → nonviolent

vindictive → takes care of people's future

tends to support those who win → tends to engage with vulnerable people

intervenes with punishments → intervenes by trying to understand other people

uses tools and measures to impose their will on others → uses tools and measures to value themselves and others

ambiguous → sincere, they are loyal to everyone

works to become a better warrior → wants to become a builder

enjoys and exploits power, they are exploiters → serves other people responsibly, they value other people

take care of their customers → they create interconnected groups

supports and defends older structures → starts and creates new structures

Therefore, education is an inherently political act in the highest sense.

In the Devoto-Oli dictionary of the Italian language, one can find the following definitions of the word politics: "science and technique, as well as theory and practice, having for object the constitution, the organisation and the administration of the State and public life" Only in the end and in its abstract meaning we find this meaning "careful and astute behaviour aimed at reaching one's interests". This aberrant connotation we today ascribe to politics distorts their very essence. It pushes many people, even in education, to state their lack of interest in



politics as if it was an honest gesture, one should be proud of. Education, when it is not merely about the transmission of notions, is a political act as it inspires change and activates thinking, shaping new behaviours and conscious agency. If thought produces action and the action regenerates thoughts in a cyclic process, it will inevitably lead to conscious and political engagement.

When Danilo started working in Sicily, he found himself in a social context filled with many urgent problems that needed to be understood and faced. Getting to know the group you work with is an essential starting point, then as it is today. He immediately found himself in a complicated situation: on the one hand, many urgent matters were stating a need for change; on the other, there was resignation and immobilism of people who were used to vexation. In this local framework, there was a strong presence of the mafia and a population mainly devoted to banditry, according to mass media. Firstly, this meant that one had to clear things up to understand people's characters, to help them free themselves from the mafia's domination. Intellectual labour, such as acquiring knowledge, can start only after getting to know and satisfying the group's real needs, which may impact their opportunities to grow. In other words, any educational action should proceed from an act of liberation, and it is freeing. Danilo could not talk about school before giving back to children the right to health and family. Before starting his educational work with children, as he immediately took care of improving their living conditions, it was necessary to answer their basic needs. Therefore, it was fundamental to start with their parents since it was essential to give them back their dignity neglected for too long.

Even nowadays, an educator should get to know the group they take care of first and create mutual trust and cooperation, which are essential in any path toward growth where change stems from self-awareness and critical thinking. Teachers must keep it in mind.

A group of nine-year-old children, who know how to use their political skills as they organise and cooperate in their school life, reflect on how they think a teacher should be and explain that good teachers:

- ✚ know many things, and their pace is not too fast.





- + they can wait, and they speak clearly.
- + they listen to and understand children.
- + they know when children are attentive and respect them.
- + they can put themselves in children's shoes.
- + they take care of and protect children without being overprotective.
- + they help children explore the world.
- + they act as an example.
- + they know how to inspire enthusiasm and ignite interest with joy.
- + they dream and desire to be teachers.
- + they smile and enjoy spending time with children.
- + they know how to communicate and understand other people's points of view.
- + they know how to discuss and do not impose their ideas.
- + they know how to express and share their emotions.
- + they respect other people.
- + they allow all people to participate.
- + they let all children express their ideas.
- + they are affectionate and take care of everybody.
- + they know when to be authoritative.
- + they do not deceive children.
- + they do not underestimate children.
- + they know how to encourage people.
- + Children are not just children to them.

A teacher is an interpreter of the deepest needs of childhood; in this sense, Danilo did the same by acknowledging the population's needs. When he arrived in Sicily, after having spent his childhood in Northern Italy and lived his experience in Nomadelfia, Danilo entered new territory. He lived and shared his life with people and worked with farmers, constructors and fishers. To understand people's character, he created an empathic relationship with each of them and transformed it into an intellectual one only later. Soon, during countless meetings with people discussing issues they were interested in, it became clear that what the media



said about these men and women did not reflect their real nature. The violent and criminal group was composed of a few people. They imposed their rules on those forced to accept them passively due to their poor conditions. Some men seemed physically strong and did not want to recognise the evidence of their despair or give themselves up to violent men. Since they did not find any support from a national authority, these people had to surrender to their fate and were pushed to become bandits. Many of them had to steal and hide themselves to provide for their children. They stole not to become rich but because their children died of famine. They stole because they did not have a job, and one can die without one. They stole because they were desperate. And that's why many of them were arrested and imprisoned at Ucciardone, Palermo's prison.

Which levers have been activated using Danilo Dolci's maieutic action? What happened during the years he spent in Trappeto? How could nonviolent methods promoted by Danilo Dolci become part of a context characterised by a violent tradition?

Day by day, Danilo, with his empathy and capacity to ask wise questions, created deep relationships among people and reinvented ties. He started inner research generating a change in dealing with life challenges. The Sicilian population had many urgent needs, but it was a mainly fragmented community.

Danilo's action aimed at reuniting them to create a group of men and women who thought together, had common goals, elaborated solutions, and transformed dreams into projects.

Each of them felt understood by Danilo and the maieutic group, which was becoming more structured.

People were lowering their defences to open themselves to others trustfully and honestly. Soon it became clear that people are not violent by nature. Some of them were resigned, some angry. The violent and criminal group was very cohesive but composed of a few people.

Danilo did not know that place very well; he needed to understand and was open and ready to discuss with anyone. He did not have any straightforward project; he had to learn by living with them. Dolci was looking for solutions, not for plain answers, but for visions that could broaden new horizons. By asking maieutic questions, leading him to get better insights, he helped people become aware of their needs. Queries generated ideas leading to a change, and



Danilo was the interpreter of these honest people looking for a job. His actions gave them a voice, helped them understand things clearly and find the most suitable tools to make themselves heard by those not interested in listening to them. All of these allowed them to become a larger and stronger group, albeit nonviolent. There was no need for violence since the group was their best defensive weapon.

Giacinto, a beekeeper Danilo had met in Calabria, notes: “We can derive many solutions to our problems by looking at the relationship between flowers and bees. Flowers and bees communicate. Bees return to the hive to invite the other bees to work and give directions. Flowers and bees are the same organisms. If there were no flowers, bees could not exist. If there were no bees, trees would have fewer fruits. We should learn from bees and flowers: they coexist by helping each other. The bees are not cowards; they know how to fight and defend themselves to death, by they try not to harm anyone, and they do not seek war. If you do not disturb the bees, they won’t bother you. Flowers and bees are creatures of peace.”

Even though he was threatened and invited to leave Sicily, slandered by the Church, by cardinal Ruffini, who said he was a “danger to Sicily”, Dolci could continue his work because he was not alone. His attacks on the mafia member were never an individual but a collective action. When he denounced the corruption of some Italian politicians who had a connection with the Mafia, Danilo collected the statements of numerous groups of Sicilian people who have dared to report to the police a corrupted system suffocating their land and hindering its equitable development. The maieutic group was the strength of people and was, at the same time, the strength and protection for Danilo. To kill Danilo would have meant to kill only one part of an organism, an essential one, but just a part of it.

The process of transformation and awareness had already started, and its roots grew deeper and deeper. If Dolci had died, many people would have been ready to replace him: the mafia would have had to kill all the people working with him. The maieutic group, asking questions and finding answers together, and designing possible futures was the motor of his nonviolent action. He was more potent than the mafia members; it became a protective factor and a lever



of change for the population. A community cannot grow if individualism and violent competition emerge. It develops when, by overcoming the Darwinian vision of relationships, it becomes an organism in which each part collaborates to reach a common goal. Change, as a factor of growth, is not an individual matter; it is a process that shall involve the whole community, waiting for its maturation to be relevant.

Which was Dolci's secret then and the strength of his nonviolent action? His strength was his maieutic method, slowly emerging and transforming a group of resigned, crushed and discouraged men and women whose fate was marked by disillusionment in a different group. That method, permeating all the social aspects, not only the school community, became a real defensive weapon. The reciprocal maieutic approach was the force of Danilo's nonviolent action. Thanks to that, he could transform a lacerated social fabric into a palpitating organism in which any individual recognised themselves in the group and could blossom by educating themselves and others in an evolutionary cycle.

## 2.4. Educating in critical thinking

When working with farmers and fishers, women and bandits, he started a dialogue stemming from his ignorance and desire to understand that land. These discussions appeared immediately as maieutic dialogues, even though he did not call them so. The reciprocal maieutic approach is the result, as it is apparent at this point, of direct action and experience: the reflection upon such matters came afterwards. We can see in Danilo Dolci a circularity between action-experience and reflection; Danilo acted by creating maieutic dialogues upon which reflect and discover the characteristics of an approach that by overcoming the Socratic conception becomes reciprocal, even prophetic at times. Being aware of one's ignorance inspires continuous research. His maieutic method goes beyond an elitist and Socratic vision and becomes reciprocal-planetary. Each person is involved in the dialogue; they can sense their dismay from doubt and then find themselves again when discussing with others to reach shared truths uniting all the individuals in a group. In the afterword to his essay *Il ponte screpolato (The Cracked Bridge)*, Gianni Rodari wrote: "That's Danilo Dolci, a person who is always looking for something with other people... He built his identity by helping farmers,



*unemployed and illiterate people, and bandits escape from darkness and step into history...Together, that has always been the rule.” In 1979 Rodari kept on saying: “Danilo stays at the centre of these multiple movements, not as a guide, a Socrates who can lead his Phraedri and Critos on a path he only knows about, secret strategist of common discourse, but as a democratic Socrates. He feels equal to the last and simplest man and can make a protagonist out of him, determining with him the character and the goal of the quest itself.”*

The reciprocal maieutic approach, which he also called “planetary”, to underline its global character and the opportunity to export it to other places and times, has some crucial differences from the classic one. Exploring the differences between the Socratic maieutic method and the one reinvented by Danilo Dolci is necessary. It aims to free the thoughts of a community and not to start a sly practice seeking to activate individual interest and be more successful in selling a lesson or a ready-made recipe. Empathy has now replaced irony; poetry is no longer considered a moment of craziness but an active component of growth. Nature is not silent anymore, as it communicates and gives inputs for reflection. Each person has a contribution to offer, including women and children. No one will constantly be the facilitator because it is a reciprocal process. Finally, writing is essential to disseminate the method. Three words are central to Danilo Dolci: experience, maieutic, and planetary. His maieutic practice is not connected to pure abstraction but is based on experience from which it starts and is nurtured. It is planetary because it targets the whole world, *“You cannot be happy if other human beings are suffering”*.

Starting from these substantial points, we can identify some differences.

Socratic approach	Reciprocal Maieutic approach
Irony, dissimulation	Encouragement, appreciation
Unique and unchangeable truth	Mult perspective truths
Abstraction: logos, concepts	Experience: project, action
Individual (max 2-3 people)	Group (no more than 25 people)
Men	Men, women, children
Selective	Inclusive



("Ce n'è poi altri che non mi sembrano gravidi")	("Everyone is creative")
Learning by remembering	Learning by searching
Only the interlocutor is solicited	Collective participation
Rigid rules	Reciprocal
"One" maieutic master	Educators of new facilitators
Dominating person	Coordinator
Targeted at human beings	Targeted at all creatures
Intellectual engagement	Empathic engagement
Focused on politics, science, technique	Focused on arts
Local	Planetary

In our greedy consciousness of ignorance, we know that starting from the self, we can embrace the world. What does it change in the way we ask questions? In maieutic communication, there is not a precise, unique answer to find. We are not engaging in a maieutic dialogue when we ask students, sitting in a circle, a series of questions and waiting for the "right" answer suffocating all the attempts to continue to explore and reflect, losing thousands of shades of thoughts because we are not paying attention! In maieutic communication, the facilitator does not presume they have an answer; they have one, but it is just one amongst many different possibilities. It is not only about asking questions but also accepting all the other and multiple answers, even those which appear unusual and unexpected, trying to find a link while searching for harmony. The facilitator must be ready to listen to people as they dig deep inside themselves. It takes time, a long time, as every thought activates other reflections in which everyone can find unexpected discoveries. Only when the group think they are satisfied it is possible to look beyond. Otherwise, the dialogue can be updated but never interrupted: doubting and asking questions are essential to critical thinking. Without it, one suffocates thoughts, and creatures die.

The reciprocal maieutical approach is the basis for building a society where everyone is aware of their power because common knowledge allows for self-discovery and appreciation of all the people. Thanks to that, one can regenerate thoughts neglected in years of resigned transmission; in other cases, one can help shape reflection and find the best way to express it.



Everyone is involved and experiences the sense of dismay generated by doubts, to find themselves in discussion and reach shared truths uniting different personalities and identities within a group.

In the maieutic dialogue, the concept of truth is inevitably modified as it becomes a constant quest. It is not an absolute idea governed by a group of individuals with the faculty to transmit it. If the truth were a definite notion, then we would need to find it and keep it in a safe, leading to that depositary education Paulo Freire talks about. Reformulating the very concept of truth is essential to start a maieutic dialogue. When there is not one immutable truth, we can cultivate a way of thinking connected to continuous research and tireless doubt, a restless desire to understand the world conducting to critical thinking. The maieutic approach is based on two central interchangeable aspects: truth as continuous discovery and the development of critical thinking.

Danilo Dolci lived in a different time, but his message is current and full of unexplored potential. In his 1993 essay *Comunicare, legge della vita* (Communication: The Rule of Life):

“Inside the school’s walls, one can transmit data, techniques, and atmospheres, **but knowledge is a process each person needs to recreate and confront with respecting critical thinking**: if teachers inculcate, train and examine, they cannot become proficient in the dialogue of research, they do not even familiarise with other individuals. When the school expects to teach the values it neglects in practice, instead of favouring a coherent critical relationship with the reality we live in; if the school promotes love while it teaches children to justify privilege and dominion; if the school is incapable of educating in non-violence, while it extinguishes the creativity the poor need to heal the world, then this kind of school corrupts people, teaching them hypocrisy.

The multitude of the marginalised, gradually becoming even more marginalised, unlearn to integrate; they learn to bite each other.

When the courageously structured initiative of authentic educators fails to set, those who dominate ask to scientifically tame children and youth in schools: they are afraid and destroy



their growing creativity and organic unity little by little. They slowly learn to become objects. The little ones do not grow up joyously as they are kept captive by their guardians inside the walls built by masters-benefactors. However, fearfully, they cannot cultivate their profound interests and prepare themselves to ignite structural changes. If we looked closely at the main sufferings in the schools in any part of the world, we would observe a constant difficulty in youth's growth: young people do not learn to communicate nor use their power there. They usually become mere executors.

## 2.5. A suffocating school

### *"The experience of a mother"*

On one of her first days at daily care, my daughter was given a piece of paper, and they asked her to draw something. I spent a lot of time with her at home: we read together many books she almost knew by heart, we loved fairy tales and spoke perfectly, using complex words for a child her age. She trusted school, even though she was perplexed in dealing with somebody who wasn't her mum, but she deeply trusted adults. The child took the sheet and started drawing. She drew a circle and brought it to the teacher, who enthusiastically looked at the drawing and asked if it was a balloon. The child looked at the teacher with limpid and confident eyes; she answered that it was "the circle of life". The next day the teacher wrote on a piece of paper she put outside the classroom, along with many others: "This is a balloon". Her way of being did not correspond to that of a three-year-old girl; she was different from the stereotype the teacher had in mind when she looked at her".

It often happens that the school interrupts natural dialogue and, instead of stimulating, slowly suffocates students, who, as they grow up, learn to become silent and stay silent even when confronted with questions. Once any creative urge or critical reflection has been put out, it is as if their mind were too dull, suffocated by tests, not questions, and their very selves were buried after having long tried to make themselves heard.

It is necessary to promote change at school in the sense of what people do to learn in a passionate, critical, liberating way, stopping to resort to tradition as the only motor of action. Within schools, we can feel a sense of unease, bursting into continuous complaints, among





teachers who cannot understand why they do not reach the same goals as in the past, forgetting about the differences among classes. During a training session with teachers, we talked about maieutic dialogue starting from Danilo's account (from *Palpitare di Nessi*, in English *Palpitating connections*):

"One teacher talks with another teacher. But when she starts talking, the other intervenes, covering her voice. She does it repeatedly. How can she promote socialisation among a group of children if she does not respect other people? In class, then with a group of twenty-five-year-old children, she kindly puts a box on the desk.

"What colour is it?"

Some voices: "Blue".

"And what about this?" It is a violet woollen ball. The class is silent. The teacher says: "Blue, Let's repeat". "Blue"

She takes a beret: "What colour is it?" One voice: "Red." "And what about this one?" "Let's repeat, red."

Children look puzzled: the crimson beret looks different from the brick red cube the teacher has in her hand. She did not mention all the other infinite shades of colours. Children are confused and bored and talk with their peers.

"Children, shall we sew our lips?" She pierces her lips with an imaginary needle and invites them to do the same: they imitate her gesture in a more sluggish than amused way. The teacher shouts at them, insisting on her rigid categorisation of colours. Children look uninterested. Some of them shout. The teacher seems even angrier. She almost screams, "That's how we play...."

Slowly children lower their voices; they look bored and resigned."

Listening to this account, many teachers looked down, embarrassed: many of them recognised themselves in that teacher because they unconsciously created the same atmosphere in their class. Once they go back to their class, however, they do not find the strength they need to ignite change that promotes mutual wellbeing. It is as if the students' resignation mirrors teachers' resignation who have lost their creativity, critical thinking, willingness and interest in their work. It is as if the school had also crashed and put out their fire. We need to get back self-awareness and critical thinking, not only among students but also among teachers. Danilo



started his maieutic dialogues with adult people, trying to help them go beyond mental clichés, leading them to adopt a resigned attitude to the *status quo*. We should do the same with teachers so that they can rediscover the dignity of their job, and overcome rigidity and fears, uncovering its infinite beauty and responsibility.

Then there will not be wrong answers, but right questions asked wisely. Their questions will provoke and create wonder and surprise, and this will happen when the minds of those asking questions will be free and capable of thinking critically. It will be possible to free learners once teachers have participated in a liberating process to abandon old stereotypes and habits. When textbooks and curricula are the centres of school life, people inevitably lose interest, passion, skills, creativity, and awareness. Sometimes it is difficult to understand the origin of an inevitable unease, bursting into violent anger or idle apathy. It is seen with surprise as if it was a “generational virus”.

Learners are objects, observed, tested, and assessed; they are never considered the protagonists who participate in a process in which they are primarily involved. This objectifying trend also suffocates teachers since they do not feel like agents; they become subjected and incapable of liberating themselves from the trap they find themselves in, resigned and depressed. Therefore, we need to modify the dominating paradigm in the school environment, which infects and suffocates the life of any creature breathing that air.

What would happen if “throughout the years, in schools, frontal lessons and readings have replaced the reading of the world, the interpretation of life”? How can we choose? How can we solve life problems if we fail to observe and recognise them? How can we read the world if our eyes are fixed on a page, and our hands are not dirty but of ink?

Which vaccine may heal the school?

During our last day of school, a group of students talks about the years we have spent together since we learn something every time an experience leaves a trace:

“Francesco C.: These past five years have been filled with adventures, and I learnt things I have never imagined I would know. I learnt how to work with people and put myself in their shoes without exaggerating or losing my identity. They have been a magic arrow that, as in a spell, allowed me to become more mature.



Siria: We have been a great family. I felt at home, welcomed as if I were with my parents. The school was our building, the classroom our home; our classmates were our siblings, and teachers were our parents who helped us grow.

Francesco F.: Teacher, I need to find a new word to define these years, may I? “Eduqual” is the adjective I would use. “Edu” stands for education and “qual” for quality: it was a quality education. They have been rough years because there have been sad and difficult moments, hot as well because we got angry at times, cold when we fought. Anyway, we have always been capable of reconciling ourselves. In the beginning, we were desperate to stay home, and now to stay here.

Greta T.: I spent just two years with you, but I have learned not to keep all in, to overthink, and to say what I think without being afraid or ashamed. I have realised what I believe is essential.

Andrea: It was like climbing a mountain, tiring. I managed to do it at times, and the top was close. Sometimes, I stumbled, and I had to start over. I wanted to arrive as soon as possible, but I didn’t manage to reach the top because I was impatient. I sense the time passing by, and that’s why I am always in a hurry.

Alessia: They have been adventurous years. We got to know each other initially, and it was as if we should get each other’s measures. We had to understand ourselves and the environment we were in..., and it takes time. We took this time and left to live our grand adventure.

Domenico: We put down our roots here.”

However, this kind of school, where teachers promote critical thinking, creativity, and dialogue, in which the educational act is not a mere transmission of knowledge but a challenging questioning, was just a part of their learning path, which looks quite different. The experiences they lived were a treasure they carry anywhere but are not strong enough to oppose this suffocating trend, the constant attempt to stop their thinking students had to cope with when they entered their new classroom.

In the first year of middle school, after only two months, the same students shared their reflections: talking has become more complicated, many of them who did it freely now have a hard time expressing themselves, and some of them who were capable of profound thoughts, now remain silent. Their eyes fill with tears.



### 3. Chapter 3 – Research on the Maieutic and Montessori Approaches in REACT partner countries

#### 3.1. Greece

##### **Socratic Maieutic method**

The **Socratic Maieutic method** of formulating questions is based on disciplined thinking and contemplative dialogue. The Socratic dialogue is the gradual, step-by-step, undoing of the interlocutor's positions, and the gradual attempt to draw a new conclusion, a new approach to the truth. Socrates believed that the main advantage of the technique he used in his dialogues was to help people think in their own way, so that they could generate new ideas. Socratic dialogues focus on the respondent's thinking as s/he tries to answer Socrates' questions. When a new idea is formulated through the application of this method then it is examined whether the idea is a "false ghost or an instinct with life and truth". In particular, the goal of dialogue is mainly pedagogical. This is because through the rigorous process of questioning, individuals evolve mentally and are transformed intellectually through encountering and understanding the meaning and essence of virtue. For both Socrates and Plato, philosophy is primarily a way of life that incorporates and implements virtues in practice. In addition, the knowledge that arises through the Socratic Method is a form of self-knowledge that is implemented in practice as the knowledge acquired from the individual him/herself.

There is a wealth of literature on the Socratic method and its application in the classroom, on the Internet which, while not entirely a useful bibliographic source, highlights the interest in the Socratic learning strategy worldwide.

As mentioned in the article of Ford "The Socratic method in the 21st century", the application of the method aims to cultivate the ability to research problems and the need to prove the truth. Accordingly, it helps to identify inaccurate information and inaccurate allegations. Finally, it strengthens the ability to draw conclusions and verify their validity.

##### **Utilization of the Socratic method in the teaching practice**



In particular, the Socratic method of teaching as presented in the Greek-related literature refers to the educational dialogue through the formulation of questions. As Pigiaki (2004) points out, the art of the teacher focuses on his/her ability to bring to the surface the students' knowledge and, through their logical processing, to use them to formulate questions, which are oriented to discover the new knowledge step by step. Thus, the students with their answers will reach the logical result themselves. Similarly, Matsagouras (2007) refers to the **Maieutic of Socrates** as a suitable method for seeking and teaching valid knowledge. According to Socrates, to discover the truth, a person must carry out a logical control of the data, otherwise his/her life remains "unexamined". In this light, the Socratic Method consists of a dialectical teacher-student communication aimed at checking the validity of experiences. Dialectical communication is preferable because -in contrast to monologue- it offers possibilities for formulating objections and arguments and controlling knowledge. In addition, a scientifically thorough approach to the same subject is attempted by Ioannis Kanakis in his study entitled 'The Socratic teaching-learning strategy'. In his research work, the theoretical foundation and the empirical investigation of the Socratic teaching-learning strategy are attempted. Kanakis presents a strategy, which is based on the observation and analysis of Socratic geometric teaching in Menon and includes the following phases:

- Verification of the conditions: The process begins with the submission of the appropriate questions by the teacher to verify, if there are the necessary conditions for the success of the objective goal of teaching-learning.
- Formulation of the problem: The problem is formulated by the student or by the teacher.
- Interlocutor's answer: the teacher pretends to be ignorant and motivates the students to seek solutions. The first answer is often inadequate or incorrect, but it could also be correct.
- Clarification of the insufficient or incorrect answer: The insufficient or incorrect answer is not immediately rejected but its inadequacy is clarified in every detail by the teacher. In this way the mistakes are revealed, and the misunderstandings are clarified while the student understands his/her mistake while at the same time s/he is given the opportunity to learn from these mistakes.



- Question: After two or more unsuccessful answers and their declaration, the student realizes his/her problem and difficulties and
- Assistance: the student is assisted by the teacher, until s/he realizes the solution of the problem.

The method of Interactive Argumentation consists of the formulation and support of logical arguments for or against (search for information through various sources and their evaluation, analysis and clarification of views, attitudes and values) and role play: playing other roles and social groups on a contentious issue, accepting their views with a view to a joint decision.

It is pointed out that the above teaching method does not simply allow students to make mistakes but tries to exploit the importance of these mistakes in the discovery of knowledge. The constant questioning causes a mental tension that reinforces concentration, patience and inner motivation to the students. Therefore, the question to which the teacher deliberately shifts is the provocative basis for the change of his/her social attitude. Kanakis adds that with the implementation of the Socratic teaching-learning strategy it is reasonable to expect a change in the attitude of the interlocutor, since s/he is convinced of the inadequacy of his/her opinion, questioning the validity of his/her ideas, opposing different views, refuting arguments, revealing contradictions. In addition, with the Socratic teaching-learning strategy, ethical, sociopolitical questions can be effectively discussed and researched, e.g. local value-laden issues for which there are always different views.

There are some initiatives in secondary education in Greece that introduce the practice of Socratic circles (see Coffey's article entitled 'Socratic Method' – it includes didactic proposals concerning the creation of groups of students (Socratic circles) that push students to process information and deepen their understanding of individual topics). Instructors guide students with open-ended questions about selected texts and motivate them to support their answers and views. The steps for the formation of Socratic circles are the following:

1. The teacher gives a text to students for critical reading one day before the application of Socratic circles in the classroom.
2. Students individually read, analyse and take notes based on the text.
3. Students are divided into two concentric circles



4. The inner circle reads the text aloud and discusses it for about ten minutes while the inner circle observes and listens carefully
5. The external circle evaluates what was said by the internal circle and provides feedback in the internal circle with its comments.
6. Students change circles
7. The new inner circle discusses the text for about ten minutes and then in turn is given ten minutes of feedback from the outer circle.

In the National Curriculum of Primary education, the idea of interdisciplinarity is promoted: Horizontal connections (appropriate organization of each subject), ensures processing issues from many perspectives together with Vertical interconnection (the organization of the curriculum on the same concepts, themes and skills through the classes).

Suggested teaching strategies are Exploration and discovery through various means (audiovisual material, simulations, and modelling), group discussion, narration, student-centred teaching approaches: by intervening in the process (e.g. Flexible Zone programs) /Flexible Interdisciplinary Zone and Creative Activities -interdisciplinary activity, project work).

The teacher works as facilitator and mediator in the learning process through exploratory and teamwork methods to develop their mental skills to deal with problems and shape positive attitudes and behaviours.

Additionally in the new teaching zone “Skills Workshop”, applied from 2020-2021 ( in the experimental schools) and from 2021-2022 in every primary and secondary school, the teaching approach of Interactive Argumentation is introduced: the formulation and support of logical arguments for or against (search for information through various sources and their evaluation, analysis and clarification of views, attitudes and values) along with role play: playing other roles, understanding the views of different social groups on controversial issues, accepting and processing their ideas with the aim of coming to a joint decision.

## The Montessori System

On the other hand, the **Montessori system** is based on the ideas of Maria Thekla Artemisia Montessori. Maria Montessori considered herself a citizen of the world, and she was a doctor



who dealt with children with mental retardation. She found that for the treatment of these children and the development of their abilities, the cooperation of Pedagogy with Medicine was beneficial. Her method has been used and is still used today in children of normal development. She has been nominated for a Nobel Prize three times and was awarded it in 1951. Her work and through her work her groundbreaking spirit and pioneering work in the field of Pedagogy are important.

The basis of her system is the deep trust and the unlimited respect for the abilities of the child. According to Maria Montessori, the teacher must plant the seed and then disappear, only observe and wait. Education starts from birth, specifically at the age of 2 years, and the following years, up to the age of 5, are particularly important, as they are the foundation of the child's personality. Maria Montessori rejected the notion that children are tabula rasa by birth. She believed that they are born with minds that are particularly "absorbent" and capable of self-directed education.

Her pedagogical thinking includes children from birth to adulthood. The dominant role in the classroom is played by the child, who is treated individually by the teacher. The scope of activities refers to practical issues such as animal - plant care, courtesy activities and discussions.

Maria Montessori characteristically stated that when children encounter nature, they reveal their power.

There are many private schools in Greece, mainly in Athens and Salonica which practise the ideas of Maria Montessori. In fact, Maria Goudeli, primary school teacher, founded the first Montessori kindergarten in 1936 in Athens.

The basic principle of this school which still exists is to respect the growth rate and personality of each child and self-education is applied as a teaching method. Specifically, there is a free choice of work by children, in a scientifically organized environment, which provides the appropriate stimuli for each child to learn using his/her inner motivation. The goal is for each child to build the necessary skills to develop into an autonomous and independent personality. Mixed age classes help children learn based on their personal growth rate, in a mental environment of growth, mutual respect and interaction with children of different ages. In kindergarten, children delve even deeper into various cognitive concepts and the emphasis





is on enhancing their social skills. In primary school, class work is organized by the students themselves with the support of the teacher. All work is done in the classroom with the Montessori material, so there is no homework. Each class has a key teacher, the children's reference person, who animates, coordinates, observes and helps students meet their needs at all levels. The Montessori assistant takes care of the classroom environment and supports its general function. There is also provision for students with special educational needs with the support of a special educator who assists the teacher in his/her work.

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What is practical living through the Montessori method?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8IIKnLv31o>

Montessori Lab with Maria Tasiou:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPGaTZRTPIAoZcw8lhf2RA?app=desktop&cbrd=1>

Montessori School of Athens: <https://www.montessoriani.gr/?page=%2F>



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## 3.2. Germany

### Introduction

In Germany the Maieutic method, like Greek philosophy in general and the person of the philosopher Socrates in particular, have found wide acceptance and admiration.

Briefly, therefore, the philosophical reception as well as the reception in the field of pedagogy and didactics will be discussed. In a second step, current topics and issues that determine the situation in Germany will be described.

### History, Topics and Discussion of (and about) Maieutic Philosophy and Didactics Philosophy and Social Sciences

Socrates is considered the founder of the Maieutic method. Although this method (and thus its founder) can – also and probably even primarily – be defined as didactic, in Germany he is most perceived as a philosopher. Therefore, this overview shall start with the reception of the Maieutic method in the field of philosophy. Already famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant, born on April 22, 1724, died on February 12, 1804, intensively studied Socrates and his Maieutic method. Kant is considered the most important German philosopher and well-known as the most important fighter for Enlightenment in his time. His most famous work has the title *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1781, in English known as the *Critique of Pure Reason*).

However, even before the publication of this *opus magnum*, Kant formulated and substantiated his core thesis and labelled his motto '*sapere aude*' (Kant 1784): Have the courage to use your own intellect! A motto that already seems to point to a democratic attitude. The reason and basis of this attitude is a conception of man in which every person has the same rights – at least insofar as they can use their intellect. Thus, there seem to be restrictions of acceptance in regard of the same rights. The restrictions obviously – and



not unimportantly – depend, for example, on cognition. Thus, it is at first sight seems not to be entirely clear whether children and pupils are already included in Kants conception.

However, this indeed might already be co-conceived, and as a matter of fact many Kantians have subsequently turned to pedagogy and didactics. In fact, the reason is obvious: It seems to be important to at least prepare the ground and make it possible for children and students to be enabled by teaching to make use of their intellects. We might thus presume that at least preparing children and students to become enlightened persons is a fundamental concern of Kant's. Children obviously must be included.

At the very least, his pedagogical credo seems to be that man can either be merely trained, and mechanically instructed, or truly enlightened (Kant 1789: A 25 – “Der Mensch kann entweder bloß dressiert, abgerichtet, mechanisch unterwiesen, oder wirklich aufgeklärt werden.”).

For this reason, at least a brief look at Kant, who is to be regarded as a central figure of German philosophy, seems quite useful and necessary.

According to Kant, the task of an engaged philosophy is to answer three questions, which lead to a fourth:

*What can I know?*

*What should I do?*

*What may I hope?*

*What is man?*

The questions respectively deal with by the epistemology, the ethics and the philosophy of a conception of man. Kant himself presented a fundamental text on each of these areas. Together they answer the question “What is man?” in philosophical terms.

Kant attempted an empirical answer to this question with reference in his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, or *Anthropology in Pragmatic Respect* (Kant 1798). Here, too, thoughts play a role that are at least close to the Maieutic approach. Kant emphasizes that it is about the human being as a freely acting beings creating themselves, or as beings that can and should become freely acting. (Kant 1789: Preface – der Mensch „als frei handelndes Wesen aus sich selber macht, oder machen kann und soll.“)



The freedom demanded by Kant as a necessary precondition of enlightenment is the right, and, deriving from and necessary for this right (and for acting accordingly), quasi the obligation, to make public use of one's reason in all areas.

German philosophy after 1800 is unthinkable without Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1781). Some historians of philosophy even distinguish between a time 'before Kant' (or the *Critique*) and 'after Kant' (or the *Critique*).

Still, outside philosophical circles, the *Critique of Pure Reason* initially remained rather unnoticed and even unknown. This changed when Carl Leonhard Reinhold published his *Letters on Kant's Philosophy* in the journal *Der Teutsche Merkur* in 1786, with which began the presentation of Kant's beliefs in terms of popular philosophy (*Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*). Carl Leonhard Reinhold was born October 26, 1757, and died April 10, 1823; he was a philosopher who derived from Austria but who moved onwards to Germany.

Another philosopher of special importance for the reception of Immanuel Kant and of the Maieutic method is Jakob Friedrich Fries, born August 23, 1773, who died August 10, 1843. His most important treatise is entitled *Neue oder anthropologische Kritik der Vernunft*, or the *New or Anthropological Critique of Reason*, published in 1807. This work was an attempt to give a new foundation to Immanuel Kant's critical theory in self-reflection and the self-confidence of and in Reason („*Selbstvertrauen der Vernunft*“); it earned Fries the classification of an early psychologist.

With Immanuel Kant and, at the latest, with Jakob Friedrich Fries, a long tradition starts: the tradition of influence in Germany of the Maieutic method, firstly in philosophy and, from there, in didactics and in pedagogy.

In our context, Leonard Nelson is particularly noteworthy. Born on July 11, 1882, he died October 29, 1927, Leonard Nelson was a critical philosopher and mathematician whose work focused on logic and ethics, especially committed to education and politics. Politically, he is associated with socialism. He belonged to the Neo-Friesian school, also known as the school of neo-Kantianism. In his best-known lecture, *Die sokratische Methode (The Socratic Method)*, delivered in 1922, Nelson recommended a modified Maieutic method of instruction for teaching philosophy as well as revitalizing philosophical inquiry. His viewpoint is also referred to as 'neo-Socratic.'



Together with Gustav Heckmann, Nelson developed principles for a new philosophical effort at knowledge, which he called *sokratisches Gespräch* (*Socratic Conversation*). Initially, *Socratic Conversation* was intended only for philosophy classes at universities. Nelson characterized it as the art of teaching, not philosophy, but philosophizing, teaching not about philosophers, but turning students into philosophers themselves (overview in Szlezák 2004, 91-127, esp. 91-98).

One of the ways in which *Socratic Conversation* differs from the *Socratic Method* is that it is not dialogic, but rather moderated in form of group discussions.

In 1922 Nelson gave the lecture on the *Socratic Method*, *Die sokratische Methode*, in which he presented his understanding of dialogue.

*Socratic Conversation* was conceived as an exchange of ideas among several seekers of truth. The role of a teacher is necessary (only) until the learners have developed their capability of 'self-thinking' so that they may dare to go alone, because they replace the teacher's care with their own care (Nelson 1922: 25 – „daß sie eines Tages das Alleingehen wagen dürfen, weil sie die Obacht des Lehrers durch die eigene Obacht ersetzen“).

It is obvious that, once again, the idea of democratization plays is intended and in the focus. This includes, again, the assessment that every living being, including children, have immanent rights. Nelson even extended this to animals: Animals, too, are living beings that must be treated as beings with immanent rights.

Nelson saw himself in the tradition of Socrates, Kant and Fries. He not only founded the Neo-Friesian school of philosophy (*Neufriesische Schule*), but also *the Jakob-Friedrich-Fries-Society* (*Jakob-Friedrich-Fries-Gesellschaft*) as a philosophical discussion group. The aim was the cultivation and further education of the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant and its importance.

Nelson's colleague was Gustav Heckmann, who was born April 22, 1898, and died June 8, 1996, another well-known teacher and philosopher of his time. Heckmann studied mathematics, physics and philosophy. After the end of World War II, he received professorship of philosophy and pedagogy at the Pädagogische Hochschule Hannover.



Heckmann enriched the method of *Socratic Conversation* according to Leonard Nelson's ideas and thus with new aspects such as 'meta-conversation' (overview: Horster 1994: especially 26).

On the understanding of dialogue in the neo-Friesian school: Following Socrates' approach, Nelson held that the influence of the teacher's (or better: the discussion leader's) judgments on the students must be eliminated at all costs so that the students can arrive at their own judgments without bias.

*Socratic Conversation* according to Nelson and Heckmann continues to be practiced, especially in adult education. This also includes Maieutic.

An essential difference to the Maieutic of Socrates, however, is that with Nelson there are not dialogues in which one or several people help another, but a group conversation. The person leading the conversation, according to this conception, does not speak about the matter himself, discussing it, but only takes on the 'midwifery role' (see also Wöhrmann 1983).

Similar methods still play a very important role in Germany. Influential today are especially social philosophers Robert Jungk and Jürgen Habermas. The concepts of Jungk (*Zukunftswerkstatt*, meaning both, *Factory for the Future*, and *Future Workshop*) and Habermas (*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs* or *Discourse Free of Domination*) are very similar.

Robert Jungk was born May 11, 1913, and died July 14, 1994. He received the *Right Livelihood Award (Alternative Nobel Prize)* in 1986 for his method. As early as 1952, his first book on questions concerning the future of humanity was published, entitled *Die Zukunft hat schon begonnen (The Future Has Already Begun)*.

Jungk was one of the most important figures of the international environmental and peace movement. The concept of the *Zukunftswerkstatt* is a method clearly related to Maieutic. The aim is to develop solutions to social problems.

A *Zukunftswerkstatt* is intended as a project for empowerment. In this way, people are to move from being the objects of future planning to becoming the subjects of this planning and, starting from the local context of action, to open up larger spaces for action. The aim is to turn those who are affected into participants.



A *Zukunftswerkstatt* can be used wherever "groups of people have problems that cannot be solved by conventional means" (Kuhnt / Müllert 2006: 17 – „wo Menschengruppen Probleme haben, bei denen sie mit herkömmlichen Mitteln nicht weiterkommen“).

In principle, it is suitable for participants of all ages (from kindergarten children to senior citizens) and all levels of education (from unemployed people without training to business managers), since a *Zukunftswerkstatt* does not require expert knowledge and can therefore also be used by and with participants who have little experience with decision-making processes, such as children or young people. However, this method requires intensive preparation and support by trained moderators.

The areas of application and the spectrum of a *Zukunftswerkstatt* might range from learning to problem-solving, to idea-finding, strategy or communication, among others. It is a method that seeks to collect ideas and solve problems within the framework of a specific issue. People develop, together, future designs, goals and measures. The application of a *Zukunftswerkstatt* is mostly limited to regional processes and is used by municipalities, local governments, etc. The *Zukunftswerkstatt* is thus also a citizen participation process.

It is used, for example, in urban planning to involve citizens in certain planning processes, or in organizational development to unify employees around common goals and values. The main goal of a future workshop is to find approaches to solutions that the participants previously sought in vain. The topic must be penetrated in a perspective-oriented and clear way (gaining new perspectives), a feeling for the future has to be developed (thus not concepts but people and their personalities come into focus), and thus, self-awareness might be acquired (reducing fears of the future, gaining personal confidence, trusting in one's own power).

The method comprises three main phases as well as a preliminary phase and a follow-up phase (for the following: Kuhnt / Müllert 2006: 62-63).

In the preliminary phase, the focus is on beginning the process and getting the participants started. This is where the group is 'founded' and an agreeable atmosphere of mutual trust is created, including the fostering of an informal group atmosphere, the recognition of the specific interests and the disclosure of the methodological and time planning parts of the *Zukunftswerkstatt*.



In the next phase, the focus is on complaints and criticism. Here, the participants express their displeasure, and criticise negative experiences with regard of the topic. This phase should be as free of constraints as possible. It seems to be important that the focus lies not so much on the analysis of the problems as on an inventory for further work. It is a good idea to brainstorm on cards, which are then arranged topic by topic: that is, as in the moderation method. The goal of this phase is to get rid of anger, rage and disappointment, thus freeing up for creative, imaginative and constructive work in the following two phases.

The next phase focuses on utopian aspects: Here the creativity of everyone is called for: One should think the utopian. An initial sentence would be, for example: "It would be nice if ...". Sentences like "But that's impossible!" are to be avoided at all costs. Here you can and should fantasize. Again, brainstorming on moderation cards is a good idea, which are arranged according to topics, as in the moderation method.

Only the following phase focuses on realization and practice. The earlier phases are linked, but now must be assessed to what is feasible. Group work and the involvement of qualified experts can be used. Still, external experts are deliberately avoided to view the solutions delivered by the participants, because they are seen as themselves being experts in the matter. The aims are fresh procedures for project planning, for implementing (social) change and for qualifying in the use of cyclical group processes.

The moderator / facilitator designs the conclusion. The goals, procedures and results are once again briefly summarized and classified. Under the heading: *How do we continue?* the possible continuation of the *Zukunftswerkstatt* is reflected. If necessary, new meetings are arranged. At the end, the participants give feedback on how they experienced the time together.

After being terminated, a further *Zukunftswerkstatt* on the same topic should take place, in which the previous *Zukunftswerkstatt* is analysed with accordance to the phases. A control loop can be created in which the participants check whether the target result corresponds to the goal. This is referred to in the basic literature as a permanent *Zukunftswerkstatt* (see Jungk / Müllert 1993: 199-200).

Jürgen Habermas, born June 18, 1929, is a German philosopher and sociologist. He belongs to the second generation of the so-called *Frankfurt School* and was most recently a professor of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt am Main.





The *Frankfurt School* is a group of scholars from various disciplines who relate to what is called the *Critical Social Theory*. The object of their theoretical statements is the analysis of society, that is: the exposure of its mechanisms of domination and oppression and the questioning of its ideologies, with the goal of a reasonable society, of responsible people. Theory is thus, curiously, understood as a form of practice.

One of the founders, Theodor W. Adorno, emphasized that thinking is a form of doing. This means that with theoretical enlightenment, social conditions are unveiled, and with the new view of them, the changing practice begins, starting to alter the consciousness of enlightened people. While in the 'older' or 'classical' *Critical Social Theory* the project of an interdisciplinary theoretical social-science diagnosis of our times, with an emancipatory goal, was in the centre, this changed in parts with the 'younger' *Critical Social Theory*, which indeed goes back to Jürgen Habermas. Habermas holds on to the socio-critical motives, but his concept of 'communicative reason' (*kommunikative Vernunft*) turns emancipatory motives into the centre of the theory. In his *Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Habermas 1981) Habermas assumes that social action is linguistically mediated. Communicative action is coordinated by generating an agreement, based on criticizable validity claims. Only if these are accepted, the casting persons can achieve their goals. Again, there is some proximity to the Maieutic method.

Habermas is one of the world's most widely received contemporary philosophers and sociologists. Some of his proposals have had an impact on concrete politics. The most famous of these were the controversies surrounding the new main train station in Stuttgart, which were so heated that as a result – for the first time in Germany – a state government was elected that was dominated by the Green Party.

The disputed topic was a transportation and urban development project to reorganize Stuttgart's rail hub. Despite widespread agreement among various interest groups on the need to modernize Stuttgart's rail hub, the project was controversial in many respects. A police operation on September 30, 2010, with several hundred people injured, some of them seriously, led to a conciliation procedure in line with the Habermasian concept. It was described as a 'democratic experiment' because the exchange of opinions was held in public sessions and broadcast by public television. Over nine days of meetings in November 2010,



some 70 speakers gave some 9900 speeches in about 65 hours of discussion (overview: von Staden 2020).

There were several comparable experiments, for example on the course of federal highways (Giessen 2013).

All this shows that the Maieutic method or at least concepts that are very close to this method have a long tradition in Germany. Hence, there are also corresponding traditions in the fields of education, specifically in didactic and pedagogical concepts.

### **Didactics and Pedagogy**

It has already been pointed out several times that the philosophical Maieutic method has quasi automatically implications for didactics and pedagogy. Already the very first of the hitherto mentioned philosophers, the most famous thinker of the Enlightenment in the German-speaking world, Immanuel Kant, wrote a book "on pedagogy" (Kant 1803 – *Über Pädagogik*). Here, we find text passages that prove a direct proximity to the Maieutic Method. One example:

"One learns most thoroughly, and retains best, everything one learns, as it were, from oneself. Only a few people, however, can do this. They are called autodidacts." (Kant 1803: 89 – „Man lernt das am gründlichsten, und behält das am besten, was man gleichsam aus sich selbst lernet. Nur wenige Menschen indessen sind das im Stande. Man nennt sie Autodidakten.“)

Kant recommended a 'dialogical way of teaching' („dialogische Lehrart“). According to Kant, this consists of a teacher asking his disciples what they want to be taught, addressing the students' reason – in both senses: their reason for learning, and the reason that is a consequence of their thinking.

In Kant's view, thinking reasonably can only be done dialogically. The teacher and the student ask and answer to each other. Thus, the teacher guides the student's flow of thoughts, through questions, by developing the predisposition to certain concepts in the student through – the teachers are the midwives of their student's thoughts. The students in turn help the teachers to improve the questioning techniques by his counter-questions (Kant 1797: 478).

*Socratic Conversation* became a teaching method called *erotematics* ('art of questioning', „Fragekunst“) in the 18th century. *Erotematics* was used in religious education and dominated



the catechetics of both denominations, Catholic and Protestant, in the German-speaking countries until the early 19th century. Especially in the Protestant area it had many followers. An important example is Karl Friedrich Bahrdt who was born on August 25, 1740, and died on April 23, 1792. He was a Protestant theologian and advocate of the Enlightenment. Reference should be made to his influential book whose title can be translated as *Philanthropic Education Conception* (Bahrt 1776, *Philanthropinischer Erziehungsplan*).

Another leading exponent of this similar method and concept was the Protestant theologian Johann Friedrich Christoph Gräffe, born February 15, 1754, who died October 27, 1816. He, too, was a German Protestant theologian who taught catechetics and ancient and Kantian philosophy (at the University of Göttingen). He also wrote his major work on Kant, entitled *Textbook of General Catechetics According to Kantian Principles for the Use of Academic Lectures* (Gräffe 1795-1799 – *Lehrbuch der allgemeinen Katechetik nach Kantischen Grundsätzen nach Kantischen Grundsätzen zum Gebrauche akademischer Vorlesungen*). Gräffe also described and promoted the Socratic or Maieutic method in his influential work *Socraticism According to its Original Nature from a Catechetical Point of View* (Gräffe 1789 – *Die Sokratik nach ihrer ursprünglichen Beschaffenheit in katechetischer Rücksicht betrachtet*).

Christian Gustav Friedrich Dinter, born February 29, 1760, who died May 29, 1831, was another of these Protestant theologian and educator. The truths of the Christian faith were to be made understandable and popularized primarily through reason. The most important testimony to these efforts is the nine-volume 'Schoolteacher's Bible,' which he published from 1826 to 1830 (*Schullehrerbibel*). This was a standard work for elementary school teacher training in the 19th century.

On the Catholic side, Franz Michael Vierthaler, among others, was a notable exponent of Maieutics. Vierthaler was born September 25, 1758, and died October 3, 1827. He was a noted educator and school reformer and was appointed the first director of the first teachers' seminary in the German-speaking world in Salzburg in 1790. Teacher candidates were required to undertake practical teaching exams and hospitations. Vierthaler developed teaching methods and principles and authored textbooks and children's books (see Thaler 2022).



Another important German-speaking Catholic theologian and educational reformer was Bernhard Galura, born August 21, 1764, who died May 17, 1856. He was also a Catholic priest and a high church dignitary, at the end of his life prince-bishop of the diocese of Brixen, now located in Italy. Galura authored several writings, such as on a Socratic Method of Catechism (Galura 1796 – *Sokratische Katechisirmethode*). Galura was convinced that the beliefs taught in religious instruction were inherent in man in the sense of a natural theology and could be elicited by skillful questioning.

Outside theological circles, Maieutics found more appeal in the Age of Enlightenment, among others with the most famous authors of that time, for example with Moses Mendelssohn (born on September 6, 1729, who died on January 4, 1786). Mendelsohn was the most famous Jewish philosopher in Germany (see Knobloch 2006).

Similarly significant is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, born January 22, 1729, who died February 15, 1781. He is the first German dramatist whose works are performed continuously in theaters to this day. His theoretical writing relevant here is entitled *The Education of Humankind* (Lessing 1780 – *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*).

Not only theological and philosophical material was conveyed in a ‘Socratic’ manner; social and even mathematical questions were dealt with in ‘Socratic Conversations.’ (Examples: Böhm 1929: 134) One example is the essay *On the Socratic Teaching Method and its Applicability to School Teaching* from 1845, published by the mathematician Karl Weierstrass (*Über die Sokratische Lehrmethode und deren Anwendbarkeit beim Schulunterrichte*).

Karl Theodor Wilhelm Weierstrass, born on October 31, 1815, who died on February 19, 1897, was an important German mathematician in his time, who worked above all around the logically founded analysis. He thought that the Maieutic method was excellent, but he also saw problems especially in the natural sciences. Overall, however, he was convinced it helped the students to gain knowledge whose source was directly in the dispositions of human nature.

All in all, it can be said that an essential difference between the questioning art of Socrates and the pedagogical Maieutic of the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany lies in the fact that Socrates' approach was negative but was turned into its opposite in Germany. Socrates had his interlocutors present their views and then refuted them. The early modern German



educators, on the other hand, tried to elicit positive statements from the students that corresponded to what they themselves believed to be true (Bühler 2012: 48-53).

Overall, it can also be stated that corresponding teaching methods have a long tradition in Germany. They are commonly discussed under the name 'questioning-developing teaching method' (*fragend-entwickelnde Unterrichtsmethode*). Their representatives, such as Hilbert Meyer, explicitly refer to them as a further development of Socrates' Maieutic.

Hilbert Lühr Meyer, born on October 2, 1941, is a German educator. He was a professor at school pedagogy from 1975 until his retirement. His standard work is entitled "Teaching Methods" (Meyer 1987 – *Unterrichtsmethoden*).

Hilbert Meyer advocates a research-developing teaching with the following definitions: Research-developing teaching is a holistic and student-active teaching approach in which the information learned – called the 'products of action agreed between the teacher and the students' – guide the conception of the teaching process.

In addition to subject knowledge, inquiry-based teaching also teaches students scientific ways of thinking and working in a meaningful context and enables them to reflect on the meaning and limits of scientific work. Inquiry-based teaching allows the practical implementation of a variety of didactically important principles, such as action orientation or Socratic Dialogue, i.e. Maieutic.

Through the broad connection to the students' pre-instructional ideas and the repeated reference to partial aspects in the overall process of gaining knowledge, the students' thinking is trained, and scientific problem-solving competence are acquired. Since the students can directly contribute their own ideas to the lessons and develop a high level of their own activity during the lessons, the research-based lessons have a strong intrinsic motivating effect.

Even outside the school contexts, there are further developments of Socratic Maieutic as a method of discovery and multidimensional learning practiced in many teaching and learning areas in Germany, such as traffic education (Kreft 2003): The teachers pick up the children in their horizon of experience and encourage them to develop his or her own insights and self-determined action through appropriate stimuli and questions.



In a modification and extension of a guiding principle of Montessori pedagogy, 'traffic education from the child' works under the didactic objective 'Help me to discover the environment myself and to act on my own responsibility'. In this way, children develop forms of traffic appropriate to their thinking from their own understanding and challenged own reflections, such as the compatible interaction with each other, the use of traffic space in partnership, the design of appropriate forms of communication, the design of descriptive traffic signs or accepted traffic sanctions (Warwitz 2009: 50-75).

This reference by Siegfried Warwitz points to other traditions close to Maieutic, which are also very popular in the German-speaking countries, especially to the pedagogy of Maria Montessori. Montessori has been widely recognized and appreciated in Germany.

### **Excursus: The Relevance of Maria Montessori's Pedagogy in the German-Speaking Countries**

In Germany, especially two women were important in making the Montessori pedagogy known and spread: Clara Grunwald in the 1920s and Helene Helming after 1945.

Clara Grunwald was born on June 11, 1877, and was murdered in the Auschwitz- Birkenau concentration camp in April 1943. She was a German teacher and the most important protagonist of the Montessori Method (for the following, see Berger 1994 and Stiller 2008).

In 1919 she founded the German Montessori Committee. Two years later, the Society of Friends and Promoters of the Montessori Method in Germany was founded (*Gesellschaft der Freunde und Förderer der Montessori-Methode in Deutschland*). In 1925, the two organizations merged to form the German Montessori Society (*Deutsche Montessori Gesellschaft*), with Clara Grunwald as its first director. In 1921 she completed a Montessori course conducted by Maria Montessori herself, in London, and in 1923 it was Clara Grunwald who herself conducted the first German training course for Montessori education, and personally invited Maria Montessori to give lectures. She ensured intensive public relations work, especially in the form of lectures.

Together with her sister, another Montessori children's house was opened in Freiburg im Breisgau, where children of preschool age were cared for, as well as children who had been deferred from school attendance. In Freiburg, another branch of the German Montessori



Society was established in 1927. In 1929, on the initiative of the two sisters, an elementary school class was taught according to the Montessori method. The school experiment was highly praised by parents, teachers and the official school administration (von Hatzfeld 2000). Clara Grunwald's activity ended because she was persecuted by the Nazis as a Jew (Berger 1999).

The second important protagonist of Montessori education in Germany was MariaTheodora Helene Helming, born March 6, 1888, who died July 5, 1977 (see Berger 2015). Helming got contact with Montessori education through her interest in the education of young children, and in the winter of 1927 / 1928 she attended the classes in Berlin organized by Clara Grundwald and led by Maria Montessori. Enthused by the concept, she set up a Montessori group in Aachen. This group later eventually developed into an independent Montessori school. The first German Montessori school was founded in Jena on June 2, 1923. There is an overview on Austria by Haberl and Hammerer (1997). According to this, the first Montessori children's home in Austria was founded in Vienna in 1917. Montessori education spread rapidly to the municipal kindergartens in Vienna during this time. Between 1924 and 1936 Maria Montessori visited the city several times.

### **Current discussions**

Currently, several experiments determine the discussions in Germany, showing that even small children can act democratically in the daycare center, regarding what they want to play (overview: Plahl 2022). For this reason, these recent experiments will be discussed. The socio-political question of how to 'learn democracy' also plays a role.

Some of these experiments are organized by young people and children themselves. The movement 'Fridays for Future' plays an important role. Obviously, some young people and even children have the impression that it is necessary in our society to make one's own voice heard, to solve problems and to take responsibility. This is now accepted by important parts of German society and the political class (Deutscher Bundestag 2020; Kultusministerkonferenz 2018). According to this, children and adolescents should have the opportunity to experience and practice democratic discussions and democratic problem solving for themselves. Co- shaping society is accepted as to be their right.



At least, this is the topic of three reports from recent year that were published independently from each other: The Report on Strengthening Democracy Education by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in Germany (2018: *Stärkung der Demokratie-Erziehung, Report der Kultusministerkonferenz*), the Report on Children and Adolescents of the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2020 – *Kinder- und Jugendbericht: Förderung demokratischer Bildung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*), and the Children and Youth Report on the Promotion of Democratic Education With Children and Adolescents, by the German Parliament (2020: *Kinder- und Jugendbericht: Förderung demokratischer Bildung im Kindes- und Jugendalter. Bericht des Deutschen Bundestags*).

Since children and adolescents currently do empower themselves (for example, in the context of the "Fridays for Future" campaign), it is even necessary to speak of a 'megatrend' (Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 45). The reasons lie primarily in 'ambivalences of globalization; climate change and environmental destruction; the Corona pandemic and its management; flight and migration; ambivalences of digitalization; consequences of demographic change; armament and the threat of war. This and even more aspects would result in a "societal task portfolio for today's young generation.' (German Bundestag 2020: 45-46). For this reason, the support of democratic action and corresponding movements among children and adolescents are worthy of support and necessary.

The prevailing opinion in Germany assumes that all of this is feasible with and through children and adolescents. It is about 'allowing' them to express their own will and to contribute their own opinions (Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 138).

Plahl (2022) describes everyday life in various day care centres. She has observed that quite regularly there is a joint vote on what the children play. Even the youngest children are allowed to participate in decision-making and self-determination. This doesn't just mean choosing a game or planning an outing or the summer party. It can also mean that each child decides for themselves whether they want to be changed diapers and are allowed to say which person should do it. When, how long, where, next to whom and how they sleep. What is on the menu and how much they eat this day.





Some daycare centers have already anchored these children's rights in their daycare center constitutions. Plahm quotes the director of an integrative daycare center with 200 children, 24 teachers and eight educators, who says, for example, that the daycare center has developed principles for action: Children decide what goes on their plates and whether they eat at all. And in what order – whether they eat the compote first, for example.

The biggest problem, she says, was that the professionals had to learn: a child can only build up responsibility for itself if the professionals relinquish the power they traditionally have.

There must also be tolerance (and this must also first be learned and accepted by the professionals and teachers) that the children also (of course) make mistakes and that this must be allowed.

This implies seemingly irrational preservation. If a child has not eaten anything at noon and is then hungry an hour later, this is all right and must be accepted by the professionals, because only in this way can children really gain experiences that are related to their own bodies. The child must be made competent for its own needs.

The professionals must be able to tolerate that there are failures. Learning democracy takes time and trust that children are competent enough to get there without having to pull them along and lecture them.

Thus, there must also be further training for the professionals in learning democracy, starting with team meetings, discussions – that the management always reminds them and works on improvements. In any case, there needs to be an inner acceptance that children's rights and child protection are simply extremely important.

Another experience: Anyone who gives children leeway in decision-making should also be prepared to break away from rigid structures. These changes are not always easy.

*Nurseries of democracy (Kinderstuben der Demokratie)* was the name of the project in the northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein (see Hansen /Knauer /Sturzenhecker 2009). In this study, the positive effects for even young children were noted: They do speak more, for example, because they want to express themselves, because it is important to them to be heard by the others. But there are also many things involved like mathematical skills, aesthetics and so on.



Critically, it is often discussed that there can be contradictions between democratic learning and the educational mission. However, the Children and Youth Report states that no young person should be prevented from "gaining independent judgment" because the goal is their maturity (Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 120).

Many municipal ordinances in Germany have been amended to require municipalities to involve children and to involve young people. One important problem that has emerged is that it is not clear how this can be implemented when there is no experience in dealing with such a dynamic group as young people apart from the local council, city council meeting and similar bodies. In addition, the flow of information must be open in both directions.

### **Computer-Supported Maieutic Learning?**

At the latest with the Corona crisis, many forms of teaching and democratic Maieutic scenarios have shifted to the Computer and the Internet. This requires a rethinking of computer-assisted learning. It can also have positive aspects, as aspects of participation play an even greater role than in face-to-face teaching. It has been recognized that in the context of computer- and Internet-based learning, only didactic participation scenarios are functional and effective.

The focus of the discussions is therefore on the design and application of the available technology.

For example, it is important (and not always easy to guarantee in the context of the computer or, respectively, especially the Internet and the hate messages and excessive language that frequently occur there) to avoid fear, stress, or even boredom, while positive emotions and those perceived as interesting are positive and useful for Maieutic processes (see, for example, Knautz 2013). The goal should be a playful approach to the medium (Ritterfeld 2011).

A specific problem in the context of the computer is apparently that learners "tend to reduce the absorption of knowledge in an explicit learning mode in order to switch back to the play mode as quickly as possible" (Kerres et al. 2009: o.S. – "die Aufnahme von Wissen in einem expliziten Lernmodus eher zu reduzieren versuchen, um möglichst zügig wieder in den Spielmodus zu wechseln"). Democratic learning can also be exhausting; the success therefore also depends on the context and the content. Democratic learning via computer must



especially aim at avoiding passivity. The activation of the students is the decisive criterion, especially with the computer (Giessen 2016).

For example, it seems important to avoid a simple comment function (comments like 'I think it's great' or 'Your idea is crap and you're crap'), but to encourage constructive feedback.

Such experiences sound trivial but had to be tested and experienced first. Therefore, what Petko has formulated is still valid: "What would be necessary [...] is an increased orientation towards 'trying out' the postulated potentials in educational contexts" (2008: 11 – Nötig wäre [...] eine verstärkte Orientierung am, Ausprobieren' der postulierten Potenziale in Bildungskontexten).

## Final Remarks

In summary, it can be stated that, at least in a broader sense, Maieutic educational methods have a long tradition in Germany.

This, incidentally, has also been observed from the outside. French linguist and educationalist Michel Bréal described in 1875 that the German educational system was considerably more liberal than the French at the time. In France, he said, teaching generally remained as *cours magistral*, whereas in Germany students were encouraged to think along, to discuss, and to take responsibility.

These traditions were, of course, interrupted by dramatic breaks; it has already been pointed out that the propagandist of Montessori education was murdered in a concentration camp because she was Jewish. Nevertheless, these lines of tradition exist and are perhaps also an explanation for the fact that and how Germany dealt with its past after the Second World War. In any case, the German educational system continues to be strongly influenced by democratic and Maieutic ideas. It could be shown that it is not only discussed in reform pedagogical niches. Rather, in recent studies and reports, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018), the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Kinder- und Jugendbericht des Bundesfamilienministeriums 2020), or the German Bundestag (Deutscher Bundestag 2020) address the importance of such pedagogical approaches and deliberately want to promote them further.



Current discussions also refer to the extent to which Maieutic approaches are possible in the context of digital media.

These discussions also show and demonstrate the importance attached to corresponding issues in Germany.

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### 3.3. Bulgaria

At the present, the two approaches exist rather in parallel in the school environment and it is difficult to find their common intersection. While the Montessori approach has a wider range of applications - it is not related to a particular subject and is practiced at all stages of education (5-18 years), but with an accent in kindergartens and in primary schools (5-12 years), the Maieutic Socratic approach, we can say that as far as practiced in school, it is related to the upper grades in the age group 13-18 years and is rather used in the teaching of specific subjects of the humanities cycle - especially Philosophy and History, in whose programs topics from civic education are discussed. Another specific detail is that the Maieutic Socratic approach does not enjoy broad institutional support but relies mainly on the methodological support of university and NGO enthusiasts and experts and their personal



causes, while for the Montessori method, we can say that due to its modernity at the moment, he enjoys a strong public interest, and hence one of the schools. This means that the path of the Maieutic Socratic approach to the school passes mainly through projects. Another thing that does not help for the wider application of the Maieutic Socratic approach is that the main developments that should facilitate the teachers are highly academic and there are no trainings and trainings focused on specific pedagogical tools, interactive activities, role-playing cases:

1. [http://junior.integra.bg/bg/Socratic\\_Dialogue/docs/evelina\\_vardjiska.pdf](http://junior.integra.bg/bg/Socratic_Dialogue/docs/evelina_vardjiska.pdf)
2. <https://extremepress.net/wp-content/uploads/E-book-Lochrat-Gherdjikov-Metodika.pdf>
3. [https://ejournal.vfu.bg/pdfs/%D0%92%D0%98%D0%9A%D0%A2%D0%9E%D0%A0%20%D0%9F%D0%95%D0%A2%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%92%20%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B0%20\(2\).pdf](https://ejournal.vfu.bg/pdfs/%D0%92%D0%98%D0%9A%D0%A2%D0%9E%D0%A0%20%D0%9F%D0%95%D0%A2%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%92%20%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B0%20(2).pdf)
4. [http://e-phd.uni-sofia.bg/news/doklad\\_Nikolova.pdf](http://e-phd.uni-sofia.bg/news/doklad_Nikolova.pdf)

However, a possible path for the wider introduction of the Maieutic Socratic approach is the so-called **Innovative Schools**, which after the new educational law, adopted in 2016, are a great opportunity for the schools to deviate from the institutionally set rails and seek new educational approaches. The innovative school is an institutionally acquired status given by the Ministry of Education and Science to the respective school based on a project submitted for approval to the Ministry of Education and Science. About 40% of the Bulgarian schools that have received this status of Innovative School from the Ministry of Education, in their innovation is set the approbation of new innovative teaching methods, some of them rely on methods related to the development of critical thinking and include Maieutic Socratic approach as a method of work. There are already schools that develop new school subjects with own curriculums based on innovative teaching methods – exemplum Creative Thinking and Communication, where Socratic dialogue is practiced as a method adopted in Secondary School “prof. Assen Zlatarov”, Parvomay town -





(<http://u4avplovdv.com/%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD>)

Contrary to what has been said so far, the **Montessori method**, although currently being developed as a private initiative mainly, due to the great public interest, the Ministry of Education and Science is closely monitoring and creating conditions for support - through the so-called Innovative schools, through training programs, some of which are designed as masters university programs.

Montessori training programs for preschool age in Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - [https://fnoi.uni-sofia.bg/?page\\_id=6871](https://fnoi.uni-sofia.bg/?page_id=6871)

- Master's program "Montessori pedagogy in the digital society - preschool stage"
- Montessori pedagogy in modern society - preschool stage "/ first and second level /

The same and for a New Bulgaria University - <https://cpo.nbu.bg/bg/profesionalno-kvalifikacionni-programi/montesori-pedagogika>

- Introduction to Montessori pedagogy in group work with children from 3 to 6 years
- Montessori classroom - main activities, approach and practices in school age 1-4 grade

Historically, the tradition of the Montessori Method in Bulgaria was restored in 1996, when a private kindergarten "Dr. Maria Montessori" was established in Sofia, which marked the beginning of the formation of the Montessori community in Bulgaria. 2008 Montessori education in Bulgaria takes a decisive step towards establishing the Montessori method, which should be the main and leading in education, and not to be used in the context of classical pedagogy. Pioneers in this regard are Montessori kindergarten children" (Casa dei Bambini), Children's Centre "Kameleni Montessori ", Children's House" Montessori. These are the first three kindergartens where teachers certified by Montessori international institutions work with children.

In 2011 Montessori kindergarten "Children's House" (Casa dei Bambini) became the first school in Bulgaria to receive a license from the Ministry of Education and Science and from a



children's centre became a private kindergarten. In 2012 they received a license from the Ministry of Education and Science - "Camelini", and in 2013 - Children's House "Montessori". In 2014, the Montessori House of Children (Casa dei Bambini) became the first and so far, the only school in Bulgaria licensed by the Montessori Center International, London, UK to train students pursuing their studies at the British institution. In the same year, the Children's House opened its doors to students from the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", who work with children on various projects. There is no doubt that Montessori schools are spreading the fastest in Sofia, where the conditions for private initiative create the most suitable environment, but they are rapidly expanding to the next big cities - Burgas, Varna and Plovdiv, which has its own economic logic.

In 2016, parents and teachers from Montessori kindergarten "Children's House" (Casa dei Bambini) launched a large-scale campaign to promote the Montessori method in Bulgaria. They set up a Community for Innovative and Montessori Education, working to change the education system by opening it up to new and alternative forms of learning and providing a safe and innovative environment for children. On April 6, 2016, the Community for Innovative and Montessori Education and the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" hold a round table on "Innovative education in Bulgaria - Montessori pedagogy".

After the adoption of the new law on education in 2016 and the procedure set out in the law for the status of innovative schools in the coming years Montessori pedagogy is rapidly developing in municipal and state kindergartens and schools.



## 3.4. Spain

### Introduction

Historically, Spain began an extensive educational reform at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was indeed a convulsive period all over Europe, but for Spain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the State became a republic forcing the monarchy into exile. During this period, the 1900s, education became key for the development of the country. Over this period of reforms, Spain looked mainly to Germany, France and England. It is also true that Maria Montessori visited Spain in 1914, instead of travelling to England as planned. Because WW1 had begun, she decided to visit Barcelona instead and experiment with some of her pedagogies there. These proved to be very successful and Maria Montessori, visited Spain on several occasions later, setting up her model in several schools in Cataluña (Cañigueral, 2022; Porto Ucha & Vázquez Ramil, 2014). In 1907 a group of intellectuals led by Enric Prat and the Catalan bourgeoisie wanted a Catalan educational system. Because some of them visited different countries like France with new and innovative pedagogies coming from the USA, they wanted to transform the Catalan society using some of those ideas. Different educational journals started to pay attention to Maria Montessori work in Italy and how her system was working very well. Because the Regional Catalan Government at that moment was led by two great intellectuals (Egenio Dórs and Puig i Cadafall) a Pedagogical Department or Council of Education was created, in order to start applying Montessori's pedagogies in orphanages such as the Orphan Home from Barcelona (Cañigueral, 2022).

The rate of illiteracy was very high: up to 50% of the population was estimated to be illiterate) and poverty and child labor was the norm at that time. The main teaching method was memorization and corporal punishment in class was the norm. As the famous saying from those times goes: "la letra con sangre entra" (letters are learnt with blood). It was in this context that certain politicians such as the Aragonese Joaquín Costa and José Ortega y Gasset, having liberal views and an idea of what was happening in the rest of Europe, thought and fought for dramatic changes in education, believing that the real change that Spain needed so much, had to begin with changes in Education. They fought for this with the help of writers and university



professors such as Miguel de Unamuno, Francisco Giner de los Ríos and Santiago Ramón y Cajal. It is important to note that Spain never had an Enlightenment era (it returned to an absolute monarchy again after voting for the 1<sup>st</sup> constitution). So, the economy of the country depended mainly on agriculture based on large estates owned by the few with the majority of the population living and working for these rich landowners for miserable salaries.

### **History of new methodologies in Spain the role of women pedagogists/educators**

It is in this context that some professors from the Central University in Madrid, tired of the lack of academic freedom, and the imposition of the Catholic Church, and its intervention in the curricula, decided to opt out and create the “Institución Libre de Enseñanza” (ILE) (The Free Teaching Institution). In 1876 the ILE was created following the German School of Krausism. It was without a doubt, the major educational reform in Modern Spanish times. A coeducational institution for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in Spanish history, very rare for those times. The focus of the ILE was on innovative and active methodologies following the Socratic model, such as: no memorization, the use of debates in class, promoting critical thinking, no books, the use of games and gymnastics in the school, no exams and the link between health and education, arts and crafts, artistic subjects and music.

The main pedagogical idea was that children need to be educated rather than taught, in the sense that children should be educated as responsible future citizens. From the ILE several important departments and institutions were created: the Ministry of Public Instruction, “La Junta de Ampliación de Estudios” (The Department of Education Extension), The Pedagogic Museums, The Meteorologic Museums, and the University Dormitories (Mujeres para un Siglo: María de Maeztu, 2022). The Pedagogic Museum was responsible for the new curricula for schools, in which active and innovative methodologies were implemented. The idea was to train

future teachers to create a new educational system where schools would be cultural centers (Investigar la Educación, Escuela en la Segunda República, 2013).

At just the same time a set of scholarships for teachers was established. Teachers could apply and have a short international stay in England, France, Germany, Belgium and other destinations. This gave teachers the opportunity to experience education in countries where



they were doing excellent educational innovative projects (Rebordinos Hernando, 2014). There was also substantial investment in educational infrastructure. During this time, schools were conceptualized as clean, healthy, inviting places for children to learn and grow as human beings. During this time, what was called “Grupos Escolares” (Scholar Groups) were created, with bigger classrooms full of natural light, big playgrounds and even swimming pools for children to learn how to swim and practice sports.

In 1915 the Ladies Residence (Residencia de Señoritas), depending on the ILE, was created. This Institute, under the direction of one of the greatest Spanish pedagogists, María de Maeztu y Whitney, was established to help women progress in their education from secondary level to entry into the Central University of Madrid). The residence began with 35 women studying at the Central University and between the 1920s and 1930s this number rose to over 350 female residents studying at the university, even more than in the Residence for Men.

María de Maeztu y Whitney was a primary school teacher and a professor of Pedagogy at the university. She studied at the University of Salamanca under the supervision of Miguel de Unamuno and gained a scholarship to visit London, then Brussels and Belgium and later she spent three months in Cambridge, thanks to the “Patronato de Pensiones para Ampliación de Estudios” (Patronage of grants for the Continuation of Studies). She had a very different vision of what education should be, and she was very concerned with the education of women and the importance of training for primary and secondary teachers. Influenced by the pedagogic ideas of Giner de los Ríos and Manuel Bartolomé Cossío (Founders of the ILE), María de Maeztu believed that in order to improve the educational system in Spain teachers and mostly women

teachers should obtain a higher degree in education and be better trained in active and innovative methodologies.

In 1931 at the beginning of the Second Republic, 50% of the Spanish population was illiterate and at that time, 80% of Spanish women were illiterate. This meant access to only temporary, badly paid jobs and a total dependency on their husbands (Mujeres para un Siglo: María de Maeztu, 2022).

María de Maeztu, followed the same pedagogies as the ILE, and tried to implement what she had seen during her visits abroad, she also included having important visitors to speak about



their research. Some of the people who visited The Ladies Institute were Marie Curie, Albert Einstein and Maria Montessori among many others. She worked towards learning by doing, and a holistic approach to learning, promoting dignity and dialogue in the classrooms.

She tried to imitate the English and North American colleges, creating an environment of enquiry and dialogue from a scientific perspective. These innovations took place while Maria Montessori was in Barcelona implementing some of her new ideas in schools for children belonging to the bourgeoisie, very much related to the Catalan educational movement of “Nueva Escuela” (New School), which was also linked to the Regionalist Catalan Movement and directly linked to the Catalan bourgeoisie.

In 1934 Maria Montessori was invited by María de Maeztu y Whitney to give a course in Madrid. They connected immediately and try to cooperate as much as possible.

Sadly, all this was cut short suddenly with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. After three years of war, Spain commenced forty years of dictatorship during which time the educational system returned to its former state as it was before the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic. María de Maeztu y Whitney had to flee to Argentina. She never returned to Spain alive, although she was transported to Spain years later with honors and buried in Estella, Navarra, where her family was. This is just an example of what one of the greatest pedagogists in the Spanish educational system did over the same period as Maria Montessori. Many other teachers from the Republic

times were also forbidden to continue educating under the dictatorship regime. Many had to go through public hearings to prove that they were suitable for such a morally significant task. It is important to mention this, because it is still today a hidden part of the Spanish History of Education. When we refer to innovation and innovative methodologies, we do not consider that during the 1930s those methods were already being implemented.

During the beginning of the democratic period the educational laws changed, but it was not until the 1990s when the first acknowledgement of competencies and a more “innovative way of teaching” was made and encouraged. The Spanish educational system during the last years of Franco’s Regime first attempted to democratize education at all levels of education.

However, the teaching pedagogies were based on memorization, and secondary education was focused on academicist approaches and goals. Spanish students reached secondary



education with the aim of going to university and during all the years of secondary education they prepared for that. The teaching methodologies were not innovative or active, the classes were teacher centred and the students had to memorize and demonstrate learning through final exams (Lorenzo Vicente, 1996).

### Recent educational laws promoting the implementation of innovative pedagogies

The Spanish educational system has undergone numerous changes in a short time, due to the approval of multiple educational laws that have modified the curricular content, the organization of the different educational stages and the operation of schools, among other aspects. Specifically, since the publication of the 1978 Constitution, the following educational laws have been enacted, with the rank of Organic Law, many of them currently repealed and therefore not in force:

Table 1. Spanish Educational Organic Laws from the Constitution of 1987 to 2020.

Year	Law Title	Validity
1980	LOECE, del Estatuto de Centros Escolares (Statute of SchoolCenters)	It did not come in force
1983	LRU, de Reforma Universitaria (University Reform).	Repealed
1985	LODE, del Derecho a la Educación (the Right to Education).	Amended and effective
1990	LOGSE, de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo (General Organization of the Educational System).	Repealed
1995	LOPEG, de Participación, Evaluación y Gobierno de los centros docentes (Participation, Evaluation and Government of educational centers).	Repealed
2001	LOU, de Universidades (Universities).	In force
2002	LOCFP, de las Cualificaciones y de la Formación Profesional(Qualifications and Vocational Training).	In force



2002	LOCE, de Calidad de la Educación (Quality of education).	Repealed
2006	LOE, de Educación (Education).	Amended by LOMCE and LOMLOE, in force
2013	LOMCE, de Mejora de la Calidad Educativa (Improvement of Educational Quality).	Repealed by LOMLOE
2020	LOMLOE, Ley Orgánica 3/2020 de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la LOE-Ley Orgánica 2/2006 de 3 de mayo, de educación (Organic Law 3/2020 of December 29, which modifies the LOE-Organic Law 2/2006 of May 3, on education).	In force from January 19, 2021

As can be inferred from Table 1, there is a lack of consensus, sustainability and coherent progression in the quick succession and changes of different educational laws. Apart from the national laws, the Autonomous Communities also have some implication in their applicability. This is due to the decentralization process that took place over the democratization period, after Franco's Regime. It should be noted that the Autonomous Communities (or regions) have competences in the field of education, so that each autonomy can develop its own legal framework; the most significant legislation focuses, among other issues, on:

- The curriculum, that is, the contents, methodologies, and evaluation at each stage
- School coexistence regulations
- Attention to students with specific educational needs
- Regulation of the operation and organization of schools (especially for public schools).

It is important to note that even though many reforms began to mention the importance of acquiring competences, there is still confusion about how to do so. Another key factor is the increasing cultural diversity in Spanish classrooms, and how different educational laws have tried to be more inclusive and mention integration, but with few defined school plans or more





flexible curricula that could actually help such inclusive schools (Bolívar, 2020; Baches & Sierra-Huedo, 2019).

As it can be inferred from the report, the figure of women pedagogists not only María Montessori but also María de Maeztu y Whitney had a great impact in education in their life span, but also nowadays. Thus, those pedagogies are as current as innovative as back then. One characteristic that it is important to highlight is the importance of looking to the children who have difficulties in learning in a standardized system, those who are minorities, or who do not learn as the system imposes. The main active methodologies back then focused on those children and youngsters. This will be an excellent consideration for the REACT project.

All these, obviously imply “new” teaching methodologies in which all students should play an important part in their own learning, having the opportunity to grow in a welcoming space which they feel part of. Learning by doing, learning how to learn, cooperative learning, project-based learning, communicating effectively across cultures are indeed key for the success of all those methodologies (Delors, 1997). If we want to recover the spirit of Maria Montessori and María de Maeztu y Whitney and so many other women pedagogists we need to rethink how our children need to learn to become the best human-beings, and good global citizens. The Socratic Model it is not at all an outdated model and more fluent and effective communication is needed in order to overcome cultural barriers which are very much linked to learning styles and learning barriers.

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## 4. Chapter 4 – Reciprocal Maieutic Workshops for lower and middle secondary school classes

### 4.1. Methodology

This chapter will describe the methodology adopted by the REACT project, which is presented as a combination of the maieutic structure of the sociologist Danilo Dolci and the approach that focuses on observation and accompaniment to independent learning by Maria Montessori.

The structure includes the proposal of some laboratories which, taking inspiration from the principles of the two Italian pedagogues, can offer teachers but generally the entire educating community a practical tool for applications of sweet maieutic used by the Montessori principles of observation and autonomy. Beyond the possible theoretical links between the works of the two scientists, the methodology undoubtedly emerges as an original autonomous proposal, which is certainly practical and feasible in many contexts.

### 4.2. The Theoretical Framework

The Reciprocal Maieutic Approach (RMA) is a dialectic method of inquiry and "popular self-analysis" for empowerment of communities and individuals, and it can be defined as a "process of collective exploration that takes, as a departure point, the experience and the intuition of individuals" (Dolci, 1996). The RMA was developed by Danilo Dolci from the Socratic concept of Maieutic. It derives from the ancient Greek "μαϊευτικός", pertaining to midwifery: every act of educating is like giving birth to the full potential of the learner who wants to learn, as a mother wants her child to emerge from her. Socratic maieutic compares the philosopher as a "midwife of knowledge" that does not fill the mind of the student with information but helps him to reach the light, by using dialogue as a dialectic instrument to reach out the truth. What differentiates both concepts is the fact that Socrates' Maieutic was unidirectional, while for Danilo Dolci the concept of knowledge comes from experience and a



reciprocal relationship is necessary. As the name says, RMA is a “reciprocal” process between at least two persons and it is normally done inside a group, with one person that asking questions and others giving answers. It is the reciprocal maieutic communication that brings out people’s knowledge, with all participants learning from each other. Beginning from this and inspired by other great thinkers and people in action (Gandhi, 1999; Freire, 2002; Capitini, 1958; Chomsky, 1998; Moren, 2001; Galtung, 1957), Dolci developed the RMA, that he started to use in the villages of Partinico and Trappeto, fighting for poor people’s rights and against mafia. The RMA is strongly connected with the concept of “nonviolent communication” (Rosemberg, 2001) and can be also described as a group communication strategy (Habermas, 1986) that enables all the elements in the group to give their ideas and opinions, contributing through this to the development of a final common idea in order to make a change in the individual and collective social / political / economic / educational spheres (Mangano, 1992).

### 4.3. RMA: assumptions and characteristics

Assumptions
<p>Dialogue as a tool for reciprocal research and active participation.</p> <p>Each person has an inner knowledge that comes from experience.</p> <p>Knowledge is dynamic and in constant evolution and it should be built within a group.</p> <p>Everybody being in connection inside a group can be an element of change.</p>
Characteristics
<p>Emphasis on the individual and group experience.</p> <p>Deep grassroots analysis/participation of everybody in the process</p>



whereby we understand our real needs and our responsibility to make a change.

Connection with reality to identify concrete problems, develop reciprocal awareness and find positive solutions.

Building complex images of reality through the plurality of points of view and everyone's contribution.

The horizontality of the process: sharing of power instead of domination/concentration of power.

Active participation. Active listening. Communication.  
Confrontation. Cooperation. Nonviolence. Creativity. Self-reflection.  
Openness.

#### 4.4. The RMA learning process

*Everybody clarifies soberly  
and grows: a meeting coheres  
if by the end you're no longer yourself  
and more yourself than before.*

*(Danilo Dolci, 1984, The World is only one creature)*

The RMA learning process starts with a long-term process of analysis and discussion about meaningful themes for the group, getting deep into feelings, inner perspectives and needs that people have. In a continuous dialogue that embodies a new way of educating, we begin by emphasizing individual learners' capacity to discover their own vital interests and to express their feelings freely on the discoveries they have made.

Word analysis is a practice used in RMA which aims to boost people's capacity to analyse deeper the reality and develop their capacity of self-reflection. The ultimate goal is not to understand some "true meaning", but rather to verify how meanings "resonate" in many ways



to different people and, more importantly, to reconstruct them through a shared experiential process of reciprocal discovery and respect.

It is essential that we integrate theory and praxis in this process, by generalizing experience and developing perspectives on where we want to go. We must observe, experience, experiment together, in a mutually supportive atmosphere to understand one another. Gradually through dialogue, a sense of group emerges as a process in which the participant learns that the group is an organism in which one can be valued as a person and participate in forming a democratic society.

In the RMA process, to educate is intended in the classical meaning of the word, that is *educere*, to take out. It aims to discover, resolve, decide, learn, design, think, build together as well as to know themselves more deeply by fully valorising everyone's contribution.

The educational process happens in two senses: the real discussions that happen and that might have concrete results and the development of competences through the discussions and group meetings. The experience of reaching decisions this way, of learning to modify and coordinate one's own demands to those of others, and of learning to plan, both personally and in a group, is important for everyone. Conversation encourages learners to express themselves. The disposition to listen allows the educator to get closer to the learner's way of thinking and seeing

In this sense, the RMA fosters the development of everybody's potential to discover, it creates and pushes for essential confrontations and encounters to analyse, imagine and experiment the capacity to change the reality and act non-violently.

*The words, slowly and painfully, become action, life.*

*(Danilo Dolci, 1984, The world is only one creature)*

## 4.5. The RMA workshops

The completeness and simplicity of an RMA workshop can be disclosed only to whom experiences it: questioning is a science and an art.



### The context

Maximum number of participants suggested is 20, minimum 10.

There is only one RMA coordinator for each session. Maximum duration suggested is 3 hours.

The space is organized in order to create a democratic, non-hierarchical environment.

Participants sit in a circle (sharing of power, equality), so everyone has the same distance from the centre and can look each other in the eyes. The space is the metaphor of relations, communication, expression and creativity.

There isn't any leader, boss, desk or pulpit. Haranguing the crowd from the balcony is totally different than trying to create a democratic dialogue where it is possible to listen to questions and think about making responsible choices.

It's useful to have a flipchart or a notebook to write down the diverse interventions and to record the outcomes of the session.

Warm, bright and comfortable environment. A close connection with nature is very helpful.

If possible, it is important to enable a coexistence between simple people, experts and professionals within the group.

### Preparation to the RMA workshop

It is advisable for everyone to make a priori preparation (by reading documents, researching, bringing articles, lyrics, pictures etc.).



The subject matter that participants discuss is decided before the session, as it is necessary that everybody agree on the theme.

### The RMA workshop

In the first meeting, it's important that participants introduce themselves in a personal way or by presenting their personal dream.

The RMA coordinator introduces the issue or a "good question". Ex. What is peace according to your personal experience? What is war?

The workshop should begin as a process of dialectical inquiry that should be easy and based on a democratic open structure, without any constraint, imposition, mystical deviations or dogmatic closure.

It's not necessary to previously present the RMA theoretical framework.

The RMA coordinator harmonizes the group discussion in order to allow each participant to have the proper amount of time during each session, so that each one can express her/himself on the issue and according to her/his own style and personality.

It is important to always put emphasis on real needs, interests, desires and dreams first, in order to understand new, yet sometimes obscure relations, and learn how to consider other options.





The coordinator should educate the group how to listen to its own inner breath, just like a midwife does with women during childbirth and he/she also should give the group the right rhythm in order to give space to reciprocal confrontation and to shape a new action-idea. Breath and rhythm are inspired by natural processes.

During the session, participants ask when they want to speak, creating an order that should be respected. It is good practice for all participants to express their opinion on the subject matter as it then calls for the individual responsibility that each of us should have in our own lives.

It is important that everybody listens actively to each other's voice.

The coordinator might also invite to speak those participants who are silent, giving them the possibility to accept or refuse the invitation.

However, it is up to the RMA coordinator to allow and even inspire moments of silence where people are not pressed to give necessarily some kind of answer, but rather to silently reflect on what they have just heard from other people and then talk.

It is important to put into practice the mosaic metaphor, to find nexuses, to connect by association of ideas and analogies. The fragments of knowledge, experience, the hypothesis made by everyone, are gradually related to one another, thanks to each contribution.

The RMA coordinator might intervene and give his own contribution to enable true reciprocity. However, he should not



influence the group discussion by expressing his/her personal opinion on the topic being discussed; but rather, on a more methodological level, he should favor reciprocal communication, re-launch the discussion, ask for further explanations and/or examples taken from personal experiences of participants etc.

It is important during the discussion that the RMA coordinator records what the participants say.

Once the process of research is triggered, the RMA coordinator aims to improve the group's autonomy and its self-organisational skills.

#### How to finish the RMA workshop?

At the end of the workshop the RMA coordinator closes by asking a short evaluation to all participants about their personal experience and about what they have learnt within the group. This final evaluation will allow the participants to have reciprocal feedback.

The RMA coordinator closes the workshop by making a short summary of what has been said during the session and drawing conclusions on what emerged from it.

The RMA coordinator should also talk about the next encounter and propose when, at which time, about what.

Such intense activity needs to be documented regularly and the RMA coordinator must keep the records after each workshop and make a synthesis of the main outcomes. After a certain number of meetings where participants will deeply experience RMA, the RMA coordinator could change during the workshop. Little by little,



everybody should become a real mid-wife to everybody else.

During the workshop all the participants discuss about how the learning experience is going and the discoveries made by the group.



## 4.6. The RMA coordinator

Within a workshop, an RMA coordinator does not transfer content from one mind to another, but he/she creates conditions in which each person can learn how to express him/herself and research individually and in groups.

He is an expert in the art of questioning. He can wait during the natural gestational timing, valorising what RMA produces in the form of hypotheses, thesis, new questions, proposals etc. He knows how to listen to reformulate more targeted questions, he tries with other people to connect observations, to emphasize convergence points and help to interpret what starts to emerge.

He is not a leader, but “midwife”, expert in the theory and practice of group work, involved in clarifying the essence of everybody’s intuitions and experiences.

### Characteristics of the RMA coordinator

Capacity to coordinate the group process and at the same time to be at participants level (capacity to share power), to assure attention to feelings, individual/group plans and goals, to manage time.

Capacity to ask questions and analyse problems instead of imposing solutions.

Capacity to “read” and get through the group, empathy, capacity to valorise each individual experience and the expression of all participants.

Communication skills: active listening and capacity for clear expression, presentation, cross-cultural communication.

Capacity of summarizing and using key words, ability to reflect personal and group intuitions and ideas, rephrasing, initiate others



to speak, clarify interventions.

Capacity to manage conflicts inside the group and to transcend them in a positive way.

Open to diversity, capacity to avoid and/or change prejudices, sensitiveness, patience.

Creativity.

## 4.7. RMA classical themes

Danilo Dolci succeeded in building a network of collaborators, intellectuals and not, who deeply wondered about the meaning of communicating and about its social, political and human applications. In 1988, he launched an initiative to create a “Manifesto on Communication”, then called Draft of Manifesto<sup>3</sup>. He was aware about the risks linked to the so-called “mass communication”, like the increase of unidirectional transmission medium (such as one-way teaching school, television, propaganda/commercial breaks). Dolci’s friends from all around the world took part in the Manifesto on Communication, they all were great International cultural personalities such as Galtung, Chomsky, Freire, as well as scientists like Rubbia, Levi Montalcini, Cavalli Sforza, yet also representatives of cultural solidarity like Don Ciotti and Monsignor Bello from Italy and Ernesto Cardenal from South America. From the Manifesto, it is clear what Dolci, and his collaborators intend for communication: the opportunity to speak freely, also for those who don’t usually could speak, so they can be listened, and also receive answers.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to the DVD to find the “Draft of Manifesto” (Danilo Dolci, 1998).



## 4.8. The RMA as a tool for social transformation

It is not possible to exercise a non-violent conflict without being able to communicate. Besides the experience of Ghandi, to succeed at interpreting the essence of relationships, it is necessary to clarify:

What is the difference between transmission and communication?

According to Dolci, transmission is often unidirectional, toxic and outrageous, while communication is a bidirectional process, with neither active nor passive role, or a higher and a lower issuer. In the Draft of Manifest, Dolci denounced the damages coming from unidirectional and violent relationships in every field and proposed RMA and non-violent communication as alternative. To communicate is not only to inform, to exchange, to code and to decode; it is instead a condition of unexpected cultural fertility closely related to creativity and personal growth.

What is the difference between power and domination?

Domination brings to violent society, thus Dolci underlines strikingly the distinction between domination and power. Considered as a noun, 'power' means potentiality, strength, virtue, faculty to operate, aptitude to influence situations, when it is allowed by the subject's willingness and availability. Learning to express personal power is a practical and inner need for everyone, and at different levels, it is linked of being creative. When personal power pretends to dominate others, it becomes domination, it is as a "disease for power" and it only transmits in a unidirectional way, not recognizing the majority's right to realize its own desire to communicate. We consider power what strengthens and emancipates everyone and develops democratic participation, while domination is what is violent, insane and doesn't bring any development.

What is the relationship today between domination and violent transmission?

According to Dolci, in the educational field, domination manifests itself in transmitting a ready-made reality. Dolci affirms that one of the most widespread and upsetting lies translated in different languages, is to consider transmissions as communications. Transmitting can be violent or non-violent, while communicating is essentially sincere and non-violent, even when it is conflicting: transmitting is like sending and it often ignores who



receives. Communication presupposes participation, ability to express, to listen actively and receive feedback at the same time.

The current use of unidirectional tools allows few people in the world to determine the future of the majority. Transmission makes people passive and submissive, while creative communication focuses on the development of the person. It is not power but a form of domination that defines the kind of relationship between the active subject affecting a passive one by economical, ideological or political instruments. If each one's creativity doesn't grow, as an individual and as a group, whoever has more power tends to impose himself.

Nowadays, being able to distinguish transmitting from communicating is an essential procedure for the democratic growth around the world and for everybody's creativity. In his Manifesto, Dolci underlines how many tools of domination escape from democratic control and popular awareness. Only communication allows to discover how everybody can grow as a unique and different creature. What mows down is the scare of being creative, not being able to communicate, so if transmission is domination, communication is power. Not being able to express ourselves (and to communicate) and not being able to use our power, sickens and kills us.

We should not be afraid of the diagnosis. In our society people do not develop joyously, but in fear. People are unable to cultivate their own interests and prepare themselves freely to activate structural social changes. People do not learn how to really communicate, nor how to exercise their own power, learning instead how to become executors and unconscious slaves. The phenomenon of not being able to communicate should be studied as a disease that must be cured.

*It is one thing to try to substitute the old power,  
but it is another thing to create new power within everyone.*

*(Danilo Dolci)*



## 4.9. The reason of RM nowadays

Asking what the meaning and the function of Dolci's RMA can be nowadays, and which is the sense and the value of organizing RMA workshops, will make us consider once again, the practical intelligence and brightness of a man who considered the separation between knowledge and action as the true real limit of intellectuals. Giordano Bruno advised "do not contemplate without action, do not act without contemplation". If every single person is not educated to recognize his problems and the possibility to solve them, he may be destined to be a hopeless person not believing in the possibility of a personal and social change. The responsibility of educators is to goad and motivate learners in order to question and make them question themselves.

The RMA workshops offer a space to confront one another in order to propose and formulate projects, even if they seem utopian. They also become a moment to search for the real meaning of words, by using lexical and conceptual analysis. The RMA workshops give the chance to look deeper above all the superficial occurrences and the fragments of concepts. Several times it could also happen that inherited old beliefs that are usually accepted passively may collapse, yet surprisingly unknown perspectives can be enlightened and unexplored aspects within reality can be revealed by new minds<sup>4</sup>.

The RMA today represents a powerful tool to promote active citizenship and social dialogue that have been highly missed, especially in modern society. So, RMA workshops must be considered as essential moments of research and of individual and collective growth. It generates in the people the awareness of how to identify their own problems and a desire to participate in planning and carrying out possible solutions.

Danilo Dolci gathered peasants, fishers, scientists, intellectuals, youngsters, social activists, women and children in his RMA workshops. Thousands and thousands of people, thanks to his engagement, have slowly learnt to listen and to express themselves, to think critically and to work in a group to find possible elements of change. Little by little, year by year, lots of

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<sup>4</sup> Sebastiano Pennisi, 2008, *Cosa è la maieutica*, Mesogea





democratic experiences of bottom-up planning have given their contribution to deeply change West Sicily.

#### **4.10. The RMA as an inter-cultural encounter**

The way Danilo Dolci proposed the RMA is an extremely communicative approach, that encourages a productive exchange among individuals. As a result of the European borders breakdown and influx of immigration from Eastern and Southern countries, our society seems to be extremely dynamic and changeable. An interactive, multicultural, multi-linguistic culture of emancipation must be created at European and worldwide level. It is necessary to rediscover unification, relations among countries and cultures to encourage the birth and the growth of a society based on respect and cooperation. The RMA seems to be a very suitable approach to help intercultural relations among different men, since the environmental conditions and cultural differences are not suppressed but respected and valued on a sincere humanity base. The etymology of the word 'culture' comes from the Latin word 'colere', and it means 'to cultivate'. Doesn't a plant, cultivated with loving care, grow better? Therefore, only by cultivation and care, by confrontations with influences coming from different perspectives, different ideas, a culture can innovate itself and grow, being constantly creative. The RMA favours a productive exchange between individuals and cultures by accepting reciprocal diversities, through which every violence based on alleged superiorities ceases, to meet and also collide in a non-violent, dialectical and creative way<sup>5</sup>.

Also, with reciprocal exchange each culture can overcome its limits and continue growing. It will be possible to create the foundations for a new reality, where individuals will learn how to deal with each other, comprehending that with unification and human solidarity, a conformist, fragmented and violent reality can be changed. The RMA allows people of different cultures and nations to interact and meet each other using dialogue; to understand

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<sup>5</sup> Verso una maieutica planetaria, Tiziana Morgante article, 2007



and learn from our past in order to live a more conscious world; to discover valid options for a change in order to create a better future for every single creature.

## **4.11. How to develop training courses by RMA**

RMA training modules could be implemented in-presence, on-line or using a mixture of both methodologies. Modules aim to disseminate active questions and to develop different transversal competencies, knowledge and attitudes by using RMA and non-violent communication.

As an example, below you will find some themes to be developed in-presence:

Transmission Vs. Communication

Teaching Vs Educating

Because of its wide applicability, RMA can be easily applied to a variety of other themes and fields. The activities should also be adapted for specific goals and to specific target groups.

It is important to get to know the group first, how well they know each other, what are the priorities or main needs, what the group expects and desires to learn. All the in-presence modules reported in the following paragraphs use the same structure:

Introduction to the theme

Description of activities including objectives, instructions and timing

Session conclusion

On-line modules should be developed using an on-line environment, as “moodle”, and each activity should also include objectives, instructions and timing, conclusion.

## **4.12. Transmission Vs. Communication**

Communication is a bidirectional process which is close to creativity and human development. Conversely, the concept of transmission in learning is based on a channel connecting a sender and a receiver of a message, thus there is no active participation of the receiver in this case. The receiver only must acquire information from the channel used by the



sender, even though it is not always approachable for him. The sender (trainer) does not receive any feedback from his receiver (learner), he cannot control the difficulty level of the message and the accessibility of the channel.

### 4.13. Activity 1: RMA workshop “Transmission Vs, Communication”

OBJECTIVES: to analyse the meaning of the words “transmission” and “communication”, the differences existing between them and the potential effects of both concepts on the learning process.

SUGGESTED TIME: 120 min.

INSTRUCTIONS: participants are invited to sit in a circle<sup>9</sup>. The RMA coordinator introduces him/herself and invites each participant to introduce him/herself by asking: *What is your personal dream?*

Each participant starts to tell something about him/herself and his/her life through dreams. In this way everyone can open up, by expressing themselves and listening to other people’s point of view.

Then he asks the participants the following questions:

What is the meaning of “transmission” according to your personal experience?

What is the meaning of “communication” according to your personal experience?

The starting point of an RMA workshop can be simply just a word or two. Each participant expresses his/her opinion freely on the meaning of the concept of “transmission” and “communication”, by starting from their etymology. Gradually each of these initial words are associated to an adjective, an idea, a point of view and so this is how the actual workshop activity begins. The workshop activates a process of interchange as well as a reciprocal enrichment and only when communication between the workshop participants is effectively established it will be eventually possible to see a continuous germination of ideas.

Then the RMA coordinator invites participants to reflect on the following question:

On your view own what is the relationship between violent transmission and domination?







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*REciprocal  
maieutic Approach  
pathways enhancing  
Critical Thinking*

The RMA coordinator sets the tone of the group and writes down participants' interventions on a sheet of paper or a blackboard.



Transmission	Communication
<p>(trans – mittere), literally “send across”</p> <p>Unidirectional</p> <p>Receivers and transmitters passivity</p> <p>Impersonality</p> <p>Selfishness</p> <p>Immobility</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Alienation</p> <p>Closure</p> <p>Homologation</p> <p>Hierarchy</p> <p>Dogmatism</p> <p>Automatism</p> <p>Violence</p> <p>Propaganda</p> <p>Indoctrination</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Domination</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Increased control on our daily lives</p>	<p>(cum – munus), literally (gather gifts)</p> <p>Bidirectional/ pluri-directional Participation</p> <p>Respect and valorization of differences and diversities.</p> <p>Creativity</p> <p>Empathy</p> <p>Sociality</p> <p>Solidarity</p> <p>Dialogue</p> <p>Spiral, as a symbol of growth and development</p> <p>Reciprocal disclosure</p> <p>Critical Thinking</p> <p>Nonviolence</p> <p>Free flow of information</p> <p>Planning together</p> <p>Discovering oneself and others</p> <p>Trust</p> <p>Reciprocal growth</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Power</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Social Capital</p>



<p>Exclusion</p> <p>Stigmatization</p> <p>Exploitation</p> <p>Conflicts and wars</p> <p>Human rights violation</p> <p>Authoritarianism</p>	<p>Inclusion</p> <p>Freedom</p> <p>Intercultural dialogue</p> <p>Alliance of civilizations</p> <p>Sustainable development</p> <p>Democracy</p>
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CONCLUSIONS: the outcomes reported in the chart above have been built through dialogue, discussion and reciprocal confrontation with everybody’s ideas. During the workshop many other questions have been asked but they didn’t receive any exhaustive answer, yet participants experienced what it means to learn to listen to one another, to question and try to find answers all together. At the end of the workshop the RMA coordinator closes by asking a short evaluation to all participants and by making a synthesis of what has been said during the session and drawing conclusions. Many participants realised they had deeper needs and dreams. RMA workshops tend to transform such needs and personal dreams in shared objectives to make them become common social development projects<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4.14. Teaching Vs. Educating

The most common form of education is formal school education based on “vertical” learner-teacher Relationships. Teaching is based on delivering theoretical knowledge to the student in the form of courses and curricula. Unfortunately, in many cases, the formal education system fails to provide to all adult people their personal learning needs. Danilo Dolci’ RMA highlights the importance of reciprocal communication as a method to educate oneself and others, as well as a tool to decide all together and to value people as individuals. Planting questions enables answers to germinate. Teachers and trainers usually only tend to transmit a priori defined disciplinary contents and learners just must passively assimilate them. Education is

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<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Barone, 2010, Una rivoluzione nonviolenta



consequently reduced to a faithful execution of homework assigned by teachers and trainers. There is a difference between “teaching” and “educating” although often they are both used as synonyms.

## 4.15. Activity 2: RMA workshop “teaching vs educating”

OBJECTIVES: to analyse the meaning of the words “teaching” and “educating”, what is the difference between them and their potential effects on the learning process.

SUGGESTED TIME: 120 min.

INSTRUCTIONS: at the beginning, the RMA coordinator introduces to the participants the following lyric<sup>7</sup>:

*Everybody grows only if dreamt about.*  
(Danilo Dolci)

Then he asked participants the following questions:

What is the meaning of “teaching” according to your personal experience?

What is the meaning of “educating” according to your personal experience?

Starting from these initial questions, the RMA coordinator invites participants to focus on the arising questions and to say them out loud. The questionings coming from the initial questions are of fundamental importance in order to reach a deeper level in the process of reciprocal research.

The RMA coordinator summarizes and condenses everyone’s contribution, pointing out conclusions that surfaced on the meaning of “teaching” and “educating”.

Then the RMA coordinator invites participants to reflect and comment on the relationship between “teaching” and “violent transmission”.

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<sup>7</sup> The RMA coordinator can introduce the workshop theme by reading a lyric, an article, by watching a short video, a picture, a painting or anything he might consider useful.



CONCLUSION: the RMA coordinator synthesizes all the interventions and summarizes the subsequent questions emerged from the dialogue. He also invites participants to reflect individually and to reopen the discussion during the next workshop.

Some notes: the mechanic transmissive education system only wants its receivers to repeat the received message. The receiver is never encouraged to ask questions to him/herself nor to the community where he/she belongs to. The legitimate questions are already codified, as well as the answers that must be memorized in order to just be repeated automatically.

The RMA coordinator educates the group to take personal and social responsibility, to question oneself and to learn confrontation with others.

Questioning oneself through RMA stimulates learners' curiosity, helping them to improve their attention, as well as their pleasure to explore their interest in learning. This allows everyone to look and see through other people's eyes.

## **4.16. Methodological Conclusions**

The Danilo Dolci experience has given us a fruitful inheritance that has been only partially explored, and which is deeply and profoundly connected to all the principal themes and issues of our time. So many groups in Italy and around the world consider Danilo Dolci and his collaborators as well as his ideas, as a precious reference point. RMA has been experimented and developed in over

50 years thanks to commitment of the Center of Studies and Initiatives, that has been working hardly to involve the largest possible number of people, in order to maximize the quality of relations and results.

Our constructive answer to disclose and keep Danilo Dolci's works alive, therefore, has been to always be willing to undertake RMA activities and workshops; although we knew it was almost impossible for anyone to continue such an intricate work, especially for its complex relations, experiences and memories. We strongly believe that there are some urgent key challenges in education nowadays that must be considered, like: a radical yet nonviolent transformation of our society; a new education proposal based on nonviolent approaches; the





valorisation of individual and collective creativity as well as the research for authentic democratic and participative organizational models.

Our experience today allows us to confirm that RMA workshops are a necessity, as they represent a true and overwhelming discovery, a positive change, astonishing yet so simple. We know clearly that an RMA workshop reveals its richness as well as its simplicity only to those who experience it. We must never forget that RMA principles and characteristics cannot be communicated only on a theoretical level. Theory alone is not enough; it needs to be verified instead by considering the type of practices that produce certain results. The first task for those who have experienced RMA is to make everyone know about the existence of this approach and to try to practice it in other areas as well.



## 5. REACT proposed Pathways for Workshops Development

### 5.1. REACT Workshop 1: A maieutic for the development of social skills

This workshop is aimed at understanding the **relevance of social skills in daily life of students** and, at the same time, at **helping them in the identification of those skills in the “curricular subjects”** that are proposed to students in their schooling *routine*. Therefore, the discussions within this path are mainly devoted to the creation of an appropriate “intellectual *stimulus*” as a fruitful environment for change.

The RMA Coordinator is called **not to transfer information** about such skills to participants during the development of the laboratories related to social skills, **nor students are called to absorb any kind of knowledge**. Rather, RMA Coordinator acts as **facilitator of an open discussion** – keeping in mind that this discussion should be – and should remain till the end – safe, respectful, democratic and open to all the contributions.

The ultimate purpose of this path is to **acquire consciousness** about the fact that **social skills** lay in each “curricular subject”, lesson, homework, project work that is proposed to students. Social skills can be less or more “hidden”, easy or difficult to identify, but they are **always present in learning process**. The learning process carried out in classroom, from this perspective, could be considered as a **transposition of real-life elements in an “teaching & learning” cycle**. Thus said, this workshop would inspire in participants a sense of ownership and autonomy in learning, thus keeping the students at the centre of the educative process.

Preparatory materials about social skills, the relation between schooling and the ownership of knowledge alongside appropriate indications and practical examples on how to facilitate the development of this workshop can be found in the Guidelines for Teachers (“A Certain Formalism”).



## 5.2. REACT Workshop 2: School for Social Change

This workshop has been developed taking stock from one recurrent feedback that risen from REACT previous research, both desk and filed ones, about **the school as a mechanism of social mobility**. What has emerged from the research is that **this mechanism seems to have jammed**, meaning that the expectations of learners to improve their social and personal position thanks and through the school are lower and lower as time goes by, posing the school in a **vicious and dangerous spiral** fuelled by frustration, indifference and lower degree of involvement and proactive participation.

Both Danilo Dolci (that conceptualized the Reciprocal Maieutic Approach) and Maria Montessori offer suggestions with this regard. First, the Montessori's principle of "**absorbent mind**" is called into action: according to Montessori, the mind of the child is an **immaterial spirit capable of absorbing from the learning environment not only notions and knowledge, but also experiences and stories that are the fundamentals of the community's culture that host the learning space**. In the Montessori's perspective, this relation between the learning space and the elements related to the culture of the community **sustain the evolution of the child's mind**. At the other hand, Danilo Dolci considers the **affirmation of one own social role in his/her community as the fundamental element of the relationship**, dreaming about a **true emancipation** from a situation of social risks – as it was within the Sicilian community of poors when he started to develop and apply the RMA.

With this premises in mind, the aim of this workshop is to **raise awareness about the school as a "social right" not only as an expression of compulsory basic education according to the terms of law but also and primarily to make social climbing easier**. The purpose of this set of laboratories is to **articulate**, through the RMA, a **reflection with students about their right to obtain**, from their active participation to the school life, a **tangible improvement of their social and personal condition**.

The reflection will be guided by the Montessori's perspective of the development of autonomy in the perception of rights and by the Dolci's assumption about the need to defend our rights "**exercising**" them. This aspect of exercising the rights bring us back to a subject, particularly important in the Dolci's thought that is the **defence of one's community rights**. At the time



of his first struggles in support of Sicilian communities, Dolci concentrates on the defence of water as a common good. The collection of his texts, published after his death with the title "Power and water (2010)", poses the process of environmental justice at the centre of the debate. The theme of the ecological transition (specifically addressed in another REACT workshop) emerges here too, even if it is not directly evoked. However, starting from this focus, the discussion branches out to include other aspects such as the **importance of involving the population in the decision-making processes, the irreplaceable value of training and the value of common goods (school included) as an element of empowerment of the local communities**. From this perspective, the idea of the community that educate and self-educate its member can be easily risen during the development of this workshop.

What is expected to rise during the development of this workshop is that the **school should recover its function of social elevator**, that the **right to socially and personally improve thanks to the participation to the school life should be identified and conceptualized** and that this right **has both an individual and a community dimension** - that mutually nurture and reinforce one another.

Preparatory materials for RMA coordinator and students, e.g. excerpts of "Power and water" collection; in depth materials addressing the perspective of school as social elevator and others are collected in the Guidelines for teachers ("A Certain Formalism") together with practical suggestions for the development of the laboratories.

### 5.3. REACT Workshop 3: School and Responsibility

This workshop is conceptually linked to the previous one, as the theme of rights does not exhaust the reflection on rise awareness about the role of the school in fostering social transformation. **The ability to exercise a right**, to be able to defend oneself if this right is violated and the capability to connect with other members of one's community to defend the common rights, common goods that constitutes the "material" face of the right **is parallel to the responsibility one**. In fact, a duty corresponds to each right and meanwhile **we are entitled to defend ourselves if we perceived that our rights are violated, at the same**



**time we own a responsibility with reference to that right.** Referring the subject to the school environment and educative process, with a certain degree of simplification, we can affirm that **to the right to improve our social and personal dimension** - through the school - **correspond the duty to attend lessons** - and this **does not mean to passively sit** on the chair and waiting for notions that will be transferred, unilaterally, by the teacher. Also, from this point of view, both Maria Montessori and Danilo Dolci suggest perspectives and elements of reflection that should orient the discussions during the development of this workshop.

This workshop is meant to make students reflect on the **theme of responsibility to learn.** Clearly, attend the school is a right of each student but it is necessary to **interpret such participation** (one of the fundamental elements of active citizenship) **also as a duty and responsibility** in order to empower students in the co-shaping a comfortable learning environment. Once again, this perspective has not only an individual but also a **community dimension.** Collectively, this participation can be described as a **responsibility towards the other members of the community** who ins shaped by the contributions of each member. On the other hand, this personal contribution is and should be valued as invaluable and irreplaceable input for the collective growth.

The conceptualization of this kind of responsibility is therefore strongly linked to the matter of **active citizenship.** The protection of individual rights is an obligation of the state at first, however **citizens are not passive and defenceless subject if exercising their active citizenship.** Acting responsibly towards our community imposes a duty: to acquire all the elements, both the active (e.g. *do something*, to exercise) and the passive ones (e.g. *not to do something*, do not violate). In this way, the members of the community are **able to adequately contribute to the development of their society.**

The present workshop shifts from the “community” to the “**school community**” perspective, resulting in a powerful educative path that enables participants in recognizing their participation to school as right and a duty, with the facilitation of “responsibility” meant as described above. The perspective for the development of this workshop is also related to the **raising of awareness and the extension of the exercise of the right** both to those who feel their rights violated and to those who do not perceive their rights being put at risk but **must be able to intervene in defence of their community** – if other members feel their rights are



denied. One of the possible outcomes of this workshop could be a **proposal for change in favour of classes** (but also specific group of mates, or age-groups, or students with different background) **perceived** by participants as **highly exposed to risk of being violated in their right to study, to be responsible towards the community.**

Preparatory materials about active citizenship (roles, rights and responsibilities of citizens) together with practical suggestions for RMA coordinator are collected in the Guidelines for teachers (“A certain Formalism”). For the development of this workshop, it could be useful to start from the Code of Conduct of the school, analysing the meaning of words and concepts to nurture the reflection.

## 5.4. REACT Workshop 4: Roots and Identity

The term “identity” often evokes concepts related to the components of one own personality and, of course, personality and character of people are encompassed when an attempt to define the boundaries of this word is made. However, **identity is experienced at school** (as in almost all the other social contexts) **as something that relies also on group choices.** The simplest and visible examples could be fashions and some habits in clothing and speaking, which end up characterizing some social contexts and not others. Instead of needlessly focus the matter on which dimension of identity “must” prevail over the other, the present workshop inspired by Danilo Dolci’s experience will be **triggered by the theme of roots.** This reflection would lead to conceptualize the identity as a **positive tool for connecting with each other and**, at the same time, it would lead to the **identification of identity elements** that could be common, diverse, derived or totally independent from the ones that characterize the other members of the community but **that are**, in every case, **connected each other.**

**Connection** is another powerful word to be exploited for the present workshop. If the ultimate scope of the human beings is the relation with the other, as Danilo Dolci repeated several times, **any relation exists without such a kind of connection.** Maria Montessori, from her side, claimed the school to invest time and resources in educate the citizens of tomorrow, thus **giving them power and tools** to improve society and the world. Montessori was persuaded that everything and everyone is connected to each other (person and person,



person and natural things, natural things each other - bilaterally and from a group perspective) and, oversimplifying the matter, she conceptualized this as “**Cosmic Education**”<sup>8</sup>.

This workshop explores **the power of connection and how education**, drawing on such “universal” insights, **can stress the ultimate commonalities on which all identities draw**. Surprisingly for most of the students, identity traits are quite often reducible until overlapping with some natural elements, or combinations of them. It proposes a profound reflection on how to start from personal and group “identity” definition (through the research of common roots, common elements) passing by connection, at first stage between one human being and another and then enlarging the horizon. The ultimate aim is to develop among participants a **shared definition of “identity” that encompass not only personal, group and community elements but also natural ones**. At a certain stage of the path’s development, if well guided by the RMA coordinator, the theme of **scientific subjects at school** will be risen by participants. There are several elements which could be problematized during the path to develop a proposal for change addressed to class and/or school and/or community, such as for instance the need to present scientific subjects focusing more on their link with tangible reality of students, focusing more on the previously identified roots. The desired, long-term outcome of this workshop would be a **renewed and fuelled sense of intimate connection with other beings, not only human**. More, it would be a powerful workshop to stimulate curiosity and appreciation for those subjects of study that are, traditionally, less appreciated by students.

Preparatory materials about social identity theory, Cosmic Education and perspective of challenge for scientific education are collected in the Guidelines for teachers (“A Certain Formalism”), together with practical suggestions for RMA coordinator.

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<sup>8</sup> “Cosmic Education” definition by Montessori Academy: “Cosmic Education is a cornerstone of the Montessori Philosophy. At its core, Cosmic Education tells the story of the interconnectedness of all things. It describes the role of education as comprehensive, holistic and purposeful; to encompass the development of the whole person within the context of the Universe. It also introduces the possibility that humanity might have a “cosmic task”, to better the world for future generations”. More references here: <https://montessoriacademy.com.au/cosmic-education/>



## 5.5. REACT Workshop 5: The Ecological Conversion of School

A central element of the Danilo Dolci's effort and proposal, addressed also by Montessori as well as one of the paramount dimensions of the individual and society wellbeing is a **good relationship with nature**, meant as the surrounding environment in which the members of the community live and develop their sociality. This topic has been a very debated one until the pandemic crisis, and then it forcefully returned to public attention in relation to recent events, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the consequent increasing of the energy prizes. Anyone of us is sincerely surprised about the worries that surround the ecological theme, due to the fact that **a dichotomy has risen and become more and more polarized over time** since the beginning of the first industrial revolution: **the right to live in a healthy planet** (and the subsequent duty to protect the environment, first of all to protect it by ourselves) **VS the right to develop our societies to reach the desired economic standards** (and the subsequent duty to exploit our planet, first of all to exploit its resources for human beings development).

Nowadays, the theme has evolved and broadened its scope in what has been defined as "**Ecological Conversion of Society**". The idea of ecological conversion has been recently discussed thanks to **Pope Francis's second encyclical, *Laudato si'***. However, the discussion is started early in the '80s of the last century thanks to the vision of **Alexander Langer**<sup>9</sup> that is considered the funding father of the Italian and European green political movements. In even more recent years, discussing the theme of ecological conversion has taken on the idea that a **new parameter, socially and environmentally more sustainable, should be applied**. Unfortunately, time is passing, and **we still do not have a shared definition of such a parameter, nor of its components**. Ecological consciousness, like all relationships, is

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Langer developed his ideas about ecological conversion in the 1980s but, when read today, they offer relevant takeaways. His thinking starts from the realisation that production and consumption systems oriented towards profit seeking and maximum growth no longer appeared sustainable as early as the 1980s.





dynamic and ever-changing. While “conversion” describes “a radical shift of one’s fundamental orientation, one’s horizon and an ongoing process toward consistent self-transcendence and authenticity”<sup>10</sup>, ecological conversion additionally involves **the reshaping of the concept of the humanity’s place and role in the Earth Community**. Taking stock from this, it suddenly becomes clear **the topicality and relevance of Montessori thought on the subject**, taking up once again the concepts related to “Cosmic Education”. Being able to “convert” does not mean just taking note of a new development process, it also means **greater knowledge of the dynamics of universal growth that also affect one's own microcosm**. In this microcosm, boys and girls are called to a profound mutual connection and to a renewed commitment that must be translated into new behaviours.

Starting from these premises, the present workshop intends to make participants **reflect on how “ecologically convert” their behaviours, the ones they see acted by peers and adults that, summed up, constitute the behaviour of their school community**. With the support of the RMA coordinator, boys and girls will be called on what it means to adhere to this new social and economic paradigm by **adapting individual behaviours to it**. The subject is rich in terms of insights: for instance, participants could identify one peculiar behaviour that discomfort them in approaching such a new paradigm (e.g. “at school we do not have enough recycling bins” or “the number of cars parking every morning in front of the school could be reduced with school-promoted car-sharing options”). The goal of the workshop should be a **deep but practical reflection on the meaning of “ecological conversion”** in their school, in terms of systems or in terms of behaviour or both, in terms of the conception of time and spaces and how to make the school more environmentally sustainable. The desired outcome could be a **proposal for change a particular behaviour or system (or both) that undermines the perceived needs of an ecological conversion of the school**.

Preparatory materials about Ecological Conversion, Alexander Langer, sustainable development goals, Cosmic Education are collected in the Guidelines for teacher (“A certain formalism”), as well as practical suggestions for RMA coordinator.

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<sup>10</sup> Omerod, N., Vanin, C., Ecological Conversion: what does it means?, 2016, SAGE publication, 330.



## 5.6. REACT Workshop 6: The Partisan Language

**The language** is an essential element of human beings' relational life, through which people exchange ideas, confront each other and, hopefully, manage their conflicts. In the end, **language is the principal tool we have at our disposal to define the world we live in**, inspired by the famous quote "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world"<sup>11</sup>. It is a matter of science that **an improvement in language correspond to each cognitive growth**, as we can easily observe in children, and this consideration qualifies the **language as a cornerstone of development**. However, this element is not confined in the fast-changing relationship between growth, development and personality that characterizes the childhood. The language maintains its strong relevance even afterwards, in the age of adolescence and maturity since the adulthood. It should be observed, conversely, that it is within the language's boundaries that misunderstandings of various nature originate and are amplified: two examples out of million are **cognitive bias and the development of stereotypes**.

There are at least **two fundamental concepts** behind the development of the present workshop: the first one is related to the **non-indifference (non-neutrality) of language**. When a word is chosen to give a definition, both the word and the definition are not indifferent: on contrary, they are **linked to the cognitive choice of word with a strong conceptual meaning**. The second element relates to the **awareness of the direct and unmediated exchange** created by language: are we aware of the reflection that a certain word can trigger in others? Are we sure that the choice we made to use a word instead of another could be understood and appreciated by the interlocutor? Those two questions can be summed up in this way: **every word is generated by a choice** (and we cannot avoid this choice, as Montessori said, "to talk is in the nature of human beings") **and generates a reaction that we should be aware of**.

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<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 1921, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc.



With these premises in mind, the present workshop has the purpose of **raise the awareness about the power and responsibility students have when communicate one another and with other members of the school community**. Triggered by sharing a definition of language, the reflection would possibly lead to a **deep and practical reflection on the use we make of words in everyday life**, inside and outside the school. There are many insights for further steps: it is possible that a reflection on language of social media and/or the perceived differences when communication is made online VS offline emerges.

Preparatory materials about the non-neutrality of language, the cognitive processes behind the choice of certain words and the development and diffusion of stereotypes and cognitive bias are collected in the Guidelines for teachers (“A Certain Formalism”) together with practical suggestions for RMA coordinator.

## 5.7. REACT Workshop 7: The Learning Space between Concreteness and Abstraction

This workshop is aimed at **stimulating discussions about the nature of the learning space**. Students are called every day, for years, to enter physically and mentally a place called “school”. This environment is generally perceived as a learning space, but its beating heart is the **classroom**. But what a classroom is? **Which are the elements (concrete and abstract) that constitute the core of this learning space?** Those questions are legitimate by the progresses made in terms of school architecture that, nowadays, reflects (or would reflect) the conception of the vital elements that make up the school buildings – the conception of living spaces. However, **little or almost nothing has been improved** in this sense because of the Montessori approach to **the subject of the classroom as a “living space”**.

Thus said, this workshop would raise awareness about the idea that **a learning space is not primarily made up by concrete objects and/or things** such as school desks arranged in a certain way; the position of the teacher’s desk; the presence of maps hanging on the walls of the classroom and so on. As Montessori underlined several times in her work, **the classroom consists of a series of elements that are also conceptual in nature and that have an**



**extraordinary impact on the cognitive process of both learners as individuals and on the Educating Community as a group.** More, the sociology of architecture teaches us that it is not a matter of indifference whether the development of the life of a human being/community takes place in one environment or another. There are ‘ghettoized’ places and, conversely, places where people can develop their life ambitions more serenely. The historical context, the social composition of the community and **many other factors** are linked to the creation and maintaining of those living spaces.

But, **what about the classroom? Who contribute mainly to the definition of its conceptual and physical elements and its nature of “learning space”?** The purpose of this workshop is to introduce the subject reflecting together with students on **their perception and definition of the classroom** (this reflection is only the opening step of the workshop, to be developed in the first workshop) and then to help them in the conceptualization of **problems/needs/mistakes** in the definition of the classroom (“Conflict”). Then, participant will be guided till the **identification of a possible solution** (“Therapy”) and finally to the development of a **proposal for change** (personalization and customization of classroom’s physical elements starting from the ideas of the students and without the intervention of expensive actions).

What would emerge from this workshop, hopefully, is the **transformative power of reciprocal maieutic reflection when applied to the Montessori perspective of classroom as a first and foremost “living” space the encompasses also the “learning” function.** This transformative power is expressed through a *pars destruens* (destructive part of the workshop, that would bring the discussion to the identification of problems and concerns of students about the shape of their classroom) and only after through the *pars construens* (constructive part of the workshop, when the problems will be turned into proposal for improvement).

Contents for teachers, preparatory materials to be shared with students prior to the beginning of the workshop together with practical suggestions for RMA coordinator for a smooth and fruitful workshop’s development can be found in the Guidelines for teachers (“A Certain Formalism”).



## 5.8. REACT Workshop 8: The Community that Educates

Maria Montessori tells us that **learning** is basically a **process of awareness raising** originated by the encounter of a personal, spiritual element (**intangible element**) with the surrounding world (**tangible elements**). This ongoing process of encounter allow each person to **live countless and intimate experiences** – that are not exactly replicable from one person to another – and, at the end, **this process generates knowledge**. According to Danilo Dolci, the learning process could take place in a **purely social context**, and it leads to **individual awareness raising** about the need to exercise one’s rights and one’s role in the community. As consequences of the analysis of interconnection of these two approaches, we are persuaded that the theme of the **community that educates** – or the **Educating Community** – is the right “conceptual space” for an interesting synthesis.

One of the main scopes of the educational system, especially in today’s multicultural societies, is to **promote the development of intercultural competence**. To achieve this, we should avoid limiting the scope of our thoughts to teachers and educators and rather **extend responsibility to many other categories**: parents, coaches, facilitators, community leaders and so on. The Educating Community is composed by **all the actors that play a role in the psycho-physical development of young people**. The educative process realized within the Educating Community encompasses both formal education (e.g. school environment) and non-formal education.

The present workshop is meant to **understand the reciprocity in the educational process**. First, to fully exploit the potential of the path, a good starting is the reflection on the **meaning of the words “teach”, “educate”, “learn”**. In doing so, it would be become more and more clear to students that **teachers are not their only and exclusive educators**, that **sometimes they learn something without realizing it** and that **almost everyone could teach them something, but this does not mean automatically that an educative process is ongoing**.

Moving forward in the reflection, students are asked to **conceptualize a common problem** (the “conflict”) in relation to the educative dynamics of their Educating Community. There could be **several insights** arising from this discussion: an example could be the perception of “bad role models” within the boundaries of the Educating Community, or the difficulties



experienced by students when they try to make transparent their learning outcomes acquired during non-formal experiences. A **possible proposal for change could emerge as outcome of the workshop**, e.g. a shared strategy through which they plan to involve other figures (informal and non-formal educators, external to the school environment) to complement their educative process in certain moments.

Preparatory materials about the Educating Community, the formality of education, and the learning process are collected in the Guidelines for teachers (“A Certain Formalism”), together with practical suggestions for RMA coordinator.

## 5.9. REACT Workshop 9: Critical Thinking

It is worth to be mentioned, as we approach the last workshop proposal, **the *fil rouge* that links the possibility to reduce the diffusion of cultural stereotypes** (and subsequent marginalization episodes) within the educative process **and the application of the Reciprocal Maieutic Approach**. This red thread is the **development of critical thinking skills**. Within the boundaries of REACT project, critical thinking is meant as **the ability to focus on some elements of thought itself and to bring them to a higher level of awareness and clarity**. Critical thinking is an abstract concept that, if applied in a rigorous way, could bring to very practical and visible outcomes. It encompasses the abilities to think rationally, exploiting issues and ideas and understanding the connection between them, before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

Once again, **Maria Montessori** could be an inspiration for this workshop, and it could be inspiring **her theme of Exploration**. Montessori describes children as curious creatures: they are born with a desire to touch, taste, feel and experience the world around them. The teacher, and particularly the teacher in the Montessori approach, is called to **develop autonomy of children** by leaving them free and owners of their discoveries. In this perspective, **critical thinking is an intrinsic part of Montessori education**. Children are seen as scientists, problem solvers, they are empowered to independently analyse, test and make conclusions. Another concept that underlines the role of critical thinking in the Montessori approach is the role of teacher, as **a facilitator of the learning process that**



**encourage his/her students to understand and control their own errors**<sup>12</sup>. The famous *motto* “help me to do it alone” is a perfect synthesis of the Montessori approach to critical thinking skills, abilities that lay the foundations for problem solving, analysis and informed decision making.

With this premise in mind, the present workshop is probably the most challenging to develop, due to the high level of abstraction that is required. The aim of the present workshop is to **stimulate a critical approach to information**, thus being able to understand the components of an information and to evaluate it, allowing students to not passively accept opinions and ideas given by others but to analytically, independently and consciously develop their own point of view.

Critical thinking requires students to use their ability to reason, and the basic unit of reasoning is an argument. Thus said, the ‘argument’ is the starting line for the development of the workshop. Within the context of ‘logic’ or critical thinking, the word ‘**argument**’ doesn’t refer to a heated discussion or ‘fight’ between people. **An argument is the linguistic representation of a thinking ‘step’ or act** (called the ‘inference’). Whereby someone comes to accept a statement as true (the ‘conclusion’) based on accepting other statements as true (the ‘premise’). Arguments are commonly found in newspaper editorials and opinion columns, as well as magazine essay. RMA facilitator can easily choose one of these tools and **ask to participants to identify an argument**, after the identification of a shared definition of ‘argument’. Around a certain issue, a critical thinker can understand and analyse arguments and determine if they are ‘good’ in the sense of logically reliable, and therefore if a rational person, upon hearing them, should be convinced. The second step of this workshop is devoted to **the ability to evaluate arguments**. It would be important that RMA coordinator ask to participants to compare the definition of ‘argument’ with the one given for ‘**assumption**’: the argument is a set of sentences, one of which is being asserted; an assertion is a single sentence

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<sup>12</sup> Montessori education encourages children to develop critical thinking skills by providing them with hands-on learning materials. Each Montessori material is specifically designed to isolate one concept or skill, and has an inbuilt control of error, which allows the child to ‘discover’ the outcome of the material independent of an adult.



that can be true or false. In logic, assertions are either true or false, but arguments are neither true nor false. They are either good or bad. A good argument is one in which **(a) the conclusions follow from the premises; and (b) the premises are all true.** Time to evaluate the chosen argument(s) would be ensured by RMA coordinator. The final step of the workshop has the objective to **apply the previous concepts to a subject of study.** In fact, one of the fundamental elements of this workshop is to **raise awareness on the fact that critical thinking is not a foreign element or an external factor, but it is part of a cognitive strategy that must be applied to all stages of knowledge.** Thus said, RMA coordinator will guide students in the choice of a matter of study (e.g. Language and Literature, Philosophy, Geography and History, Mathematics and so on). For example, if Geography and History are concerned, an idea could be to challenge the Eurocentric vision of textbooks and sources, exploring different point of views. In Mathematics, rather than directing students to use a particular strategy to solve an assigned problem, the RMA coordinator should work with participants to identify various strategies and to develop criteria for choosing a suitable strategy from among the options.

Useful materials for RMA coordinator, both for previous analysis and to be used during the laboratories are collected in the Guidelines for teachers (“A Certain Formalism”). Guidelines for the various steps are given, e.g. questions to be asked when participants approaching a text or a speech to frame the situation analytically; the F.E.L.T. criteria to critically evaluate an argument (Fairness, Evidence & Logic, Tone) as well as suggestions and tips to assess credibility and reliability of sources and data. More, other materials for an in-depth analysis are collected and particularly regarding deductive and inductive arguments, logical fallacies and cognitive biases. Finally, suggestions for the choice of the subject for the final stage of the workshop are given in detail for the most common subjects in primary and secondary schools curricula.

## 5.10. Laboratorial Conclusions

The Manual herewith presented, as is evident from the proposed structure, is a work necessarily under construction, since it draws its inspiration from a method, the maieutic one





of Danilo Dolci which cannot be confined to a series of defined passages within which the pedagogist must be held tight by the grids of the method itself.

The traces and appearances are indications, we could say almost geographical, of laboratories that start from a point, which in many cases also has a linguistic consistency, and develops in intricate ways that retrace not only the physical geography of the school as a place but and above all the geography of the mind.

The Maieutic ideas are enriched by a series of reflections which are intended to be the application of Montessori inspirations, and which have caused the authors of this handbook to experience the positive trauma of the encounter between the two pedagogues.

In order to enrich the information that has been offered in the description of individual workers, it is also advisable to build an appropriate network of keywords within which one can move and which can bring the reader an interesting and stimulating contribution to understand how to implement workers and how to structure them in full freedom of conceptual and moral vision as the authors to whom we refer would have wanted.

### ***Maieutic***

It is the first word of this list, it is an inspiring word, and it means that knowledge starts from a conscious interior and that to extract it, if the letter of the word requires a conscious process that one cannot remain in the simple exchange or the discussion wants something moreover, active and critical thinking wants an enlargement, it wants full ownership of knowledge.

### ***Exploration***

Montessori exploration is the encounter with the world: the complex world, both symbolic and real world. Nothing in Montessori exploration forgives the carelessness, the superficiality of the adoption of concepts and experiences. The maieutic makes a fundamental contribution to Montessori exploration because it is traced within a personal geography that is made up of biography and encounters. These have undoubtedly left traces in the descendants and therefore the task of the exploration experience to bring to the surface and make it become knowledge.



## ***Space***

The space is the place, the space is the non-place, the space is a conceptual place, a constitutive element of the experience of knowledge. Through an analysis and conception of “space”, the conceptual experience of boys and girls in being protagonists of an educational process is proposed. In this sense, space is never neutral, it can be negative, positive, comfortable, uncomfortable, but it is never neutral.

Maria Montessori reminds us of the “prepared environment”. In this sense, we must consider the difference that the conceptual approach of the facilitator makes, whether they are teachers or not, to the dialogic encounter caused by these laboratories. The main idea of this section of the Manual is to prepare the environment and make it suitable for all boys of all girls.

## ***Upside down/Reversing***

The evocative of Dolci's experience known as the "reverse strike" allows us to draw clear inspiration for a reflection on the theme of the "call to action" and on the theme of individual and collective responsibility.

The idea came to Dolci reflecting on the theme of the workers' struggle for rights. The idea is to allow even the unemployed (who cannot abstain from work) to activate other forms of mobilization precisely defined "upside down". The actions had the aim of regaining possession of their workforce, perhaps starting to build a work of public utility.

In this workshop we take up this concept in a more extensive way and we enlarge the subject to reflect on the theme "strike for rights", in order to promote awareness of the need: this is not to take the acquisition of knowledge for granted, but to make it active in an ever-broader conceptual context.

The idea of the workshop is that a passive attitude does not allow the individual, and social dimension of everyone, to grow. Therefore, the theme will be what can be done to improve the school, one's own school, not through an attitude of simple protest but by “doing” and promoting concrete actions.

The idea is precisely that of overturning, to reversing the emotional experience into a larger dimension. Generally, in a maieutic experience of exploration, which also draws its cue from



the Montessori idea of experience derived from the interaction with the world, there is a superficial knowledge of the things that are intended to be opposed (norms, rules, habits and rituals), there is also a superficial knowledge of what one would like the outcomes of the protest to be. The workshop calls for an effort to get to know the status quo that is being criticized and for a clear and conscious definition of the results. Because knowledge is responsibility.

### ***Liberation***

Knowledge through knowledge, that in Danilo Dolci's idea is a liberating knowledge, does not only create one's own "social being" but one can put oneself in a fruitful relationship with the other members of the community. Knowledge also violates the rites and rhythms of domination and the aberration of power. Through the process of becoming aware of knowledge, the state of spiritual essence is positively overcome, and the articulated state of social essence is reached.

The theme is that of being the owner of the knowledge that is received through an active attitude. Maria Montessori also insisted on the definition of "cognitive effort" as "work". Educational activities that are carried out in a Montessori environment are, precisely, a work. This term refers to responsibility but at the same time to the need for a productive effort to achieve objectives that are intended as one's own. This workshop will try to induce the students to reflect on the fact that the knowledge they receive is not something provided anonymously but it is, and must be, the owner of those who receive it through a community context.

### ***Communicate***

Danilo Dolci insists on the theme of communicative action. Communicating represents the attempt to create a positive dialogue and presupposes the involvement of the interlocutors in a circle that is understood to be virtuous. But to communicate, you need to appropriate the contents and take responsibility for them. This word in the workshops takes on a fundamental meaning that, on the one hand, echoes the Montessori as the idea of the relevance of language in learning, on the other it testifies to the political commitment of communication, which is



never indifferent or neutral, asks for and hopes for a conceptual relationship with the interlocutor hoping in the solution to all conflicts.

### ***Environment***

The list, that is certainly not definitive, closes with the word that summarizes many concepts and at the same time explores them. The Environment is the place where we live something that surrounds us, something that belongs to us but that we do not know how to defend. The environment is the place where we learn, it is a conceptual element, a physical element, an abstract element to which we must refer in all the steps of our cognitive effort. The environment is also a supreme form of responsibility that reminds us of our civic duty to defend what we have for future generations, but also reminds us of the commitment to knowledge because all knowledge is militant and is aimed at the creation of a common homeland: the world, as Maria Montessori said.



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