



A History of Infant Pedagogy in Europe from the Fourteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*

Tracce di una storia della pedagogia del neonato in Europa dall'Umanesimo al primo Novecento

Traços de uma história da pedagogia de recém-nascidos na Europa, do Humanismo ao início do século XX

Huellas de la historia de la pedagogía del neonato en Europa desde el humanismo hasta principios del siglo XX

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Abstract

This article outlines a history of infant pedagogy in Europe from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century. By offering new readings of significant pedagogical works written in these centuries, the essay highlights the link between the historical genesis and the morphologic manifestation of educational processes in each individual's experience. This paper is a first attempt at deepening our understanding of this issue and contributing to the education of both parents and educators involved in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Keywords: Infant education. Parenting. History of pedagogy.

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Astratto

La proposta di identificare alcune tracce di una storia della pedagogia del neonato in Europa dall'Umanesimo al primo Novecento è finalizzata a mostrare, attraverso la rilettura di autori significativi, il legame esistente nello sviluppo della loro riflessione pedagogica fra la genesi storica e la manifestazione morfologica dei processi educativi nell'esperienza di ciascuna persona. L'articolo intende affrontare un primo approfondimento di tale questione, nell'ottica di fornire anche un contributo alla formazione dei genitori e degli educatori impegnati nei servizi dell'Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Parole chiave: Educazione neonatale. Genitorialità. Storia della pedagogia.

Resumo

A proposta de descobrir alguns vestígios de uma história da pedagogia de recém-nascidos na Europa, do Humanismo ao início do século XX, tem o objetivo de mostrar, por meio da releitura de alguns autores significativos, o vínculo existente no desenvolvimento da sua reflexão pedagógica entre a gênese histórica e a manifestação morfológica dos processos educacionais na experiência de cada pessoa. O artigo pretende abordar um primeiro estudo sobre esta temática, com o objetivo de contribuir também para a formação de pais e educadores envolvidos em serviços de Educação e Atenção à Primeira Infância (EPAI).

Palavra-chave: Educação neonatal. Paternidade. História da pedagogia.

Resumen

La propuesta de descubrir algunas huellas de la historia de la pedagogía del neonato en Europa desde el humanismo hasta principios del siglo XX tiene como objetivo mostrar, a través de la relectura de algunos autores significativos, el vínculo existente en el desarrollo de su reflexión pedagógica entre la génesis histórica y la manifestación morfológica de los procesos educativos en la experiencia de cada persona. El artículo pretende abordar un primer estudio de este tema, a fin de aportar igualmente una contribución a la formación de los padres y educadores implicados en los servicios de Educación y Atención de la Primera Infancia (AEPI).

Palabras clave: Educación neonatal. Parentalidad. Historia de la pedagogía.

Introduction

By proposing a historical-pedagogical study of the progressive development of infants, one needs to consider a substantial number of contributions on the theme of early childhood education. Western *paideia*, whose origin has traditionally been identified with Homer's work, recognizes the centrality of newborn education on moral and technical grounds as "a direct emanation of the live normative consciousness of a human community" (JAEGER, 2003, 25). It was not until the fourteenth century and the beginning of the Early Modern period that literary, philosophical, theological, and artistic sources began to shift their educational attitude. It was only then that pedagogists began to pay more attention to infants when outlining pedagogical systems that would recognize young children as carriers of *lógos*, that is, as already possessing those characteristics that set humans apart from all other animals.

In his psychogenetic theory of history, Lloyd DeMause points out that, over the centuries, childhood history has turned out to be a "nightmare" (DEMAUSE, 1974). Similarly, Franco Cambi and Simonetta Ulivieri claim that childhood history is among the "silences in education," because of the marginalization experienced by children (CAMBI; ULIVIERI, 1994). It is therefore necessary to take up the historiographical challenge of crossing the thresholds and inspecting such domestic spaces which, for a long time, were the backgrounds to birth and early childhood, were characterized by affective, emotional, and sentimental dimensions (COVATO, 2004, 53-71). Doing so enables us to identify the reasons of the elaboration, between the Modern and the Contemporary Periods, of a pedagogical thinking that is both capable of explaining the construction of children's identity through educational relationships experienced in the first days and months of life, and analyzing the peculiarities of such relationships as compared to other modalities of caring, raising, disciplining, modeling, or cultivating children.

1. Renaissance Humanism: A New Outlook on Early Childhood Education

The first explicitly pedagogical reflection on the neonatal age occurred during the period known as Renaissance Humanism, which spans from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. It was then that the first elements of a "feeling of childhood" began to develop (ARIÈS, 1961). In particular, in late-medieval France and fourteenth-century Italy, children lived and moved within "spaces of adult life." This mingling of adults and children favored the emergence of a new outlook on children who, even as they shared adult hardships and strains in the less well-off classes, were "listened to, received affectionate gestures, [were] equipped with specific tools, clothes, and toys to aid [them] in [their] development, with which [children] were not equipped in previous epochs" (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 120). This shift was due to the great importance that was now ascribed to the family, conceived as a space for domesticity and as the natural environment for the birth and growth of children. Such a space was to be regulated by the parents but, at the same time, it was open to the extra-domestic environment (DEMAUSE, 1974, 186-238). In central-northern Italy, the shift from the socioeconomic structure of the *Comune* to that of the *Signoria* and the rise of new protagonists such as merchants (who had long been frowned upon by the ecclesiastical-noble culture) and artists (sculptors, painters, chisellers, and so on) were both especially relevant to these shifts in pedagogical outlook. Merchants and artists embodied the ideal of the *homo faber fortunae suae* and pioneered the advancement of the nascent bourgeoisie (GARIN, 1964).

A systematization of the reflections on education that had previously circulated through traditional channels resulted in pedagogical treatises that offered pedagogical planning, in response to a felt need to educate individuals holistically, thus beginning to

recognize the perfectibility of human nature. The main practice through which humanists designed their pedagogical education was accurate daily observation of newborns, focused in particular on the preferences shown by infants in the early days of their lives. Humanist observation was performed “through the intellect and with a keen eye to search their [the infants’] nature” (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 143-147). Based on their observations, recommended pedagogical “interventions” included: setting good examples (first and foremost, by the parents), pursuing excellence, practicing rational moderation, caring for the relationship between educator and pupil, not disrupting the little one’s joy and serenity, paying attention to “seeing” and “admiring,” and a commixture of learned knowledge of both body and spirit. (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 143-147).

Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder (1370-1444) authored the first short treatise on liberal education, entitled *De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus studiis adolescentiae* (The Liberal Arts and the Morals of the Youth, 1400-1402). According to Antonella Cagnolati, this treatise marked the beginning of “Italian educational humanism” (CAGNOLATI, 2016). In it, Vergerio states that: “It is during this green age [...] that we must lay the foundations of our whole life and steep the soul in virtue until it is tender and capable of receiving any imprint, which [...] will last for the whole of our future lives” (GARIN, 1964, 18). Matteo Palmieri (1406-1475) recommended that “the father to whom a son is born [must] have a perfect hope in him before everything else”. Beginning to educate infants at birth had by now become the norm, as there was a sense that children had not only concrete and earthly immortality, but also carried the responsibility for the future of men and of society (GARIN, 1976, 12). Children began to be viewed as agents, no longer as passive figures as they had been viewed before. They were at the center of a new educational narrative, the so-called “family literature” consisting of family books, memories, memoirs, and correspondences. At the same time, medical treatises imparting medical and childcare advice for children and babies became widespread. Examples of this trend are Paolo Bagellardo’s *Libellus de egritudinibus infantium* (Booklet of Children’s Illnesses) and Bartholomaeus Metzinger’s *Regimen des jungen Kinder* (Regimens for Young Children) (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 122-123).

One of the most original contributions of Italian Humanism was by architect and scholar Leon Battista Alberti (1401-1472), himself an emblem of the “universal man.” In his treatise *Libri familie* (Books of the Family), written in the vernacular and divided into four books, three of which were written between 1432 and 1434, Alberti summarizes the perspective developed up to that moment on the themes of family, fatherhood, and education. He wrote about the recognized centrality of the child’s “own” nature and the parents’ leading role in laying the foundations of his educational path right in the domestic environment. Alberti’s thought was founded on the idea that nature is the best guide and teacher of all things, and that humankind could build a harmonious relationship with nature through education, beginning in the conjugal union of the parents and the care of their children (ALBERTI, 1994, 128-129).

According to Alberti, the duties of a new father included carefully choosing a name for the newborn, the first act in the child’s identity-building process, and recording the date of birth, which at the time wasn’t customary even among wealthy families. This last duty highlights the importance that the written word and written records had for the rising merchant class (ALBERTI, 1994, 146). Alberti carefully addressed intergenerational relationships between fathers and children, analyzing them in the light of a new idea of *paternitas* (fatherhood). This new fatherhood was characterized by solicitude in care and pleasure and joy in raising children, all expressions of a new humanistic sensibility (HAAS, 1998, 1-15). The paterfamilias no longer had the sole duty of “filling barn and cradle,” that is, providing for the family and ensuring reproduction. Instead, he was ascribed a new ethical and behavioral character, both political and civil, in line with the ideals expounded in Early modern “economic” treatises (FRIGO, 1985, 10).

Within the broader context of European humanism, calling fathers to their educational duties generated an educational and cultural paradigm of ideal-typical nature, a cultural incentive for fathers (GARIN, 1976). One can think, for example, of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). In his pedagogical and moral model of the *speculum principis* (Mirrors for Princes), Erasmus proposed that sovereigns should pursue a liberal education “curriculum,” so to speak, from the moment of their first cry until full maturity. Erasmus paid equal attention to the philosophical and pedagogical traditions of the Greek, Hellenistic, Latin, and Christian worlds and to a “concrete” dimension relating to the modern implications of rulers’ political competence (ERASMUS, 1992, 18). In Erasmus’s view, the critical connection between nature and culture generated the necessity for non-corrupting education right from birth. This education would be based on the systematic observation of the child’s natural inclinations and the educational conception of fatherhood. In his *Declamatio de pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis* (Petition for Immediate and Free Education for Children, 1529), Erasmus outlined a new *paideia*, an educational path that would put newborns in the best possible conditions for exercising their minds. Human babies are unique among all animal babies in that they possess *lógos* and are therefore receptive to such a degree that makes it necessary to nourish their souls with the “nectar” of knowledge. Erasmus, too, viewed children as the supreme good: “When nature grants you a son, it entrusts you with a mass of raw flesh. It is your duty to shape such docile and ductile material in the best way. If you make a mistake, you will obtain a beast. But if you are wise you will obtain, so to speak, a divine being” (ERASMUS, 1989, 106). Based on this premise, Erasmus urged parents to take on their educational responsibility and spoke against negligence, lack of care, and tragic events such as infanticide and abandonment.

Alberti’s sensibility was shared by Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540), another protagonist of European Humanism. In particular, Vives emphasized the education of the good Christian woman, highlighting the primacy of the maternal function. His pedagogical framework acknowledged that the domestic environment naturally had an educational function. Moreover, Vives held a rigorous view of women’s life since the moment they were born. He viewed breastfeeding as the first opportunity for an educational relationship between mother and baby, and parental love was, according to Vives, the main factor in promoting an education capable of fighting the germs of corruption that already were in human nature because of original sin (VIVES, 2000, 53-54). Vives explicitly revived models from the past, such as Aulus Gellius’s *Attic Nights* (159-170 AD) and some of Saint Jerome’s *Epistles* (400-413 AD).

Finally, it is worth recalling that humanistic *paideia* affirmed the universal nature of the anthropocentric ideal. Therefore, humanists took interest not only in infants from privileged backgrounds, but also in children from lower social classes, especially those abandoned through exposure. In southern European countries, the first orphanages had been founded by religious congregations, while central and northern European countries adopted a different form of child protection. After the Lutheran reform, it became more common to search for the father and to subsequently charge the whole community with the children’s maintenance expenses, so as to discourage the abandonment of illegitimate children. Several studies have found that orphanages, which provided assistance to children and guaranteed anonymity to parents willing to expose their children, encouraged rather than discouraged the practice of abandonment, often even of legitimate children born into poor families who were unable to maintain them, especially in times of harsher economic or political crisis (STONE, 1977, 133-300; CUNNINGHAM, 1995, 114-119; POLENGHI, 2001, 1-7). However, it should be noted that these institutions gradually undid the elitist character of the Greco-Roman *paideia* and opened the doors to modernity,

both by assisting exposed children and by introducing forms of physical discipline aimed at moral correction. These forms of discipline became particularly widespread during the *Ancien régime* (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 143). We can therefore conclude that two phenomena were intertwined: the gradual diffusion of a new conception of newborns initiated both a process of institutionalization of abandoned children and, at the same time, the desire to provide those who survived the hardships of early childhood with as independent a path as possible.

2. Between Lutheranism and the Catholic Reformation

Martin Luther's (1483-1546) reformation caused nothing short of a "hurricane" at religious, political, cultural, social, and pedagogical levels. The alleged posting of his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the German cathedral of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, had an immediate impact on family relationships as well. Luther's reformation put forward the notion of "spiritualization of the household," by which every family was called to be a spiritual microcosm of both Lutheran Church and State, to be a "nursery" in which to cultivate future generations ready to serve both Church and State (HILL, 1964, 443-481). In and of itself, the emphasis placed on procreation as the spouses' primary duty did not lead to greater appreciation of childhood, which was still considered a "source of anxiety and joy," even if each new birth was celebrated in a semipublic event (CUNNINGHAM, 1995, 46-47). There were numerous expectations of newborns, related to the importance of providing them with good education. Attentive paternal vigilance was required in order for children to achieve eternal salvation and maintain good social, religious, and political standing, as discussed in the print catechisms of the time. Abandoning and dishonoring the noble souls of children was thus a serious sin, according to the teachings that Luther outlined in several public speeches, such as *An die Ratsherren aller Städte deutschen Landes, dass sie christliche Schulen aufrichten und halten sollen* (To the Councilors of All Cities in Germany, That They Should Set Up and Maintain Christian Schools, 1524) (LUTHER, 1990, 37-39).

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Moravian pastor John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) systematized these Lutheran principles. His organic theory of education took the form of pedagogy, a discipline which he conceived as independent from the philosophical, theological, and literary knowledge that until then had been the main vehicle of expression for pedagogical ideas. In his *Didactica magna* (The Great Didactic, 1628), Comenius affirmed the principle of universal education, in line with the search for a universal method promoted by the scientific revolution. He took care to outline an educational system from zero to twenty-four years of age. Infants were included in the so-called *schola infantiae*, childhood school, (or *schola materni gremii*, school of the maternal womb), which coincided with the domestic environment, as the best context to begin their education according to nature, as *arbusculas Dei* (God's little trees) (COMENIO, 1993, 446-464).

The coeval process of Catholic renewal led by the papacy, which found its highest expression in the Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545-1563), also aimed at spiritualizing domestic life via dogmatic and disciplinary decrees about the sacrament of marriage. Marriage, however, was still conceived as an indissoluble bond between two people by virtue of the choices made by their parents. This bond was even more stringent if the married couple belonged to noble or upper-middle-class families, which in and of itself did not favor marital fidelity. Social condemnation and intolerance for single mothers and illegitimate children were strong (POLENGHI, 2001, 7). Much like their Lutheran counterparts, Catholic publications of the time emphasized the importance of parental responsibility in the education of the little ones. In particular, catechisms and manuals for confessors focused on the fourth commandment, "honor your Father and your Mother,"

which served as a reminder that mutual love between parents and children followed from a new conception of family as a “place for affection” (CUNNINGHAM, 1995, 54-58). Cardinal Silvio Antoniano (1540-1603), a collaborator of Pope Pius IV and a friend of Carlo Borromeo, contributed to the popularization of these principles in Italy. In his “Three Books on the Christian Education of Children” (1584), approved by the bishop of Verona Agostino Valier, he outlined a pedagogical project which aimed to educate children to Christian values beginning in their domestic environments (SANI, 2006, 64-65). After being baptized right at birth, children were to be watched and supervised from the first moments of life, to prevent them from going too near the fire or from suffocating while co-sleeping with adults. Bodily discipline, achieved primarily through swaddling, went hand in hand with spiritual discipline, because of the inseparable connection of these two dimensions in the human person. For this reason, good nutrition was fundamental to jumpstart a child’s education. Good nutrition was identified with maternal breastfeeding, in the name of a “law of nature” that was not much respected at the time, especially by noblewomen who preferred to entrust their newborns to wet nurses (ANTONIANO, 2010, 932-934). The theme of breastfeeding, one of the most discussed since antiquity, acquired a particularly moral nuance during the Catholic Renovation, and was closely linked to the spouses’ sexual continence (GOODY, 1983, 33-47).

3. Modern Age Developments

Before discussing the important developments which, in the Modern Age, led to the progressive “awareness” of the so-called “feeling of childhood’ (ARIÈS, 1960, 5-155), one must recall the social and cultural consequences of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. The scientific revolution affirmed the primacy of experience and reason in the search for universal laws in the hygienic, physiological, and educational fields. The child’s nature (especially of the male, firstborn child) became an object of study. Scholars observed children’s games, words, tastes, and passions from the moment of birth, in order to discover their temperament and deduce the educational strategies that would best direct each child’s personal and professional path (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 285). It is at this time that the writing of memoirs became increasingly widespread among noblemen or noblewomen, who recorded their daily observations of newborns and children. A compelling example of this trend was the *Journal de Jean Héroard* (The Journal of Jean Héroard), the “health journal” of future French sovereign Louis XIII, written by his doctor Héroard. The *Journal de Jean Héroard* gave rise to both a new literary “genre” and new educational practices (HEROARD, 1989).

The philosophical current of Empiricism further contributed to a renewed focus on newborns, both in revolutionary England, with John Locke (1632-1704), and in prerevolutionary France, with François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651-1715). Both thinkers promoted the interdependence between the formalization of pedagogical knowledge from the neonatal age and the affirmation of the bourgeois individual education process.

Locke combined his medical training, which followed new paradigms of study of body and psyche based on the observation of empirically detectable data, with his political interests. His aim was to educate the rising bourgeoisie and the citizens of the nascent British parliamentary monarchy, while at the same time respecting Puritan morals. A synthesis of Locke’s pedagogical ideas is *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, written between 1684 and 1691 at the request of his friend Edward Clarke, who was looking for advice for his son’s education. At the core of his pedagogy, Locke placed an early start in care and educational practices. The newborn was considered a “blank slate” (LOCKE, 1937, 29-30) onto which experience would write and rewrite knowledge through impressions received by the five senses,

as Locke illustrated in his most important philosophical work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Caregivers should take care of the infant's body so as to make it robust, strong, and resilient; without these qualities, it would have been hard to attain good breeding ground, according to so-called “hardening theory” inspired by Spartan *paideia*.

The child's individuality and particular needs were explicitly recognized, in contrast with traditional, adult-centered views. Like the children of peasants, so too children born in cities were encouraged to live in the open air and practice a balanced alternation of physical exercise and rest, in moderation, dressed in appropriate clothes (neither too hot nor too tight), with their heads and feet not too sheltered from the cold, without using wine, alcohol, or drugs unless strictly necessary (LOCKE, 1937, 53-54). The originality of Locke's proposal lies in his empiricist interpretation of the, by then, “classic” theory of instilling good habits since early childhood. He posited the acquisition of moral and cultural *habitus* as the common denominator of all educational interventions that would make every man, as a rational being, the “master” of himself and his relationships with others, in the name of the principle of self-government. Locke proposed a practical education based on the notion that infants had an “imitative” nature (he defined them as “chameleons,” LOCKE, 1937, 93). Such an education would be free from any forms of corporal or verbal punishment, focusing instead on cognitive development through the gradual refinement of manual skills via the use of everyday objects.

Whereas Locke articulated his ideas on education addressing primarily the male child, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, better known as Fénelon (1651-1715), played a leading role in the international pedagogical landscape at the turn of the eighteenth century in supporting the importance of educating girls since they were newborns. Education for girls, he maintained, would translate into the preservation of the solidity and goodness of family relationships, once women reached marriage and motherhood (FÉNELON, 1963, 59). In his *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (Treatise on the Education of Girls, 1687), written at the request of the Duchess of Beauvilliers for the education of her eight daughters and revised before publication to address both mothers and governesses, Fénelon took inspiration from his pedagogical experience as tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, as well as from his reading of Plato, Augustine, Malebranche, and Descartes. Thanks to this combination of written sources and practical experience, Fénelon newly conceptualized the child: no longer viewed as a “deficient” being, it was now conceived as a being in evolution. Thus, Fénelon ascribed primacy to self-education, to be promoted through “lessons of things” in everyday life (FÉNELON, 1963, p. 60-66).

In Fénelon's view, the ideal early childhood educator was a woman and mother; a provident, hardworking, simple, sincere, and sensitive woman, dedicated to her husband, the domestic administration, and the education of children, bestowing balance and serenity onto the whole society. Among the strategies recommended as most effective to mothers to discover their children's physical and receptive nature were practices of daily observation and educational actions appealing to imagination and feeling, as motors of the infants' spiritual and intellectual life (PANCERA, 1991, 49-53). It was therefore crucial to guide infants' impressions indirectly, “through reason, as much as possible,” and through words accompanied by appropriate tones and gestures, in order for the children to develop the natural inclination to spend time with good and respectable people and stay away from disreputable people displaying inappropriate or angry behaviors.

Fénelon's insistence on the educational effectiveness of good examples, which is corroborated by the current awareness of cerebral “plasticity” and “receptivity” of infantile intelligence, testifies to the persistence of the notion that imitation is the chief learning method. Based on his denial of any innate knowledge—which he shared with Locke, together with a particular attention to health and healthy nutrition—Fénelon affirmed the classic thesis that infants are like “soft wax,” modeled by impressions apprehended through sensorial experience.

These ideas of Fénelon's anticipated several essential aspects of Rousseau's pedagogy, such as the idea of human nature as *physis*, the practice of indirect education against pedanticism, and the notion that experience is the first teacher (SCAGLIA, 2020, 33), which will be discussed more in depth in the next section.

4. Rousseau's Pedagogical Revolution

The Enlightenment generated an increase in neonatal educational practices in wealthy families. Even greater importance was ascribed to the mother, and individualized education within the domestic space was promoted. One of the reasons for these changes was a heightened attentiveness to children's needs, which was in turn connected to the process of "privatization of close relationships" brought about by the advent of the nuclear family, especially in central-northern Europe (SHORTER, 1975; CUNNINGHAM, 1995). This, however, did not eradicate physical and psychological punishments aimed at controlling and containing children, especially in bourgeois culture (RUTSCHKY, 2015, 171). Among the French and English ruling classes, infant mortality rates dropped, thanks to the combination of several factors: profound cultural and educational changes promoted more attention toward children, on emotional and educational levels; new medical and hygienic practices became widespread; doctors encouraged maternal breastfeeding and discouraged tight swaddling; access to contraception, which was initially available only to wealthy urban residents, became more systematic (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996b, 46-47). The domestic environment of wealthy families changed significantly during this time. These changes opened the way, in the decades to come, to the "nursery," which highlighted the centrality of the family home as a symbol of a new inner, political, and social order (COVATO, 2004, 6). Images of happy mothers as devoted caregivers and keepers of the family's intimacy became predominant.

As Dominique Julia warns, however, such changes in values, habits, and experiences were not the direct sources of Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) pedagogical theory as it is outlined in his novel *Émile, ou de l'éducation* (Emile, or On Education, 1762). Rousseau did not intend to voice such new trends, but rather to propose a new pedagogical perspective based on the centrality of the metaphysical principle of *physis* and starkly opposed to traditional educational practices (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996b, 65). Born out of "twenty years of study and three hours of work", *Émile* was presented to readers as a "pedagogical novel" interweaving several literary genres. In it, Rousseau critiqued the traditional form of the pedagogical treatise, which ran the risk of being a mere "how-to" manual for raising children. Instead, he offered his conception of "education according to nature," which had two aims: an ethical and a pedagogical one. Rousseau's *Émile* inaugurated a new "era" for Western pedagogical thinking. Besides recognizing the child's centrality in the educational process (a "child-centric" approach), he supported the idea of the perfectibility of human nature, viewed as a possibility for education rather than a hindrance to it (ROUSSEAU, 2016, 13-15).

It is therefore possible to understand Rousseau's special attention for children's educational and psychological needs since birth, which was both in line with the coeval development of a "feeling of childhood" and within the context of Rousseau's broader philosophical and pedagogical intents. The neonatal age is the focus of *Émile*'s Book I, which is devoted to the education of children aged 0-5. Rousseau gave new meaning to this age period, because he viewed it as the ideal time when human nature (called *physis* in its classical-philosophical sense, not in the narrow sense of physiological and biological nature) wholly manifests in its goodness. As such, a "personalized" education should engage the *physis* by respecting each child's qualities, stages of development, and modalities of manifestation (ROUSSEAU, 2016, 72-93).

Rousseau described the ideal conditions that promote education as “the art of living.” In doing so, he was mindful of Michel de Montaigne’s teaching against restrictions, such as tight swaddling and nurses, that hindered education according to nature and repressed each human being’s own liberty (MONTAIGNE, 1965, 404-405). For this reason, in *Émile*’s pedagogical laboratory, neonatal life and the mother-infant relationship were seen as major opportunities for pedagogical reflection. As a premise, one should mention that the mother figure is a “great absent” in the book, in contrast to *Julie, ou La nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie; or, the New Heloise), where the mother figure is celebrated as the “first educator.” *Julie* is about Julie’s care and educational efforts for her three children, which are described in Letter III, Part V of the book. We can understand Rousseau’s choice to omit the mother figure by recalling that well-off mothers heavily relied on the assistance of nurses and governesses, so much so that this widespread practice generated contradictions and discontinuities in an educative process conceived as led by the mother as the only one who could educate according to nature (ROUSSEAU, 2016, 80-81).

For this reason, Rousseau replaced the maternal figure with a *gouverneur* (governess), who was in charge of the newborn’s early sensorial education, that is, based on the stimuli received through the five senses, because experience was the primary source of children’s learning. The newborn child, freed from the constrictions of tight swaddling, was able to build, through sensorial education, a necessary, direct, and unmediated relationship with external reality. According to Rousseau, infants were born ready to learn. Therefore, every occasion to move, cry, or express themselves in their natural language of sounds and gestures was a learning opportunity and, as such, was to be encouraged, not hindered. Choosing what objects to show the child was a pedagogical strategy aimed at providing authentic freedom without falling into arbitrariness, because it allowed for possibilities to experience new sensations in age-appropriate ways (ROUSSEAU, 2016, 115).

5. The Birth of “Mother Pedagogy,” from Pestalozzi to Necker de Saussure

Rousseau’s pedagogy quickly reached the main courts and cities of Europe, including Zurich, which for a long time had been a crossroads for French Enlightenment filtered through the Protestant tradition, Swiss patriotism, humanitarianism, pietism, and physiocracy. It is there that young Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) read *Émile* and adopted some of Rousseau’s principles. However, in his pedagogical theory and educational practice, Pestalozzi didn’t dismiss the educational value of the family and, especially, of the mother (POLENGHI, 2001, 16-19).

Already in his early work, for example in his pedagogical novel *Lienhard und Gertrud: Ein Buch für das Volk* (Leonard and Gertrude: A Book for the People, 1781-1787), Pestalozzi emphasized the mother’s educational action, which he considered of primary importance in the promotion of education according to nature, and in the moral and social regeneration of a people. These processes, according to Pestalozzi, began in the domestic space. In his essay *Ueber Gesetzgebung und Kindermord* (On Education and Child Murder, 1783), he strongly supported the idea that maternal love is a natural quality, in contrast with the deviations brought about by social and cultural conditioning. Pestalozzi wrote this essay in defense of women who were sentenced to death for child murder. The essay allowed Pestalozzi to bring attention to the issue and press for social and legislative reforms to address the crime. He proposed that such reforms should revise the concept of personal responsibility and, at the same time, rely on the preemptive function of education (PESTALOZZI, 1999, 5-57). In his view, newborns were like “buds that had yet to blossom,” “tender saplings” entrusted to their mothers’ patient care and loving attention. The mother, in Pestalozzi’s view, was the receptacle of the newborn’s

life and the pin around which the life of the whole family pivoted, the first sphere of men's lives and an intermediate reality between individuals and the community. Pestalozzi's pedagogical revolution was like a "new protestant reformation": it took the best ideas of Lutheran thinking onto a pedagogical plane, successfully combining Comenius's universalistic stance on schooling and education with Rousseau's notion of personalized education according to nature, and eventually promoting a "domestic education of the people, according to nature" (SCAGLIA, 2020, 59).

During his last years as a teacher at Burgdorf's school, Pestalozzi decided to publish, alongside a book about the intuitive elementary school teaching method (*Wie Gertrud Ihre Kinder Lehrt*, How Gertrude Teaches her Children, 1801), a theoretical and practical guide for mothers raising young children. The project was completed only partially and became the *Buch der Mütter oder Anleitung für Mütter ihre Kinder bemerken und reden zu lehren Erstes heft* (Book of Mothers; or, Instructions for Mothers to Observe their Children and Teach Them to Talk, 1803). The book is traditionally ascribed to Pestalozzi, though it was in fact written by his colleague Hermann Krüsi. As early as the *Introduction*, Pestalozzi-Krüsi highlight the importance of maternal educative action in "activating" the vital seeds of development that are innate in the child. Mothers can be agents of education by promoting the children's ability to observe and talk, encouraging free movement and exploration of their surroundings. A mother's natural concern allows her to act in the best and most appropriate way, thus promoting early sensorial education. These ideas show that Pestalozzi and Krüsi had assimilated Rousseau's lessons that education begins at birth, that experience is the first "teacher," and that experience stimulates newborn development even before he or she can speak (ROUSSEAU, 2016, 113).

Pestalozzi and Krüsi addressed their ideal readers in a series of calls to action beginning with the words "Und Mütter!" (Listen, Mothers!), urging them to follow the path traced by the Divine Providence and utilize tools that are "simple," "easy" to use, and appropriate to the children's intellectual and moral development. The notion of development underlying Pestalozzi's pedagogical idea cannot be reduced to the mere physiological and biological growth of the newborn's body and mind. On the contrary, Pestalozzi and Krüsi's notion of development was complex and all-encompassing, originating in the acknowledgement that maternal action could gradually lead the child to direct his attention to his body, mind, and heart (PESTALOZZI, 1803, V-XIV).

In order to emphasize the novelty of his thinking, Pestalozzi formulated it within a pedagogical framework. He listed his major points in the thirty-four letters he wrote to his English friend James Pierpoint Greaves between October 1, 1818 and May 12, 1819. These letters were later collected in the work *Mutter und Kind* (Mother and Child), published in 1827. In this book, the mother's care for the first expressions of her child's soul is presented as a *conditio sine qua non* that will start a process of moral and social regeneration of the people (PESTALOZZI, 1927, 14-15). The natural bond between mother and baby was confirmed by experience and was not in contrast with the Christian spirit; on the contrary, it "mirrored" the primordial feeling of love and trust that bonded every man to their Creator. On a strictly educational level, the mother acted as a sentinel and would observe and catch, with courage and humility, the first expressions of the baby's physical, sensorial, rational, and spiritual development. The mother figure was invested with pedagogical, socio-political, and religious meanings, and thus became the protagonist of a type of educational planning that required the systematic practice of "thoughtful love." That is, love that was regulated "through" and "by" a reflection on one's duties as an educator, for the good of one's children (PESTALOZZI, 1927, 17). Mothers were expected to achieve a kind of "spiritual elevation," first by observing the gratitude and natural *sympatheia* expressed by their newborns, then by gradually realizing and maintaining the child's physical well-being

and “moral and spiritual tranquility.” This would later prove the full and integral development of the child’s nature (PESTALOZZI, 1927, 34-35).

Together with Pestalozzi, another important intellectual in the European pedagogical scenario between Enlightenment and Romanticism was Albertine Necker de Saussure (1766-1841). The infant pedagogy she proposed was based on the principles of mutual benevolence, just seriousness, and order. The daughter of scientist and Protestant philosopher Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, Albertine grew up in the cultural milieu of Geneva’s upper bourgeoisie. Her life spanned three momentous historical events: the French revolution, the Napoleonic era, and the subsequent restoration of power to European sovereigns (SCAGLIA, 2020, 64).

For a good part of her life, Necker de Saussure was both a scholar and an attentive mother of four children, whose education she supervised. She made a crucial contribution to post-Rousseauian pedagogy with her work *L’éducation progressive, ou Étude du cours de la vie* (Progressive Education; or, Study of the Course of Life, 1828-1838). It is clear that Necker de Saussure aimed to make a critical contribution by interacting with the most original aspects of Rousseau’s pedagogy, as her repeated use of the expression *éducation progressive* (progressive education) suggests. She viewed progressive education as a process of self-education of the human person, viewed in the light of Christian teleology and anthropology (NECKER DE SAUSSURE, 1940).

Her unpublished notes reveal that she possessed an extensive knowledge of post-Rousseauian authors, such as Pestalozzi. With them, Necker de Saussure shared the notions that the domestic environment was the best environment to promote natural education, and that mothers were to be children’s first educators. However, unlike these thinkers, she did not address the issue of human and social regeneration of the people. In order to achieve the self-perfecting work that was at the center of her teleology, Necker de Saussure suggested that forms of “accidental education,” which were available since early childhood, should be integrated with “premeditated education” (NECKER DE SAUSSURE, 1940, 61).

Necker de Saussure’s attention and care in discussing infant education in the first three books of *L’éducation progressive* reveal that her interest in education was not only teleological and methodological, but also epistemological. Among the first issues she analyzed is the difference in maternal care in the animal and human realms. From this difference, she argued, one could deduce that the art of human education was not a product of a guiding instinct. Instead, in her view, the best methodological strategy was constant and accurate observation of infants and children, in order to study the differences and nuances in their development. Development, according to Necker de Saussure, involved a contextual, rather than sequential, progression of cognitive functions and language. Necker de Saussure did not deny the difficulties inherent to education, such as the fact that babies appeared as “little savages of sort, externally uncivilized,” with their own ways of feeling, comparing, and contrasting ideas, completely different from those of adults. For this reason, it was crucial to appeal to infants’ emotional and sensorial dimensions, which were particularly active in early childhood. The educator would have to channel the infants’ energy toward expressions of benevolence and habitual calm, which had nothing to do with other manifestations, such as tantrums, which were instead due to disappointed hopes, felt sufferings, or excessively excited feelings (NECKER DE SAUSSURE, 1940, 98-147).

Necker de Saussure was also particularly interested in exploring the origin of human intentionality, so as to promote better education according to nature. She discussed the mystery and pains of childbirth, the development of the suction instinct, and the newborn’s first response to internal sensations, which she considered the first instances of the infant’s process of self-education. Like Rousseau, she paid great attention to the development of natural language and the acquisition of gross to fine manual motor skills. In her view, the development of finer manual motor skills paralleled the gradual development of sight and touch, all of which

concurrently to provide a unified concept of the same object. Since the child was now able to determine most of the causes of specific sensations, she would be able to self-correct her visual mistakes through tactile sensations and was no longer mistaken about the distance of objects placed next to her (NECKER DE SAUSSURE, 1940, 105).

6. Fröbelism

Pestalozzi's pedagogical revolution resonated in the work of German scholar Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852). Fröbel built his early childhood education theories upon Pestalozzi's *Buch der Mütter* (Book of the Mothers), propelled, as he stated, by "the most elevated ideas that Pestalozzi's loving soul had entrusted to humankind for the raising of children" (PRÜFER, 1927, 24). Fröbel's reflections on the centrality of observation, encouraging a deep knowledge of the external world, and language as representation of the world were to be of particular importance for future pedagogical discussions. As others before him, as we have seen, he too viewed mothers as "men's first educators." In his view, mothers were responsible for the "construction" of their children's "future cultural edifice," by encouraging the observation of the external world and language learning. For this reason, Fröbel designed observation activities aimed to stimulate, from a very early age, the child's abilities to differentiate, intuit, and express, within a richer pedagogical-didactic framework than the one outlined in Pestalozzi's Book of Mothers. Fröbel's pedagogical framework was founded upon the so-called "spherical law," which enabled children to regulate the dynamic unity of being and becoming and was at the basis of human spiritual development. Fröbel outlined his theory of the spherical law in his work *Die Menschenerziehung* (The Education of Man, 1826).

According to Fröbel, therefore, maternal care and child's development complemented each other and were based on the valorization of the natural and irremissible "educational mission" held by women in the family. Women were expected to pursue this mission in the most appropriate ways for "Christian mothers," as Fröbel stated in many appeals to women who were about to enter marriage. The primacy Fröbel ascribed to maternal love, as opposed to paternal love, prompted him to open, in 1840, an educational institution called "Mother's School," or *Kindergarten*. The purpose of this school was to concretize Fröbel's principles and train new professional figures who would work with children aged zero to six (POLENGHI, 2001, 19-20; SCAGLIA, 2020, 102-112). Galvanized by the success of his school, in 1844 Fröbel decided to prepare an "aid" to equip, from a pedagogical perspective, all women, as they became aware of their role of "educating mothers." This aid was a "family book" called *Mutter- und Koselieder Dichtung und Bilder zur edlen Pflege des Kinderheitlebens: ein Familienbuch* (Poetry and Pictures for the Noble Care of Childhood Life: A Family Book). Fröbel conceived of this book as a theoretical-practical guide for mothers, based on the observations he conducted with Friederike Schmidt of Gera between 1840 and 1844.

One cannot fully appreciate the cultural and pedagogical significance of this book without recalling the idea of *Kindergarten* as a "children's paradise" in which the "tender buds" would flourish. Newborns were observed and guided in the development of their first skills through suggestions of movement experiences, sensorial discrimination, imitation, and perception of disparate objects found in the domestic environment (LASCARIDES; HINITZ, 2011, 104-105). For example, newborns were encouraged to practice their strength by stomping on everything that might fall under their feet or by catching anything within their reach, whereas the expression of their feelings for others were encouraged through smiles and pleasurable sensations, such as when their faces would turn to light or air (FRÖBEL, 1874, 9). In all of these cases, "Mother's words" were the chief means to encourage children to interact with the external world and develop their own views of reality. For one thing, the illustrations in *Mutter- und Koselieder* depicted the mother-child relationship as one entailing a spirit of "continuous

communion with free nature” within a rural context in which, day after day, the children would harmoniously grow, pursuing a “loving” continuity between natural and supernatural order, guaranteed by the mother (SCAGLIA, 2020, 112-116).

The originality of Fröbel’s proposal lies in the combination of typical eighteenth-century, Romantic themes with his innovative emphasis on the educational role of mothers. His focus on mothers would later be reaffirmed by the first international movements in support of women’s rights, especially the right to be freed from centuries of family, social, and cultural conditionings. It is not by chance that aristocratic and upper-bourgeoisie women were the main promoters of Fröbel’s pedagogy. Women such as Berta von Marenholz-Bülow, Elena Raffalovich Comparetti with Adele Levi della Vida, and Elizaveta Vodovozova promoted Froebelism in Germany, Italy, and Russia respectively, qualifying their commitment as a form of “spiritual motherhood” (ALLEN, 1982).

Democratic aspirations of emancipation thus converged in Fröbel’s pedagogy, within the broader context of the founding of the first European educational institutions for children aged three to six. These were inspired by the “pedagogy of movement, love, joy, and intuition” of Robert Owen’s infant schools and paid increased attention to the medical and pedagogical issue of infant abandonment and neonatal mortality (BECCHI; JULIA, 1996b, 300). In the 1840s, the first *crèches* were opened in France, in an attempt to offer daily shelter and adequate assistance to infants and children up to three years of age. The initiative was part of a broader political and cultural plan to fight child abandonment in industrialized urban areas, which had increased due to the rise in female employment in manufacture (CAROLI, 2017, 3-39). With the advent of Positivism, medicine was subjected to a process of “scientification-epistemologization” and “institutionalization-socialization.” Medicine achieved a prominent role in the scientific progress (including human sciences), promoting a new idea of neonatal health that was also social and political and included measures of prevention, normalization, and control (CAMBI; ULIVIERI, 1988, 53-59). This way, the relationship between medicine, bourgeois ideology, and social engagement became even closer. On a pedagogical level, this meant increased attention to the “educability” of newborns and the need to develop new pedagogical methods designed specifically for them (CAROLI, 2017, 106-110).

7. The Early Twentieth Century: Janusz Korczak and Maria Montessori

In the twentieth century, new educational movements spread and consolidated in several parts of Europe and North America. The impact of these new methods can be likened to a Copernican Revolution in the field of pedagogy. The birth of psychoanalysis, the development of alternative pedagogical perspectives that opposed late-Positivism, and the international movement for the liberation of women, which had Swedish writer Ellen Key and Italian pedagogue Maria Montessori among its main protagonists, all contributed to these important changes. In her successful book *The Century of the Child* (1900), Ellen Key discussed a process of mutual interdependence among issues related to women’s culture (for instance, the relationship between public and private spheres, social motherhood, individual autonomy) and her commitment for the recognition of children’s rights, which paralleled the progress made in the twentieth century regarding general human rights (PIRONI, 2010, 4-9).

In this context, internationally-acclaimed European authors such as Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952), both originally trained as medical doctors, rose to prominence. They were not the first and only ones to focus on neonatal psychic development, early education, and the educating value of the environment; however, more than others, they learned from the discoveries and innovations recently attained in the fields of

human science and medicine. Korczak's and Montessori's distinctive trait was their unabating faith in pedagogy as a necessary and irreplaceable science that was able to study and promote early education since birth through "indirect" and "tailored" educative methods. These methods would enable parents and educators better to understand the child's nature and to act in her interest, acknowledging her rights and appreciating, on a pedagogical level, each of the child's gestures as expressions of her developing personality (SCAGLIA, 2020, 150).

Janusz Korczak was an eclectic figure in the movement for the recognition of children's rights and the promotion of child-centered education. After opening his *Dom sierot* (The orphans' home) in Warsaw in 1913, he decided to investigate the "mysterious" aspects of uterine and neonatal life from a pedagogical perspective, in order to show that each child's uniqueness began in utero and that each child was therefore worthy of respect. In his essay *The Child in the Family* (1918-1920), he stated that the symbiotic relationship between child and mother shouldn't be a reason to deprive children of their rights to be acknowledged as independent beings. According to him, out of the painful (for both) experience of birth, strength and determination in life would arise for the child, together with a need for independence: "I want to live my life," to which the mother would answer "Go on, live your life!" (KORCZAK, 1997, 19-25).

From the moment of birth, according to Korczak, the child was like a "piece of parchment densely covered in minute hieroglyphs," which adults were able to decode only partially. What mattered most, however, was the parents' awareness that there could not be good education for the child without his or her active participation. Korczak trusted the natural abilities of parents: according to him, they would experience a "profound spiritual revolution" which would enable them to teach their children, more from experiencing sleepless nights, cries, and childhood illnesses than from books and advice offered by others (KORCZAK, 1997, 30). The mother's "intuition of the heart, the perspicacity rooted in her will to investigate, her vigilance on the mind and her transparency of feeling" were fundamental in Korczak's outlook, akin to Pestalozzi's notion of maternal love as "thoughtful love."

This educational attitude was first tested with breastfeeding, which Korczak viewed as a prosecution of pregnancy. In this, he followed not only the ancient notion that maternal breastmilk is the mother's blood transformed into milk through a long journey from the uterus to the breast, but also the coeval notion that infants have the ability to self-regulate rhythm and duration of feedings, thus encouraging mothers to follow the baby's lead. Elements such as the temperature in the room or the amount of breastmilk were, according to Korczak, true educational factors, and not only from a hygienic point of view, but because they responded to the infants' psychological needs. According to Korczak, such attunement to the baby's needs was the only possible foundation for a neonatal education based on the principles of freedom and respect (KORCZAK, 1997, 45). To counter the dangers of possible, even involuntary, repression of the child's need for independence, Korczak believed that education should begin as an education of the senses, especially sight and touch. Day after day, the newborn learns to know her mother, piece by piece, beginning from the breast and moving on to her nose, hands, and so on until she can recognize her mother as a whole person. Baby's first conquests such as shrieks, the suction skill, the use of their hands were extraordinary, fundamental channels of exploration of both self and environment and would lead to harmonious psychological, cognitive, and moral development. The exploration of one's hands, besides being a pleasurable and playful activity, is a primordial form of expression of the desire to discover and understand the world, like a scientist in her laboratory (KORCZAK, 1997, 50).

Following his own appeal to educational responsibility, intensified by the knowledge attained through the coeval "discovery of the newborn" in several scientific fields, in *The Child in the Family*, Korczak outlined a sort of *magna charta libertatis* of

children's rights, on which he would later expand with his *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929). He did so at a time in history that carried many negative omens for children, because of the consequences of WWI and the rise of totalitarianism. At the same time, however, a legal formalization of children's rights was obtained with the Geneva *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1924), although this document did not by any means make up for the damages inflicted to children by adults. Korczak identified three fundamental rights of children: 1) "the child's right to death"; 2) "the child's right to his/her present life"; and 3) "the child's right to be what he/she is" (KORCZAK, 1994).

Almost at the exact same time as Korczak, Maria Montessori was also at the center of a "pedagogical revolution," which began with her first Children's House, opened in the San Lorenzo neighborhood in Rome on January 6, 1907 (KRAMER, 1988, 107-132). Montessori became interested in neonatal education a few years later. She was inspired by the principles of freedom and the recognition of the newborn's nature as a separate being from his mother, with his own personality, intelligence, and emotions since the very first breath. In a speech she gave in 1915 in Oakland, California (HONEGGER FRESCO, 2018, 30-31), Montessori emphasized that the perspective of neonatal hygiene alone was insufficient to understand a newborn's particular needs. She had already explored this idea in her volume *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1910). It was necessary to adopt a specifically pedagogical perspective in order to liberate the little ones from any and all conditionings and "let nature do [its work] in the freest way possible," recognizing childhood as a "social issue" (MONTESSORI, 2016, 6-7), as Montessori stated in *L'autoeducazione nelle scuole elementari* (Self-education in Elementary Schools, 1916. This book has been published in English in two volumes as *The Advanced Montessori Method*).

Through her prolonged study of newborns in maternity wards, Montessori observed that repression and containment practices were still common at the time. This was the inception of her fight for the acknowledgement of children's rights. The statistical data and historical demographics from the first two decades of the twentieth century support Montessori's claim, as they reveal lasting conditions of material and spiritual indigence in many families, the persistence of orphanages and wet nurses, steady illiteracy that led to ignore even the simplest norms of maternal and neonatal hygiene, and an ineffectual vaccination campaign against tuberculosis. The outbreak of WWI and the ensuing destruction worsened a situation that was difficult to begin with and further complicated by the rise of totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes waged fights against infant mortality and sickness in the name of a notion of childhood as a "symbolical construction and [an] artificial rhetoric linked to twentieth-century mass policies. [Childhood] therefore, [was] not a biological or sociological category, but an eminently political one, as one can understand from the relationship in which it was seen with the nation" (GIBELLI, 2005, 3).

Montessori systematically organized her ideas about education since birth in the early 1920s, through talks given to families in Bruxelles and Vienna. These speeches were first published in French in the magazine "La femme belge," then republished in Austria as *Kind in der Familie* (The Child in the Family) in 1923. She later perfected her neonatal pedagogy in *L'Enfance* (1935) and *The absorbent mind* (1949). Her goal was to investigate the "new figure of the misunderstood child" in order to highlight the mistakes that for millennia had been made when raising the most delicate members of humanity, and to outline a new educational path. Montessori focused especially on the power imbalance between adults and newborns that had developed over time, which resulted in the child finding herself in a state of oppression or, rather, repression. This repression was not only of the psychoanalytical kind, but one derived from forms of "dark pedagogy" practiced throughout the centuries, all the more dangerous because unconscious, yet able to overcome and suffocate the mysterious forces of the child's inner life (MONTESSORI, 2017, 9).

Parents acted in lieu of the child in every area, trying to protect her, but were not able to observe her accurately and discover that the child's gestures, looks, movements, and spontaneous tendencies revealed an irrepressible quest for independence. According to Montessori, nothing was more harmful to the full development of an infant's personality than ignoring the child's psychological need for independence, forcing her instead to fit, in a direct, forceful, and violent way, into the adult world. This attitude was so rooted in families that it seemed impossible to overcome. On the contrary, presenting infants with an environment made for them was a radical "act of charity," even if one was to always be mindful that the "original lapse" (i.e. the original sin) entailed an intrinsic fragility which justified recurring to personalized educational strategies (MONTESSORI, 2019, 81).

Montessori's awareness that newborns' and children's natures more generally were poorly known had multiple implications on a pedagogical as well as social level. The inability to identify the peculiarity of children's needs and the persisting view of children as weak beings with no personalities pointed to the fact that the understanding of childhood was still "a blank page in the history of humanity" (MONTESSORI, 2017, 12). It was necessary to set the pillars of an "education for life," beginning in the home environment, preparing newborns for all aspects of life, preventing them from growing up in a self-referential world that was unable to promote their autonomy (HONEGGER FRESCO, 2018). Montessori's proposition of nonviolent birth and postnatal life was not only the result of her medical training, but also the basis for true pedagogical planning. In her view, pedagogy should be able to handle both the "trauma" experienced by the fetus when leaving the mother's womb, "worn-out and wounded like a pilgrim arriving from far-away lands," as well as the baby's nature of active, "incarnated spiritual embryo," bearing the directives of his own future development according to certain sensitive periods and deeply obedient to the adult. The child's early "aptitude for work," manifested symbolically through his more and more refined manual skills, revealed a secret carried by each child: freedom.

Montessori had a chance to test her ideas during her travels to India between 1939 and 1949, and later collected these observations in *The Absorbent Mind*. In this work, she reaffirmed that newborns were, by nature, "builders of men," thanks to their innate and unknown psychological powers that, when properly stimulated in the first three years of life, would encourage the full development of the human personality (MONTESSORI, 2007, 2). Having an "absorbent mind" put the child in a position of heightened receptivity, allowing him to develop his own "mental flesh" in a short period of time, thanks to continuous inner work. According to Montessori, newborns were guided by a mysterious power to "become men" through their own hands, that is to say, through their concrete experience of reality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to trace a history of newborn pedagogy in Europe from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century. This has allowed me to map out, at an epistemological level, the progressive formalization of pedagogical thinking around the first years of human life, through the crossed study of historical genealogy and personal morphology in the educational processes. This process was fostered by educational experience on the one hand, and educational theory on the other, within a new conceptualization of childhood and, therefore, of the adult-child relationship. This was, in turn, affected by the age-old meaning stratification of the notions of human "feeling," "thinking," and "acting." Over time, newborns went from being viewed as *infantes*, that is as lacking, deficient beings and "parrots," clumsily mimicking what they see and hear

(BECCHI; JULIA, 1996a, 30-33), to being considered “new” children, able to manifest the signs of their authentic human nature in the different circumstances of life, even if not yet able to control their sphincters, not yet autonomous in walking, feeding themselves, and speaking. The importance given to the construction of the self is the landing point of a journey that, as we have seen, began with the humanistic notion of *homo artifex*, passed through Jean Jacques Rousseau’s systematization of the pedagogical principle of child-centeredness, and arrived at early twentieth century educational practices of indirect and “personalized” education beginning in the domestic environment, acknowledging an inner dimension to the human child since birth. Thus, William Wordsworth’s statement that “the Child is father of the Man” highlights the fundamental value of the “inner work” through which each child develops his or her personality as a protagonist of his or her education, not as a passive recipient of a process of external disciplining.

Mapping out the development of this notion through the analysis of significant European authors from the fourteenth century to the contemporary age has allowed us to respond to the historiographical need to study children as the agents of their own history, duly considering the differences in gender, religion, social class, economic class, national culture or ethnic group (GECHELE; POLENGHI; DAL TOSO, 2017, 31). Furthermore, this study hopes to offer a contribution to parents and educators involved in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and facing new educational and pedagogical challenges (POLENGHI; BANDINI, 2016).

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