

# THE MONTESSORI EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING APPROACH IN RELATION TO AGE-RELATED FRAILTY AND ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE: REFLECTIONS BETWEEN PUPILS AT A MONTESSORI PRIMARY SCHOOL AND RESIDENTS AT A RETIREMENT HOME

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## Abstract

This paper explores theoretical studies and the state of the art of the Montessori approach applied to dementia and Alzheimer's disease, with a particular focus on intergenerational projects between nursing homes and schools to promote autonomy, dignity and biopsychosocial well-being. This is in connection with the meaning making of the surrounding environment: the societal framework as well as the organisational context in relation to the individual's capacity. The paper is case-based, showing the interplay between the individual, organisational and societal level of understanding as important to learning. The paper is inspired by challenge-based learning (CBL), which underlines intentions to present students with aspects of problems connected to ageing societies. The case has enriched the Montessori approach to education. The paper concludes that the Montessori approach applied to age-related frailty, in an intergenerational framework, is not only a technical response to Alzheimer's disease, but also a proposal for cultural reform. It teaches us that care is not a unilateral act of support, but a reciprocal interaction in which the giver and receiver are interchangeable.

KEY WORDS: Montessori, intergenerational, primary school, nursing home, education, environment.

## Anotacija

Šiame straipsnyje apžvelgiami naujausi teoriniai ir praktiniai pasiekimai, taikant Montessori metodą demencijos ir Alzheimerio ligos atvejais, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant tarpgeneracinius ryšius mezgantiems globos įstaigų ir mokyklų projektams, kurie skatina savarankiškumą, orumą ir biopsichosocialinę gerovę. Visa tai siejama su asmens aplinkos įprasminimu visuomeniniame ir organizaciniame lygmenimis, atsižvelgiant į individo gebėjimus. Straipsnis grindžiamas atvejo analize, atskleidžian-

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čia individo, organizacijos ir visuomenės lygmenų sąveiką, kaip svarbų mokymosi veiksnį. Darbą įkvėpė iššūkiams grįsto mokymosi metodas, pabrėžiantis siekį supažindinti studentus su amžėjančios visuomenės problemomis. Atvejo analizė praturtino Montessori ugdymo metodo taikymo galimybes. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad Montessori metodo taikymas amžėjimo iššūkius patiriantiems asmenims tarpgeneracijos kontekste yra ne tik praktinis atsakas į Alzheimerio ligą, bet ir kvietimas kultūriniais pokyčiams. Taigi rūpinimasis nėra tik vienpusis paramos veiksmas, bet ir abipusė sąveika, kai paramą teikiantys ir ją gaunantys asmenys gali keistis vaidmenimis.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Montessori, tarpgeneracinis, pradinė mokykla, globos įstaiga, ugdymas, aplinka.

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## Introduction

The current demographic scenario, characterised by the progressive and inexorable ageing of the population (Reynaud & Migione, 2025), requires us to think deeply (Fili, 2022) about how we care for and assist people in the third and fourth ages (Boffo et al, 2025), with a special focus on dementia and Alzheimer's disease (Kim, 2022). Against this backdrop, the integration of educational paradigms historically proven in childhood (Moscato, 2012), such as the Montessori method (Pizzi & Bruno, 2025), into geriatric care pathways represents not only a methodological innovation, but a genuine shift in anthropological perspective (Rossi, 2012). The Montessori approach, originally designed to foster the development of independence in children (Montessori, 2023), has an extraordinary clinical and human value when applied to frailty in the elderly (Camp, 2011), where the primary objective is maintaining residual abilities, preserving dignity, and combating social isolation through intergenerational dialogue (Antognini, 2017), as well as improving relationships with caregivers, especially among family members (Notarnicola et al., 2024), from a holistic perspective and in line with the biopsychosocial model (Pasqualotto et al, 2023). It was shown in a study (Dedzoe et al., 2023) that emotions such as feeling useful and positive played a major role for both people with dementia and their informal caregivers. A review (Parkinson et. al, 2016) aiming to investigate what works to support informal caregivers of people with dementia found, among other things, that 'finding self-development, growth, and meaningfulness in life through the care experience' were factors related to resilience. The results of the study showed that when informal caregivers' competence increased, the caregiver burden, depression, behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD), and the caregiver reaction to BPSD decreased (Beauchamp, Childress, 2013). This is in line with the results of Hepburn et al. (2003), who developed and tested a transportable training programme for informal caregivers of people with dementia. Their results showed that informal caregivers reported increased confidence, knowledge and skills. This makes it important that profes-

nals and stakeholders are aware of factors contributing to strengthening resilience capacity among caregivers caring for people with dementia, hence the organisational conditions in which the individual acts should be considered in order to encounter changes and transformation processes. How reality is looked at, and how, in a collective way, reality is defined on different levels (family, organisation and society) will affect our capability for acting. Resilience capacity on a mental, intra level, and an entrepreneurial way of building, developing and keeping networks, gives, holistically seen, the macro, meso and micro level a broader understanding of what stimulates learning processes (Christensen, 2016). When it comes to the integration of older and elderly people into the society, there are a number of stereotypes and social stigmatising. Part of this is conditioned by the younger generation's knowledge about the ageing and elderly population. The view that the elderly represent a product of social construction that contributes to the legitimacy of the social distance between the elderly and the younger generation is one explanatory factor for this. However, the proportion of the elderly population has been growing rapidly and inevitably, leading to demographic ageing. The cultural and social importance of ageing is changing slowly, also because of myths about ageing. An intergenerational approach to education on ageing, and guidelines for improving the quality of life, can most likely overcome prejudices and reduce the fear of ageing at every stage of the ageing process (Goriup & Lahe, 2018).

## **1. The theoretical framework: the Montessori pedagogical approach and multi-dimensional care**

Understanding the Montessori educational approach in relation to ageing requires a close examination of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the biopsychosocial model and their intersection with the philosophy embraced by Maria Montessori. The transition from a purely biomedical model, focused on organ pathology and the pharmacological management of the symptoms, to a biopsychosocial model implies the recognition of health as a dynamic balance between biological, psychological and environmental factors (Palmieri, 2023). From this perspective, frailty is not a static or inevitable condition of ageing, but rather a dynamic state that affects individuals when they experience loss in one or more functional domain, be they physical, mental or social. This condition is influenced by a number of variables that increase the risk of adverse outcomes, but which at the same time offer opportunities for intervention if identified early. The adoption of this paradigm in dementia care shifts the focus from mere clinical diagnosis to the identification of a person's overall functional profile,<sup>1</sup> considering their social network

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.grusol.it/informazioni/28-11-23.PDF>

and living environments as determining factors. This approach recognises that the well-being of people with dementia depends on the balance between these domains. Rehabilitation should not therefore be limited to compensating for memory deficits, but must aim to restore environmental and relational dimensions (Lu et al., 2023), stimulating the skills that remain despite neurodegeneration (Pignataro, 2020).

The application of the Montessori method to elderly people with dementia, pioneered by Cameron Camp through the Montessori Programme for Dementia (MPD), is based on the assumption that the educational principles used to help children become independent can be transposed to help elderly people continue doing things for themselves. The core of the Montessori approach is the creation of a prepared environment (Booth et al., 2020) that compensates cognitive deficits through structured sensory and motor stimuli that engage procedural memory, i.e. the form of memory linked to motor and habitual skills, which often remains intact for longer than declarative memory.

The core principles of MPD include breaking down activities into simple, sequential steps, using external environmental cues to support orientation and memory, and maintaining a steady focus on the dignity of the individual, avoiding tasks that may appear childish or humiliating. Getting to know the individual, their strengths, preferences, background and fears, becomes a necessary condition in the process of adapting materials and tasks to specific physical and cognitive problems (Pierini, 2022). The effectiveness of an intergenerational Montessori-based project, therefore, is grounded in modern discoveries in neuroscience concerning brain plasticity (Palmieri & Balzotti, 2024). While affected by neurodegenerative processes, the ageing brain retains the ability to adapt and create new synaptic connections if adequately stimulated. Regular physical activity, such as brisk walking, has been shown to reduce brain atrophy and improve other cognitive functions (Premi, 2019), and likewise the concept of cognitive reserve suggests that experience, lifelong learning and socialisation act as protective factors against mental decline (Rega, 2024). Further, the environment, the societal framework (local, national and international) and/or the organisational context (personal network or workplace) in relation to the individual's capacity, is of great importance for development. Knowledge sharing at an individual and professional meso-social level, and knowledge transfer at the exo-social level, are key factors in a regional development context in the area of care for the elderly. Generally, experiences in the exo-system can contribute significantly to personal development and a sense of meaning (Christensen, 2016).

Although the Montessori approach is a non-pharmacological therapy, its preparation of a suitable holistic environment, rich in sensory stimuli and opportu-

nities for social interaction, makes it part of an integrated care plan that does not exclude, but rather enhances, medical support (Raghuraman & Tischler, 2021). The literature itself highlights how managing the behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD), such as apathy, aggression and agitation, requires a multidimensional approach (Sancarlo et al., 2009; Blasutto, 2024), and how a Montessori-based intervention acts as a catalyst for well-being, reducing the need for high doses of antipsychotics when agitation is the result of a lack of stimulation or frustration due to loss of independence (Luppi et al., 2023).

## 2. State of the art: intergenerational experiences

The scientific literature and experiences across Italy, with a special focus on Lombardy (Suardi, 2007), reveal a growing interest in projects that connect primary school students with nursing home residents.<sup>2</sup> These programmes are more than simple recreational activities, representing structured psycho-educational<sup>3</sup> and motor interventions that aim to break the institutional isolation of the elderly and provide children with new tools for emotional growth (Musi, 2012). In Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, several organisations stand out by their introduction of integrated intergenerational models. Important benchmarks in Emilia-Romagna are the Villa Serena nursing home in Rastignano<sup>4</sup> (a province of Bologna) and Villa Ranuzzi, two health and social care providers in the Colibrì Consortium which are trialling the application of the Montessori method to the world of the elderly and dementia, reporting significant benefits on a biopsychosocial level, and engaging with the community through workshops and meetings that promote dialogue between different generations (Taddia, 2012).

In Lombardy, several organisations stand out by their introduction of integrated intergenerational models.<sup>5</sup> The ‘RSA, dove le generazioni si incontrano’ project (Lazzarotto & Mazzoleni, 2025) operates in the province of Lecco, and involves 24 providers with the aim of transforming nursing homes into points of reference for the community and hubs for social life. Although many activities are aimed at teenagers, the experience with primary school students offers unique dynamics of reciprocity, linked to the spontaneity of children aged six to 11. The ABI Intergenerational Centre in Piacenza<sup>6</sup> represents a fundamental case study in terms of monitoring methodology. The research performed here highlighted the transition from

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dementiafriendly.it/story/i-laboratori-intergenerazionali/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cooperativasocioassistenziale.it/metodo-montessori-per-lalzzheimer-attivita-quotidiane-per-preservare-autonomia-e-dignita/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://villaserena-bo.it/raccontiamoci-a-villa-serena-letture-a-distanza-tra-bambini-e-anziani/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uneba.org/anziani-e-bambini-assieme-le-buone-pratiche-di-fondazione-martinelli/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cooperativaunicoop.it/index.php?abi/progetto>

purely narrative documentation (log books) to more critical and structured tools, making possible an accurate assessment of the project's impact on self-esteem, learning and relationships (Vagli & Ciucci, 2019).

The inclusion of an intergenerational project in the primary school curriculum is not only in response to a social need, but also pursues specific educational objectives related to active citizenship skills, such as debunking stereotypes, overcoming prejudices that associate old age with passivity and illness, and learning to see the elderly as a resource for preserving precious memories by participating in activities that foster a sense of belonging to the community and to the collective good, with a view to a more cohesive society, and the development of empathy, refining the ability to listen non-verbally and understand the needs of others, promoting tolerance and the acceptance of diversity (Salerni, 2019; Berlato, 2020; Pignalberi, 2021; Morita & Kobayashi, 2013).

For nursing home residents, the presence of children acts as a powerful motivational stimulus. Intergenerational relationships stimulate physical and psychological well-being through various channels, reducing behavioural symptoms such as apathy and psychomotor agitation, and providing positive and meaningful distractions (Skropeta et al., 2014). The elderly, often relegated to the role of passive recipients of care, rediscover an active role in passing on knowledge or collaborating with children, improving their self-esteem and personal identity. Moreover, when organised in pairs with a child, Montessori-based activities make ADLs (Activities of Daily Living) more enjoyable and less mechanical, encouraging the elderly person to move and communicate (Mioshi et al., 2007; Kim & Lee, 2025; Zhi et al., 2025; Wu & Fuh, 2025). Montessori-based activities offer a promising way to initiate intergenerational programming for older adults with dementia and pre-school children. Such intergenerational programming allows older adults with dementia to fulfil the role of teacher or mentor to younger children, or as collaborative workmates for people with more advanced dementia, while providing children with positive one-on-one interactions with older adults.

### **3. A case study with a Montessori-based class**

A Montessori-based intergenerational educational project requires planning in order to encourage students to reflect on the theme of ageing and frailty, respecting the elderly person's rhythms, and collaborating without taking over. In line with the principles of the Montessori approach, the meeting space must be organised with great care, to be welcoming and obstacle-free, using materials that reflect reality and everyday use, without infantilising the elderly. A central aspect of learning is that it provides real value, not just for the person himself or herself, but also

for colleagues and other actors outside school. In addition, it can highlight the importance within a project of having strong ownership of the project in itself and its results; it is important that the challenge is 'just hard enough' to not give up and lose motivation. So the higher the perceived self-control and meaningfulness experienced, the stronger the feelings of pride and joy experienced (Lackéus, 2016).

The importance of the meeting place in relation to entrepreneurial learning is that they believe that people can move from one reality to another; but there is always a 'dominant' reality, an everyday reality, which can be seen as positive. The assumption of a socially constructed reality implies a belief that there is an objective reality, independent of human conditions. Each individual constructs reality in different ways, which means that different people perceive it differently. This approach goes back to the Vygotski (1962; 1978; 1987) and the theory of cognitive development, meaning that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and collaborated with other individuals or groups, as constructivist pedagogy means that knowledge is constructed in context during the time of learning. Already-known knowledge is tied together with new knowledge and constructed in such a way that it develops your own, individual knowledge. Personal experiences are, therefore, important in the learning context. The individual selects and interprets information based on their prior knowledge, and new knowledge is integrated with prior knowledge. Knowledge can, therefore, be created as a result of the activity, to consider the interplay between an individual, organisational and societal level of understanding as important to learning, e.g. to integrate practice and theory through collaborative, interdisciplinary methods and theories of learning, into learning environments and to create real projects to enable an expanding learning in both national and international arenas. Cross-disciplinary meetings where a critical, creative and holistic approach to learning and knowledge creation is raised in which a caring, learning and societal perspective is included using a collaborative approach strengthen learning processes together with long-term transnational and cross-border shared knowledge of societal needs in the social and care professions (Bjeregaard et al., 2018)

In the case study reported here, the first author of this article was a Montessori teacher of first year primary school students during the 2018/19 school year. The approach to studying botany is not only theoretical, but also involves first-hand experience of nature, learning about life cycles through regular gardening: sowing, watering and monitoring the growth of vegetables are practical activities that also develop patience and a sense of responsibility. Some of the produce from the garden was donated to the elderly residents of the Villa Serena nursing home in Rastignano (a province of Bologna). It was collected from the school by a representative of the residents, accompanied by a care worker. After the children had

delivered the produce, the representative from the nursing home was welcomed into the classroom, where she spoke to the pupils about her memories as a student, and how schools have changed, commenting, as a parent and grandmother, on the transformation not only of the furniture and furnishings, but also of the relationships between teachers and pupils. The donation of the produce highlighted the fundamental social value of the project, transforming school work into a gesture of active citizenship, creating a tangible bridge between the classroom and the nursing home, and representing a path of care that goes beyond the confines of the school to nourish the community.

The interaction between the children and the representative of Villa Serena residents also introduces an element of autobiographical narration, activating a process of historical memory transmission that enriches Montessori's cosmic approach to education, and responds to the deep needs of both generations: for the elderly, it triggers the desire to take care of younger generations, transmitting their knowledge as a way of counteracting the sense of stagnation and isolation by being recognised in their role as witnesses, resulting in an improvement in self-esteem and mood; for children, direct testimony brings history to life and makes it understandable, as well as promoting cognitive decentralisation and respect for the past.

#### **4. Future prospects: sustainability and community welfare**

The structural integration of intergenerational projects based on the Montessori method is not only a desirable educational option, but a strategic necessity to ensure the sustainability of modern welfare systems (Luppi, 2021). The future of these interventions depends on the ability to go beyond fragmented local initiatives in order to develop systemic generative welfare models (Gallina, 2025). Learning cities initiatives (Proli et al., 2025) suggest the creation of urban spaces where intergenerational learning and well-being intersect on a daily basis. In this scenario, the nursing home stops being a place of marginalisation and becomes an open civic centre, where the school library, the public park and the Alzheimer's unit coexist and interact.

Solidarity and intergenerational dialogue can be seen as tools for improving the life and job prospects of an entire local community. The sustainability of such projects is closely linked to environmental, social and governance objectives (Maz-zocchi, 2016), because promoting an inclusive, wellness-oriented environment strengthens the social capital and reputation of the institutions involved. Skills such as critical thinking or systemic thinking provide crucial pathways and prerequisites for the discovery and acquisition of knowledge and awareness. Sustainability encompasses three pillars, namely the social, the economic and the envi-

ronmental dimension, which means that we need a comprehensive understanding of sustainable experiences. This is where the emphasis on mindfulness can support us (Thönnessen, Christensen, 2024). Universal societal challenges in relation to its contextual environment require a focus on internationally shared knowledge. Therefore, the development of conditions and structures (e.g. curriculum development; in-service training) for reflective learning processes and activities that support the understanding of this global dimension is crucial. This understanding can be exemplified by the intersection of global and local dimensions in learning processes; hence, there is a need for the intersection of international and local dimensions in understanding such processes (e.g. border-crossing meeting places, involvement of practitioners). In this sense, improving students' ability to increase their self-confidence should be seen as an important factor in students' learning processes. Reflective and reflexive learning processes in social care education enable participants to understand themselves from a broader perspective and strengthen their own professional identity. Creating a community-based environment can therefore be understood as an essential component of reflective knowledge. To create this environment, a contextual understanding of what influences personal and professional development is required. In summary, universal challenges in higher education require a focus on internationally shared knowledge, including the development of reflective learning processes and activities. This can be crucial for the implementation of sustainable higher education (ibid). To ensure that these programmes are replicable and of high quality, it is essential to invest in the joint training of school and healthcare staff, e.g. professional geriatric educators and primary school teachers must share a common language, based on the principles of social pedagogy and the biopsychosocial model. An inspiration here can be the use of challenge-based learning (CBL) which underlines our intention to present the students with aspects of problems connected to ageing societies. For instance, lectures present different and contractionary theories of ageing. CBL argues for aligning theories, methods and practices to provide learning experiences and generate preparedness to meet unknown future challenges (Bornemark 2018; Christersson et al., 2022). CBL considers students as 'already knowers', in the sense that their lives and thesis work are involved in dimensions of societal challenges, and they therefore have an immediate impression of these. The design, therefore, aimed at introducing the students to unfamiliar situations and to supplement and question the students' already-acquired knowledge to make them produce new knowledge and skills, thereby providing conditions for students to be what we could call change agents. Future research prospects should focus on scientific validation, using standardised tests to measure the long-term impact of intergenerational projects on the cognitive reserve of the elderly and on reducing burnout among care workers. A

second perspective is digitisation with a view to the development of platforms that enable the sharing of log books and documentary materials between schools, nursing homes and families, ensuring educational and emotional continuity. A third perspective focuses on intergenerational equity in order to tackle the structural socio-economic inequalities that affect vulnerable groups, ensuring that exchange projects are accessible to everyone, regardless of their conditions.

### **Conclusion: a new social contract**

The Montessori approach applied to age-related frailty, in an intergenerational framework, is not only a technical response to Alzheimer's disease, but also a proposal for cultural reform. It teaches us that care is not a unilateral act of support, but a reciprocal interaction in which the giver and receiver are interchangeable. As children grow up, they look to elderly people for historical roots and the meaning of limits; elderly people find the vitality of the present in children and a way to break out of their isolation. The surrounding environment and interplay matter for inclusiveness. Only through this circularity of giving, mediated by the wisdom of a prepared environment and by respect for individual dignity, can we build a truly people-centred welfare system that sees frailty not as a system error, but as an integral and valuable part of the cycle of life. Education for sustainability makes a cornerstone in this, where a challenge-based approach in learning processes may strengthen the importance of reflective and reflexive capacities. The challenge for tomorrow's institutions and professionals will be to turn this interaction into solid and scientifically validated daily practice, to ensure that every citizen, whatever their age, has the right to feel they are an active and loved part of their community. In this way, we can promote an inclusive society.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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