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Propagation of the Decroly Method in the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" Journal (1925–1939): a Theoretical and Practical Context

Upowszechnianie metody Owidiusza Decroly'ego na łamach czasopisma „Wychowanie Przedszkolne" (1925-1939) – kontekst teoretyczny i praktyczny

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Received: 7 Apr 2025
Revised: 27 Aug 2025
Accepted: 30 Oct 2025
Online First: 10 Nov 2025

Abstract: The author scrutinises the dissemination of Jean-Ovide Decroly's didactic concepts in the pages of the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" journal from 1925 to 1939. The paper aims to present the theoretical foundations of the method, such as the child's activity, integration of educational content, and reference to the child's natural interests, as well as their practical applications in Polish preschool education. For this end, the journal issues from 1925–1939 have been subject to qualitative content analysis using elements of the historical approach. First, the journal's profile and functions were discussed, followed by a biographical outline of O. Decroly, a medical doctor who became a practical educator and developed his own innovative method. Next, the content of publications devoted to his concept and how he was presented as a scholar, teacher, and reformer were analysed. Particular attention was paid to his concept of a didactic triad, i.e. observation, association and expression as well as "centres of interest". Both ideas were tools for organising the child's experiences. The analysis suggests that "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" served as a forum for the transfer and adaptation of Decroly's ideas to Polish reality and preschool practice, combining theoretical lectures with practical examples that, in turn, contributed to the professionalisation of preschool staff in interwar Poland.

Keywords: Decroly method, preschool education, interwar Poland (1925–1939), "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" journal, early childhood pedagogy, professionalization of kindergarten teachers, history of education

Abstrakt: Artykuł analizuje propagowanie pedagogiki Owidiusza Jana Decroly'ego na łamach czasopisma „Wychowanie Przedszkolne" w latach 1925-1939. Celem jest ukazanie teoretycznych podstaw metody – aktywności dziecka, integracji treści kształcenia i odwołania do naturalnych zainteresowań dziecka – oraz ich praktycznych zastosowań w polskiej edukacji przedszkolnej. Materiał badawczy stanowią roczniki pisma z lat 1925-1939, poddane jakościowej analizie treści z elementami podejścia historycznego. W pierwszej kolejności scharakteryzowano profil i funkcje periodyku, następnie przedstawiono zarys biograficzny O. Decroly'ego – od lekarza do pedagoga-praktyka i twórcy nowatorskiej metody. Dalej omówiono treści publikacji poświęconych jego koncepcji oraz sposoby prezentowania go jako uczonego, nauczyciela i reformatora. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono triadzie dydaktycznej obserwacja – asocjacja – ekspresja oraz „ośrodkom zainteresowań" jako narzędziom organizacji doświadczeń dziecka. Analiza wskazuje, że „Wychowanie Przedszkolne" pełniło funkcję forum transferu i adaptacji idei Decroly'ego do polskich realiów i praktyki przedszkolnej, łącząc wykład teoretyczny z przykładami praktyki, co sprzyjało profesjonalizacji kadry przedszkolnej w Polsce międzywojennej.

Słowa kluczowe: metoda Decroly'ego, wychowanie przedszkolne, Polska międzywojenna (1925-1939), „Wychowanie Przedszkolne" (czasopismo), edukacja wczesnoszkolna, profesjonalizacja nauczycieli przedszkola, historia edukacji

Introduction

This paper deals with the promotion of Jean-Ovide Decroly's pedagogical approach presented in the journal "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" in the years 1925–1939. Being one of key approaches to pedagogy, the Decroly method is characterized by the focus on the child's activity, integration of the teaching content and considering the child's natural interests. The aim of this article is to analyse how its theoretical assumptions and practical applications in preschool education were presented in the aforementioned periodical.

The article is structured into four main parts. In the first, the author characterizes the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" journal, examining its thematic profile as well as educational and popularizing functions it served. The second part presents a synthetic biography of Jean-Ovide Decroly, showcasing his professional path which he started as a medical graduate to become an outstanding practitioner of pedagogy, academic lecturer and creator of an innovative didactic method. In the remaining two parts, the content of publications devoted to his pedagogical concept is analysed, as well as the manner in which Decroly was presented as a scholar, teacher and educational reformer. Special attention is paid to the three fundamental aspects of his didactic concept, i.e. observation, association and expression; all three play a fundamental role in the process of the child's discovery of the world. Methodologically, the article relies on a critical analysis of sources: a qualitative content analysis of all issues of „Wychowanie Przedszkolne" published between 1925 and 1939.

1. Pedagogical Journals of the Second Polish Republic and the Birth of "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" (1925–1939): Profile, Functions, and Structure

Over the course of the interwar period, psychology and pedagogy underwent significant development, which was reflected in intense research into early childhood. The increased interest in the education of young children and in the preschool pedagogy resulted in the implementation of new educational concepts. Specialist pedagogical journals played a key role in the promotion of modern teaching theories and methods as they constituted a knowledge- and experience-sharing platform.

In Poland alone, between 1918 and 1939, more than 300 periodicals dedicated to pedagogy were issued (Sosnowska 2016, 31; Wira-Świątkowska 2007, 91). Although most of them were published irregularly or periodically, their main goal was to improve the professional competence of teaching staff and to popularize the achievements of Polish and international thinkers in the field of pedagogy. Furthermore, editors sought to raise the educational awareness of the general public, hence the journals constituted a forum for substantive debates on how to restore and model the education system in Poland.

In the above-mentioned period, seven journals targeting preschool teachers were published in Poland (Sosnowska 2016, 33). The most important ones were "Przedszkole," issued by the Section of Preschool Teachers of the Polish Teachers' Union, and "Wychowanie Przedszkolne." The latter was published by the Society for Preschool Education, the first Polish organisation to promote preschool education (Sosnowska 2016, 33–34).

"Wychowanie Przedszkolne" appeared regularly between 1925 and 1939, initially as a monthly (1925–1931) to later become a bimonthly. Its creation and development were closely related to the activities of Maria Weryho-Radziwiłłowiczowa, an outstanding pedagogue and social activist who had been involved in the development of preschool education in Poland for many years (Wira-Świątkowska 2004, 151–156; Leżańska 2008, 59–63).

In her role as editor-in-chief, Maria Weryho-Radziwiłłowiczowa gave the periodical a specific thematic profile, focusing on the propagation of modern concepts of preschool education and the integration of foreign pedagogical models in Poland. Interestingly, the editorial office of the magazine was located in her private apartment in Warsaw, at 16/6 3 Maja Avenue, which also served the pedagogical community as a venue for the exchange of ideas and experiences.

In the introduction to the first issue of the magazine "Wychowanie Przedszkolne," the editorial board precisely defined its thematic scope, namely:

- scholarly and methodological papers devoted to pedagogy,
- tips on how to use stories, narratives, games, sensory exercises and manual activities in a manner that is both engaging and effective in the educational process of children,

- analyses of the then condition of preschool education in Poland and other countries,
- establishment of a communication platform between teaching staff and the editorial team through the publication of questions and answers,
- reports and reviews of pedagogical literature and children's books (Weryho-Radziwiłłowiczowa 1925, 2).

Outstanding academics, including pedagogues, psychologists, medical doctors and social activists, collaborated with the editorial staff of "Wychowanie Przedszkolne." Their contributions ensured that the content of the journal was of high quality. Valuable additions to the national contents were translations of foreign articles, introducing readers to international models of preschool education and innovative methods of working with children.

The journal was divided into two main parts: the theoretical one, containing texts on pedagogy, psychology and medicine, and the methodical i.e. practical one, which presented specific solutions to be applied in early childhood education. The internal layout of the periodical and the names of individual sections were frequently modified, reflecting how dynamically the pedagogical thought at the time evolved.

2. Ovide Decroly's Path from Medicine to Pedagogy

Jean-Ovide Decroly was born into an industrial family on July 23, 1871, in the Belgian town of Renaix, in the eastern part of Flanders. He completed his medical studies at the University of Ghent in 1896, following which he took up a position as an assistant at the university to focus on pathological anatomy. As a laureate of a university competition and a scholarship holder of the *Fondation des bourses de voyage*, he spent the academic year 1896/1897 at the University of Berlin under the supervision of Prof. Langerhaus and at the Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital in Paris, where he collaborated with Prof. Raymond and Prof. Joffroy.

While in Berlin and Paris, Decroly came into contact with leading specialists in the field of mental disorders. This directed his interests towards neuropsychiatry and later towards psychology. In 1898, he returned to Ghent, where he continued his research into mental disorders and brain pathology. At the same time, he took up a position at the Polyclinic in

Brussels, initially as an assistant in the neurology ward and at a later point in the ward for children with mental retardation and speech impairments. It was there that he first encountered the problem of social and educational alienation of children with disabilities.

In 1901, in his own house, he founded the *Institut d'Enseignement special*: a small clinic where he observed and treated children with intellectual handicaps. In 1910, the *Institut* was moved to *le Vossegat*, a district on the outskirts of Brussels. There, it quickly developed into a laboratory school where children were provided with normal living conditions, appropriate care and education tailored to their individual abilities. The experience gained while working with the handicapped children allowed Decroly to formulate the initial assumptions of his own didactic and educational system as well as postulates concerning how the elementary education should be reformed.

In 1907, with the help of his assistants Julie Degand and Eugène Monchamp, he founded an experimental school for neurotypical children in the Ixelles district of Brussels: *École de l'Ermitage*, located at 60 rue de l'Ermitage. It was an institution he called "a school for life through life" (*l'école pour la vie par la vie*), whose primary goal was to prepare children to function in the natural and social environment and to provide them with the conditions necessary to meet their basic needs. His wife, Agnès Guisset, played a major role in Decroly's endeavors. She supported him in his research, attended conferences, prepared summaries of books and articles, and did translations. In fact, it is thanks to her financial support, particularly the inheritance she received from her father, a textile entrepreneur, that Decroly was able to pursue his educational projects.

Acknowledging his experience in the field of working with children with disabilities, the education authorities of Brabant asked him in 1912 to give lectures as part of a special education course for teachers. The following year, Decroly began working with the Higher Institute of Pedagogy (*Institut Buls-Tempels*), an establishment providing basic and continuing education for teachers.

At the end of 1918, *Université Nouvelle*, a university with which Jean-Ovide Decroly had been affiliated for ten years, was closed for financial reasons. Nevertheless, the autonomous Faculty of Social Sciences was preserved and continued its activities under the new

name *Institut des Hautes Études*. There, Decroly taught courses on mental synthesis in children, occupational orientation and differential psychology.

Starting from 1919, he taught child and adolescent psychology at the University of Brussels (*Université Libre de Bruxelles*). Then, from 1921, he offered classes on educational hygiene and pedagogical therapy for Ph.D. candidates at the medical faculty (Madeja 1958, 275; Wróbel 1962, 45; Dubreucq 1993, 249; Karcz 2003, 626–627; Depae pe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 284; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003b, 228–229, 233–234; Van Gorp 2005, 137; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2018, 225–226, 229).

Decroly's busy schedule and exceptional activity can be evidenced by the list of positions he held in 1927 alone, in addition to his teaching job at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Apart from giving lectures at schools and institutes in Brussels (Hautes Etudes, Buls-Tempels), he held "provincial courses for special and technical education teachers," was active as a medical inspector for child protection at the Ministry of Justice, and as a chief medical inspector for special services for educational classes in Brussels. Furthermore, he managed the psychology department and the occupational orientation office, the child psychology laboratory at the *Institut des Hautes Etudes* and the Municipal School No. 16 in Brussels. On top of that, Jean-Ovide Decroly headed the *Institut d'Enseignement Spécial* and the *École de l'Ermitage*, and he also managed a polyclinic dedicated to the diagnosis and treatment of children with developmental difficulties. Moreover, he was committed to activities carried out for care institutions, i.e. he was the head of the *Foyer des Orphelins* children's home, where he contributed to the development of innovative support and education methods offered to its pupils (Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 284–285). In the same year, he also oversaw the relocation of his experimental school from *Ermitage Street* in Brussels to a property on *Avenue Montana* in the suburban district of Uccle.

Surrounded by vast forests, the new site provided favourable conditions for scientific research and innovative teaching methods (Madeja 1958, 276; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003b, 234). In 1930, after consulting with parents, the school was expanded to include the three highest grades of secondary school so that its graduates could then pursue university studies (Dubreucq 1993, 251; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2018, 225–226).

It is worthwhile noting that Decroly perceived urban-industrial society as being marked by numerous social pathologies and maladies such as alcoholism, syphilis and tuberculosis. He believed that all manifestations of deviation in fact resulted from deeper social dysfunctions, and that the latter required systemic prevention through targeted education. The aim of this process was to neutralize destructive environmental impact and to create conditions conducive to a more comprehensive social integration of individuals.

Consequently, the researcher's academic and didactic activity was closely related to his social activism. In 1914, he set up a foundation to support orphans of war and organised an orphanage. He also initiated the establishment of a vocational counselling office, the *Brabant Farm School* and a scholarship fund for working-class students. Furthermore, Decroly actively supported the development of a medical inspection system for juvenile offenders, focusing on the adoption of comprehensive methods in the area of diagnosis and rehabilitation. His approach was based on interdisciplinary research in the fields of psychology, pedagogy and medicine; hence, educational strategies could be adapted to the individual needs of persons at risk of social exclusion (Madeja 1958, 276; Dubreucq 1993, 252; Karcz 2003, 628; Van Gorp 2019, 221–222).

According to the Decroly method, also described as "pedagogy of efficiency," it is paramount to ensure social integration of as many children as possible. This could be achieved through the use of psychological tests so as to establish norms for individual categories of pupils (Van Gorp 2019, 222). Decroly played a key role in the development of the test movement as he undertook a critical analysis of both European and American diagnostic tools. Together with Julie Degand, he made a significant contribution to the improvement of the intelligence measurement scale elaborated by Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon.

In 1922, he undertook a research trip to the United States with Raymond Buyse; the trip lasted several months and was aimed at analysing the state of contemporary applied psychology, with a particular focus on how to apply tests in education and in social policy (Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 287; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003b, 244; Van Gorp, Depaepe and Simon 2004, 602; Van Gorp 2005, 143; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2018, 234).

Over the period from 1901 to 1932, he attended around 50 international scientific conferences (Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 286; Van Gorp, Depaepe and Simon 2004, 594). After more than 10 years of gaining experience at the *Ecole de l'Ermitage*, Decroly proposed his own program of "natural education," which he presented at the inaugural congress of the New Education League in Calais in 1921. During the subsequent congresses of this organisation held in Montreux (1923), Heidelberg (1925), Locarno (1927), and Elsenör (1929), he drew on his own research and experiences and those of his colleagues, as well as the theoretical and practical achievements of other experimental centers, to put forward some new proposals aimed at improving school work (Wróbel 1962, 47; Van Gorp 2006, 40).

Throughout his academic career, Decroly was a lecturer at two Brussels universities: the *Université Nouvelle* (UN) and the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB), as well as at other institutions and scientific societies such as the *Institut des Hautes Études*, the *Institut Buls-Tempels* and the *Société Belge de Pédotechnie*. His teaching activities ranged from popular education, through pedotechnique and child psychology, to educational hygiene. Numerous students and colleagues who shared his reformist approach to pedagogy were trained under his academic direction.

As of 1922, the Decroly method was officially implemented in all municipal schools in Belgium and became one of the pillars of the new curriculum in 1936 (Mallinson 1955, 69; Karcz 2003, 627–628; Van Gorp 2007, 7–8). His scientific output, comprising over 400 publications in the fields of pedology, pedotechnique, neurology, child psychiatry, *médecine mentale*, criminal anthropology, psychology and special education, was cut short by his sudden death on September 12, 1932. This happened only one month after the congress of the New Education League in Nice, where Decroly gave one of his central lectures entitled "On social change, the unified school and the preparation of the elite" (Madeja 1958, 276; Wróbel 1962, 47–48; Debreucq 1993, 252; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 279–280, 283–284; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2018, 229; Van Gorp, Depaepe and Simon 2004, 613).

3. The Decroly Method Presented in the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" Journal

From its very establishment, “Wychowanie Przedszkolne” played an essential role in the propagation of the New Education movement, which was one of the key pedagogical phenomena at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The genesis of the movement in Poland was inextricably linked to the socio-economic, political and cultural transformations that unfolded in the territories of the three partitions before the outbreak of World War I. New philosophical and ideological trends also played an important role in its development, as did the demand for reform of the traditional education system (Drynda 2000, 27–39). Referring to the period of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939), which is the subject of this analysis, Sobczak (1998) points out that thanks to the efforts of Maria Grzegorzewska, the director of the Institute of Special Education, Decroly’s concept of centers of interest, could be implemented in Polish special education institutions. Only in the following years were its principles adapted also in primary schools, including early grades.

Looking at how the Decroly method was introduced into Polish education, the teaching activities carried out at the Jan Kanty Public School in Krakow were of huge significance. There, Maria Garbacz, a teacher working with children in grades 1–3, was in charge of its implementation (Dzierzbicka 1963, 287–289). The fact that the method in question was initially used in special education was also emphasized in articles published in the “Wychowanie Przedszkolne” journal (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 104; Weinlesowa 1933, 76).

The magazine published texts by leading Polish researchers who introduced readers to the latest pedagogical developments in an accessible, yet substantively reliable manner. With regard to the achievements of Decroly, the publications of Polish writers, who often referred to themselves as his students and followers, were of critical importance. It is worth emphasizing that three books on Decroly’s pedagogical concept were translated into Polish in the interwar period, which clearly indicates that his method was of great interest to the national pedagogical community. A particularly important work was the monograph on the Decroly method by Amelia Hamaïde, a long-time collaborator and one of the most active advocates of the Belgian pedagogue. In fact, the book was published in Poland twice (Hamaïde 1926, 1932), and its significance is confirmed by numerous overviews, including a review published in

"Wychowanie Przedszkolne" (M.F. 1926, 32–33; Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003b, 229–230; Van Gorp 2006, 43–44; Jacques 2006, 303–304).

Furthermore, two other publications that Decroly authored in collaboration with Gerard Boon and Eugène Monchamp were translated into Polish (Decroly and Boon 1930; Decroly and Monchamp 1931). Their availability in the Polish pedagogical milieu was an important factor influencing the reception of the centres of interest concept and its gradual implementation in the educational system of the Second Polish Republic. This was particularly critical with regard to the then activities aimed at reforming the education system.

As far as the first studies on the reception of the Decroly method in the Polish pedagogical community are concerned, the article by Wanda Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa, published in 1928, played a key role. It presented both the fundamental assumptions of the Belgian pedagogue's concept and the description of the school he created (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 101–104). In the following years, further analyses were made on how to adapt this method to the specific nature of the Polish education system, as exemplified by the 1931 Girtlerowa's study. The author investigated the possibilities of implementing Decroly's principles in preschool education, examining in detail their application in national early school establishments (Girtlerowa 1931, 46–52).

In the following years, publications devoted to Decroly were mainly of memorial nature, especially after his death in 1932. The papers in question mainly focused on his academic achievements and his contribution to the development of pedagogy and child psychology (Oderfeldówna 1933, 77–78; Weinlerówna 1933, 1–4; Weinlesowa 1933, 70–76). In the following part of this paper, a detailed analysis of the manner in which Decroly's profile was presented in the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" magazine will follow. At this stage, however, it is crucial to focus on the scholar's teaching method itself, the channels of its dissemination and the aspects that individual authors considered fundamental.

Mira Weinlesowa based her analysis on the assumption that the educational and teaching methods developed by Decroly directly reflected his psycho-pedagogical concept, in which child psychology and pedagogy functioned symbiotically and consequently created a coherent and complementary whole. Decroly did not limit himself to criticizing the traditional education

system; on the contrary, he formulated a consistent theory of modern education underpinned by empirical findings and the positive outcomes of implementing innovative methods in experimental schools (Weinlesowa 1933, 70).

With his didactic concept, he fundamentally sought to prepare pupils for active and creative participation in social life, develop their intellectual potential and stimulate their creativity; this was possible by enabling them to experiment and independently explore the phenomena occurring in the reality surrounding them (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 101).

Evaluating the traditional system of teaching and education, Decroly identified a number of deficits which he attempted to eliminate by applying his own pedagogical method. Mira Weinlesowa offered the following categorization of these shortcomings:

1. No consistency in individual educational activities, excessive thematic fragmentation of classes and a fundamental diversity of their objectives.
2. Disconnection of educational content from the child's real interests and lack of adaptation to their development.
3. Artificial division of educational content into subjects, which is inadequate to the natural development of the child's thought processes.
4. The dominance of verbalism in teaching, which is manifested in the lack of direct contact of the pupil with the discussed subject or phenomenon.
5. Insufficiency of pupils' own activity, spontaneity and the possibility of independent agency.
6. Non-individualized teaching process (Weinlesowa 1933, 70; cf. also Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 101).

Having analysed the structure of lessons taught at schools, Decroly concluded that the concepts discussed at math, language, science and geography lessons were not coordinated and the subjects were completely unrelated to one another. Consequently, in his didactic approach, all disciplines of knowledge should form integral elements of a universal life science, which implies the necessity of their close connection. In accordance with this assumption, any problem should be analysed from different perspectives: natural, historical, mathematical or geographical ones, which also applies to preschool education.

Weinlesowa illustrated this methodological principle referring to "nutrition" as an example of a centre of interest. In her view, the observation of food products and their perception with all the senses corresponds to natural sciences. The location of the places where food is grown or produced is part of the geographical perspective, while the analysis of products in terms of number, size or weight incorporates mathematical concepts (Weinlesowa 1933, 70–71).

As mentioned, Decroly recognized significant deficiencies of the traditional didactic model, in particular the lack of logical and substantive coherence between the individual activities undertaken by pupils as part of the educational process. The fragmented nature of the teaching content disrupted the continuity of cognitive processes, forcing children to make sudden and unintuitive leaps between unrelated topics. Adapting to dynamically changing content caused difficulties which led to a weakened ability to perceive reality in an integrative way. This in turn in fact compromised the fundamental goal of education, i.e. to holistically show the child the reality and the environmental structures in which it lives.

In response to the indicated deficits, Decroly proposed the principle of concentration in didactics, which became one of the pillars of his pedagogical method. It was introduced through the implementation of a system of centres of interest, the basic assumptions of which included:

1. Structuring of didactic content around overarching thematic categories that serve as axial centres that organise the cognitive process.
2. Implementation of a progressive model of deepening the content of education, where the information provided in the early stages of education was fragmented and elementary, but in the later phases it was successively expanded, supplemented and systematized.

The main objective of this concept was to introduce a dominant theme into the curriculum, which would be analysed from the perspective of a multidimensional interdisciplinary approach. Individual pieces of didactic content did not function in isolation but constituted an integrated system in which the material permeated and complemented each other both in the short term (at individual lessons) and in the long term (over weeks and months). This system allowed for a more natural and effective assimilation of knowledge,

considering both the developmental needs of the child and the principle of organic integration of content into a unified cognitive construct (Weinlesowa 1933, 71).

Decroly postulated that the didactic program should be closely related to children's natural interests and correspond to the fundamental goal of education, namely, to prepare an individual for life, both in practical and social terms. To achieve this, two main cognitive areas had to be considered: (1) the child's self-knowledge, including the identification of their own needs, goals and aspirations, and (2) the analysis of the environmental conditions in which they function, which would enable these needs to be effectively met.

Universal needs is a category which Decroly considered fundamental in the process of an individual's adaptation to reality. These needs included: (1) the need for nutrition, (2) the necessity of protection against adverse weather conditions, (3) defence mechanisms against threats and antagonistic environmental factors, and (4) the need for solidary work, activity, and rest. The categories listed above formed the organisational basis of the year-round curriculum in Decroly's schools and they determined the selection of educational content and the structure of the didactic process.

The concept of learning about the environment, which was key in the pedagogical model in question, included an analysis of human living conditions, looking at how fundamental needs are satisfied. This process was twofold: on the one hand, it included the study of the social environment, considered from the perspective of interpersonal interactions in the family, educational institutions and the wider community, and on the other hand, it encompassed the study of the natural environment, with particular emphasis on fauna and flora. As a consequence, Decroly's approach to education was truly interdisciplinary as its structure reflected the organic connections between the individual and the environment in which they live (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 102; Weinlesowa 1933, 71–72).

Weinlesowa observed that the traditional division of teaching content into separate subjects did not do justice to the natural dynamics of children's cognitive processes, which develop in a sequence, involving sensory perception, thought processes and expression.

Decroly, when developing his pedagogical concept, distinguished three fundamental aspects of mental activity that should be reflected in the teaching process:

1. Observation: corresponds to the stage of perception and reception of sensory stimuli. During this phase, the child directly experiences reality through contact with specific objects and phenomena. Sensory exploration is the starting point for further information processing.
2. Association: refers to the process of making associations, as well as analysis and creation of abstract cognitive representations. At this stage, the child integrates the information obtained through observation with their existing experiences, memories and other data from the cultural background. Decroly distinguished four major cognitive methods, corresponding to different stages of the associative process:
   a) the direct method: based on the child's personal experience,
   b) the indirect method I – based on the individual's memories,
   c) the indirect method II – concerning contemporary phenomena, but distant in space,
   d) the indirect method III – covering historical phenomena.
3. Expression: consists in verbal and non-verbal expressing of acquired experiences and knowledge. At this stage, the child formulates conclusions and presents the effects of its work in a concrete manner (e.g. through drawing, modelling, motor activity) or an abstract one (through writing and oral expression).

What Decroly emphasized is that the individual phases of the cognitive process do not unfold as separate, isolated stages, but rather are closely related and intertwined. During observation, thought mechanisms are triggered, while in the expression phase, both repeated perception and processing of information take place. The above structure was designed not only to systematize the teaching process, but also to create a coherent teaching model that would make it possible to perceive reality holistically and analyse phenomena from different perspectives as part of specific centres of interest (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 103; Weinlesowa 1933, 72).

Weinlesowa analysed the three-part structure of the didactic exercises introduced by Decroly, comparing it with the traditional division into subjects. The author drew the following conclusions:

1. Observational exercises corresponded to classical environmental talks and the study of objects. Their main purpose was to develop sensory perception and cognitive skills through direct contact with objects and phenomena.
2. Associative exercises replaced traditional geography and history lessons, as they enabled the analysis of reality from a temporal and spatial perspective. Thanks to them, the child could place the phenomena they were learning about in the context of their historical evolution and geographical diversity.
3. Expression exercises included both concrete forms of expression such as crafts, drawings, gymnastics, and abstract ones written and spoken language. An important element of the teaching process was also the close correlation of arithmetic exercises with observation, i.e. children, when comparing objects, were to develop numerical intuition and concepts related to numbers, size and mass.

To illustrate this approach, Weinlesowa used "nutrition" as a sample centre of interest, which was the main topic for first graders in a selected school year. The teaching process would begin with the children being introduced to bread, a basic food product. During the observation phase, the teacher would bring various types of bread and rolls to the classroom, which the pupils could analyse by touch, taste and smell. The next step consisted in exchanging observations and systematizing knowledge by comparing the characteristics of different types of bread. This information was then organised in the form of a lesson plan and recorded by the students in observation notebooks, which were additionally illustrated with drawings.

Simultaneously, the evolution of nutrition was thematized during association lessons, where for example, the food of early humans or the diversity of diets in different countries were discussed. For their research, children were tasked with collecting illustrations, documents, and notes related to the topics discussed, which then they placed in association notebooks.

This teaching model demonstrates the fundamental role of the principle of visualization, whereby the child would come in direct contact with a real object of cognition. The elimination of verbalism, defined as passive absorption of information, and the active involvement of pupils in the teaching process allowed to use the full potential of natural cognitive mechanisms, which

was one of Decroly's key assumptions (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 102; Weinlesowa 1933, 72–73).

In addition to standard observational exercises directly related to the centre of interest, occasional lessons were also introduced; they were based on current events in the classroom. These included observing plant growth, classifying objects brought in by children, and making meteorological observations (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 103).

An example of this teaching methodology was described by Sikorska in "Wychowanie Przedszkolne," where it was illustrated by a sample lesson based on the observation of a host of sparrows. Children would analyse the behaviour of birds and the ways in which they obtained food and shelter. The cognitive process was spontaneous, i.e. pupils collected information in the course of their own observations; then, the information was systematized and supplemented by the teacher. In the course of the class, questions and answers were exchanged between children, which fostered the development of independent thinking and cooperation.

Some pupils took the initiative to recreate the environment in which sparrows live. Children would actively participate in the implementation of this project: some of them built houses out of matchboxes, a windmill or miniature gardens using clay and sticks as trees and bushes. To imitate snow, they used finely cut crepe paper. Every day, the model would be enriched with new elements, such as additional trees or figurines of people and animals.

During classes, special attention was paid to the integration of various forms of expression: children would cut out sparrows from illustrations, make frames for them from various materials (cardboard, straw, twigs, raffia) and perform movement exercises imitating the behaviour of birds: flying, jumping, searching for grains, resting, flicking their feathers or bathing in the snow. The movements were accompanied by the recitation of a poem:

A sparrow jumps down the street,
looking for grains of wheat,
and I jump in a circle
and choose who I favour.

These activities demonstrated how fundamental it was to actively explore reality through multiple senses and strengthen the correlation between observation, conversation and action. That kind of didactic structure facilitated a more comprehensive acquisition of

knowledge and development of social competences (Sikorska 1932, 53–55; cf. Bogdanowiczowa 1927, 6).

Maria Darewska proposed a centre of interest that could be successfully implemented in a kindergarten: setting up a doll nursery. It was a comprehensive didactic project involving children in observational, manual, and cognitive activities. The educational process began with an analysis of the room's furnishings. The next stage was the independent making of miniature furniture. The teacher provided materials such as paper, cardboard, boxes, glue, plasticine, clay and sticks, from which each child created a piece of nursery furniture of their choice. This process helped develop manual skills, spatial imagination and hand-eye coordination.

An integral part of the class was a trip to a carpentry workshop. Its purpose was to familiarize children with the process of making furniture and the tools used in craft work. The teacher carefully selected the elements of the tour, adapting them to the level of cognitive development of the children. A few days after the visit, the children shared their observations and reflections, which allowed them to deepen their knowledge.

In order to consolidate the experience of craftsmanship, a themed game "carpenter" was organised. The children played the role of craftsmen and recreated the activities carried out in the workshop, which was a form of active learning through imitation. Inspired by the visit to the workshop, some children tried to work with a handsaw, which indicates their genuine commitment and willingness to explore a new field.

The final stage of the project was to decorate the furniture and the nursery. The children decorated their work by painting it and adding aesthetic elements. Special attention was paid to interior design details such as paintings, flowers and curtains. Finally, pupils were tasked with making decorations out of paper and crepe paper themselves.

The described didactic process reflected critical assumptions of progressive pedagogy, which focuses on the child's active participation in learning, developing independence, and combining theory with practice. Thanks to the interdisciplinary approach, the classes combined elements of observation, creative expression and knowledge of the surrounding world, contributing to the all-round development of children (Darewska 1930, 85–89; cf. M.M. 1931, 96).

Girtlerowa (1931) emphasized that the basic assumption of Decroly's pedagogy was to activate the child by getting to know its daily needs, the surrounding environment and overcoming difficulties arising from life experiences. As an example of the subject of educational activities, she proposed the topic of human labour, with particular emphasis on the role which human hands have in manual and cognitive processes.

1. Observation and comparative analysis

The didactic process began with observation and comparative analysis, the aim of which was to develop perceptual abilities and functional body awareness. At this stage, children:

- compared the structure and functions of arms and legs, identifying their similarities and differences,
- analyzed the range of motion of the limbs and their importance in everyday functioning,
- pointed to tools adapted to working with arms and legs.

2. Spatial and temporal association

At the second stage of education, association was introduced to link the acquired information with real-life contexts. Over this phase children would:

- recognize manual professions (e.g. shoemaker, carpenter),
- imitate movements characteristic of selected professions,
- participate in educational trips, e.g. to a carpenter's workshop,
- analyse the processes of selling handicrafts in cities.

Temporal association, on the other hand, consisted of introducing the concept of time by comparing the duration of various activities, such as washing hands or putting on gloves and shoes.

3. Physical activity and measurements

Children were involved in physical exercises and sensory experiments aimed at shaping body and spatial awareness. In the course of these activities, they:

- practiced balancing (e.g. standing on one leg),
- compared the strength and resistance of different objects,

– measured the length, width and thickness of their arms and legs to develop comparative and analytical skills.

4. Introduction of abstract elements

The final stage of the educational process was the introduction of abstract content. This was achieved through children's literature and teacher's story-telling. The literary texts were carefully selected to integrate the experiences gained and to deepen the reflection on the issues discussed.

Gertlerowa's analysis of Decroly's concept emphasizes the importance of a multisensory and interactive approach in preschool education. The methodology based on observation, association and physical activity is consistent with contemporary research on the effectiveness of learning by doing (Kolb 1984; Bruner 1966). A key element of this concept is a focus on the development of social and communication skills, which is achieved through peer interaction and the integration of play elements into the structure of the teaching process.

The presented educational concept, based on the assumptions of Decroly, was an innovative approach to the education of children in the interwar period. Drawing on the principles of the child's active participation in the cognitive process, Gertlerowa developed a teaching model that integrated experience with learning by doing. Her work constitutes a valuable contribution to the development of preschool pedagogy and is still relevant for modern teaching methods.

Weinlesowa, in turn, when analysing the pedagogical concept of Decroly, identified three main categories of exercises: observation, association and expression, with the latter being classified into two separate types: abstract and concrete. She paid particular attention to the latter group, emphasizing its close relationship with the function of globalization in the child's cognitive process. Globalization, understood as the ability to perceive images and phenomena as a whole before analysing them in detail, is a basic perceptual mechanism in children. In contrast to adults, children do not analyse and synthesize in the initial phase of cognitive development but perceive reality holistically. An example of this mechanism is how a child sees a doll; first, it registers its general shape, and only later does it begin to notice details such as

clothing or facial features. This phenomenon explains why children are equally eager to play with both complicated toys and simple ones, made of basic materials such as rags.

The process of transition from global perception to analysis occurs gradually along with gaining new experiences and cognitive abilities. Weinlesowa emphasized that in preschool and early school education, it is crucial to allow the child to observe freely before they start analysing. In fact, the excessive use of detailed questions in the early stages of education can disrupt the natural cognitive flow in children. Decroly, taking this perceptual property into account, developed an educational method based on the gradual narrowing of the field of observation: from the general picture of the world to the analysis of individual elements of phenomena.

The function of globalization was the basis not only for the synthetic curriculum and method of Decroly's centres of interest, but also for his ideo-visual method of learning to read and write, which was an alternative to the phonetic approach. The new method involved associating centres of interest with visual stimuli and using visual memory in the process of learning to read. The key principle was to start learning not with individual letters, but with whole words and sentences, which the child initially recognized as graphic images. Only in the subsequent stages of education did the transition to the analysis of linguistic structure take place through the identification of words, syllables, and letters (Weinlesowa 1933, 73).

The aim of this method was to make it easier for children to learn difficult concepts, especially those related to time. A helpful teaching tool were calendars designed as clocks, depicting different units of time (day, week, month), on which children could move the hands and do practical exercises. This approach was intended to support the development of operational thinking and enable a gradual transition from global perception to cognitive analysis and synthesis (Weinlerówna 1933, 3).

The process of acquiring literacy can be classified as a form of abstract expression, while concrete expression includes manual activities, motor exercises and other practical activities. In accordance with Decroly's pedagogical approach, children engage in modelling, cutting and drawing, relating these activities to specific centres of interest. Manual activities often serve as a starting point for further theoretical analysis. For example, as part of the topic "nutrition,"

pupils bake bread themselves, which allows them to compare the product with bread available in bakeries. Similarly, in the context of the topic "housing," children build structures out of bricks or wood, and then compare them with buildings erected by professional craftsmen. Such experiences not only develop practical skills but also contribute to shaping the understanding of technological and social processes, introducing children to the issues related to the history of civilization.

An important element of this educational model is also gardening and animal care, which are an integral part of the process of shaping ecological sensitivity and the ability to observe natural phenomena. These activities foster a sense of responsibility, contribute to developing social skills and teach consistency and patience (Weinlesowa 1933, 73–74).

One of the fundamental principles of modern pedagogy involves the individualization of the teaching process, which was also emphasized by Decroly. In this context, he postulated a maximum of 20 learners per class, which enabled the adaptation of teaching methods to the individual predispositions and needs of each child. Psychometric tests and Decroly's original questionnaire, aimed at analysing the emotional and cognitive aspects of pupils, played a key role in the teaching process. These tools allowed for the personalization of teaching strategies and for treating each child as an individual with unique developmental potential.

Analysing individual differences was one of the key aspects of research on effective teaching. From this perspective, it was important to use psychological tests to assess pupils' cognitive competences. Psychometric tests for numeracy are an example of such tools, a register of which was presented by Hellmann (Hellmann 1931, 135–138), based on earlier research by Descoeudres on the education of children with special needs (Descoeudres 1916, 320–321). However, the author pointed out that the effective use of these tools required specialized training on the part of teachers, as well as knowledge of research methodology and the ability to interpret the results obtained. The need to precisely adapt diagnostic methods to the abilities of learners was also pointed out by Bużycka-Krasuska (Bużycka-Krasuska 1926b, 3), who made a reference to arithmetic tests prepared by Decroly and Degand.

Decroly stressed the existence of significant individual differences between children at the same stage of development. For this reason, he recommended respecting the natural interests

and individual abilities of learners. He argued that personalizing the teaching process promotes their optimal intellectual and emotional development (Girtlerowa 1931, 47; Weinlesowa 1933, 74; Weinlerówna 1933, 4).

Looking at the idea of individualizing the teaching process, Weinlesowa emphasized the importance of teaching aids developed by Decroly, in particular educative lotto cards. These tools played a key role in consolidating the knowledge acquired through observation and association, while developing the independence of students and stimulating their natural cognitive curiosity. The lotto game enabled each child to work at their own pace: after completing one puzzle, the pupils could move on to the next one, which was more difficult, regardless of the progress of the other children. If necessary, the teacher provided individual support, adapting explanations to the pupil's perceptual abilities.

In order to intensify the sensory stimuli, picture lotto was often replaced by exhibits that relied not only on visual perception but also on motor responses. For example, to develop the concept of size, physical models of dolls made of wood or cardboard were used instead of pictures of dolls of different sizes (Weinlesowa 1933, 74–75).

Decroly's lotto games were not only teaching aids in kindergarten education, where the key was to shape sensory perception, attention and motor coordination, but were also crucial for primary school teaching. They were applied in various educational areas, creating counting, grammar, history and geography lotto, among others. Decroly's kindergarten used lotto games involving various sensory modalities, including:

- visual perception,
- visual-kinesthetic perception,
- tactile perception (excluding sight),
- auditory-motor perception.

The number and range of educative games employed depended on the teachers' inventiveness, their commitment and their ability to adapt the content to the children's developmental abilities (Weinlesowa 1933, 74). Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa emphasized the necessity to avoid monotony and oversimplification in game design, emphasizing that games

should correspond to the developmental level of children and provide them with an engaging challenge (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 101, 104).

According to Janina Bużycka-Krasuska, the games developed by Decroly fostered various perceptual abilities in a comprehensive manner and were an effective diagnostic tool for assessing pupils' perceptiveness. They were appealing to children as they used colorful, varied educative materials that caught learners' attention (Bużycka-Krasuska 1926a, 4–5; Bużycka-Krasuska 1926b, 5). Weryho, on the other hand, stressed that Decroly's teaching aids reflected reality and enabled children to experience the world in a direct manner (Weryho 1929, 220).

Graded according to level of difficulty, educative games were used to assess and develop visual perception and to analyse how children differed individually in terms of their cognitive abilities. Bużycka-Krasuska (1926b, 5) distinguished six main areas of perceptual examinations, which were carried out using lotto cards:

1. Recognizing objects of different colours and shapes,
2. Identifying the same object (e.g. lamp) in different colour variations,
3. Distinguishing and classifying two colours of one object,
4. Analysing the direction based on the same object (e.g. sandals),
5. Perceiving three colours in one picture,
6. Analysing directions and movements.

By using interactive teaching tools, the Decroly method enabled the gradual development of children's perceptual analysis and synthesis skills, allowing the level of difficulty to be adjusted to the individual needs of each student. Thus, it made a significant contribution to the development of modern educational methods based on active experience and personalization of the teaching process.

An example of a teaching aid for children aged 4–5 was a puzzle composed of six cubes with 5 cm long edges. Each side of the cubes featured illustrations of objects belonging to the same thematic category, such as flowers, fruit, gardening tools or toys. For instance, one cube could contain a picture of a chair, another of a table, another of a wardrobe, another of a stool, a sideboard or a bed, illustrating the category "household goods". The child's task was to

arrange the cubes in the correct order by grouping them according to the topic shown, e.g. by placing only fruit or only furniture next to each other. For younger children (3–4 years old), the exercise could be simplified by using cubes with the same illustrations on each wall, allowing for more intuitive matching of the elements (Łamigłówka (Pomysłu Decroly'ego) 1929, 44).

Analysing Decroly's educational system, the authors of articles published in the "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" magazine pointed out that there was no clear division between the preschool and school stages of education. The curriculum in preschools was an integral part of its overall pedagogical concept, which made it possible to adapt materials intended for the first year of school education to the needs of a preschool. However, this required adjusting the teaching methods to correspond to the developmental level of preschool-age children. The main goal of education in Decroly's kindergartens was to foster observation skills, develop thinking, and enable children to freely express their own ideas (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 104; Girtlerowa 1931, 47; Weinlesowa 1933, 74).

Importantly, Decroly did not restrict children's freedom of movement, but their activities had to be purposeful and useful. He was not in favour of chaos; on the contrary, he emphasized the need to develop the ability to work independently and spontaneously. In his concept, he emphasized that the demands on a child should be tailored to their individual abilities, and that comparing them to their peers is unjustified. Consequently, he rejected the traditional grading system based on marks and school certificates, replacing it with detailed reports describing the physical and psychological condition of the child and his or her educational progress (Weinlesowa 1933, 75).

In the school model developed by Decroly, pupils were not passive subjects of teaching, but active subjects of education, acquiring knowledge through action, developing independence and understanding the value of work and learning. The school functioned as a community in which both teachers and students were responsible for its development and aesthetics. The school was largely managed by learners, who organised its operation in close cooperation with the teachers. The pupils elected a student government from among themselves, as well as learners on duty responsible for taking care of plants, animals raised in the classroom, the aesthetics of the rooms, and other aspects of school life.

The Decroly school encouraged children to actively participate in organising the learning environment: pupils would decorate classrooms with their own hand-made works and also bring in objects with potential didactic value (e.g. buttons, scraps of leather, fur, materials), which they then classified on their own. A significant element of the educational process was also mutual learning, i.e. children prepared talks and presentations on topics of their choice, and after giving them, they participated in the discussion, making comments and asking questions. Older students would act as mentors for younger ones, organising games, concerts and performances for them.

This approach to education encouraged activity, commitment and cooperation among students, which in turn led to the development of internal discipline and the ability to adapt to the rules which govern social life (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 101–102; Weinlesowa 1933, 75–76).

Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa admired the enthusiasm of the pupils at the Decroly school. She emphasized that the school did not isolate the children from reality or impose a monotonous discipline on them. The pupils derived satisfaction from conscious and creative work, as well as from developing their own interests; this made them eager to participate in the daily life of the school, which they perceived as a space for both learning and playing (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 104).

Weinlesowa also paid attention to the architecture and spatial organisation of the school, located at *Avenue de Montana.* She noticed that the facility was located in a picturesque area, surrounded by a forest and that it occupied a vast area. However, the buildings themselves were not architecturally distinctive – the classrooms were relatively small, resembling museums and laboratories rather than traditional classrooms. They contained a variety of teaching materials and specimens from various fields of science, collected by both teachers and students themselves.

In accordance with Decroly's pedagogical concept, there were no specialized rooms for teaching specific subjects such as history or geography. Similarly, Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa observed that the rooms were more like laboratories and workshops than a traditional school.

The pupils were free to move around the entire building, which abounded in library collections and teaching aids (Krahelska-Mackiewiczowa 1928, 103).

Summarizing her observations, Weinlesowa noted that to set up a model school no luxurious conditions or impressive buildings were required; it is the content of the teaching that is of key importance, not its external form. Despite its modest infrastructure, the Decroly school stood out for its rich didactic content and high level of education (Weinlesowa 1933, 76; Weinlerówna 1933, 3).

4. Decroly as a Person, Scientist and Educator

A few weeks after the death of Jean-Ovide Decroly, the editorial staff of "Wychowanie Przedszkolne" published an obituary, announcing that a detailed analysis of his thirty years of his professional career as a doctor, psychologist, educator and social activist would follow. The articles in question were to present his merits in the field of care for children with disabilities in Belgium, the development of sensory games for preschool education and the "centres of interest" method, which revolutionized curricula in primary schools (Ś.P. Dr. Ovide Decroly 1932, 161).

When analysing Decroly's image in the pages of "Wychowanie Przedszkolne," it is worthwhile referring to the concept of the hagiographic trend described by Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp. These researchers pointed out that Decroly was idealized by his students and colleagues, who made him a hero of education, sometimes mythologizing the thinker (Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp 2003a, 279; Van Gorp 2006, 42, 45). As a result, they presented his method as an educational ideal (Van Gorp 2007, 9–10).

Weinlerowa recalled her experiences from her pedagogical studies at the University of Brussels, where she personally attended lectures by Decroly. In her accounts, she described him as a modest, straightforward man who avoided pathos. His lectures were clear and fact-based, often supported by examples from everyday life. She emphasized that Decroly was aware of the limitations of his knowledge and encouraged students to continue his research. Exams with him took the form of a scientific conversation, and the lecturer was interested in the students'

experiences, especially their observations concerning the psyche of children (Weinleröwa 1933, 1–2).

Weinlerowa also noted that Decroly, owing to his daily contact with children, transformed from a psychologist-theoretician into a psycho-pedagogue. He created his own teaching method based on the psychological needs of children, his own scientific experiments and modern pedagogical concepts. She also emphasized his contribution to the development of Polish education through the adaptation of his tests to national conditions (Weinlerówna 1933, 2–3).

Anna Oderfeldówna presented Decroly as a doctor who treated children with intellectual disabilities and who became a pedagogue in order to help them better. By believing in their potential and using appropriate teaching methods, he proved that such children could become independent. Convinced of the effectiveness of his methods, he extended them to general pedagogy, focusing on the activity and independence of students. During World War I, O. Decroly was a social activist, helping homeless and delinquent children. As a result of his efforts, the *Zakład Ferme-École* was established in Waterloo, where children could combine learning with vocational training (Oderfeldówna 1933, 76–77).

Although Girtlerowa described Decroly as a "pedagogical genius," she noted that the popularization of his method carried the risk of distortion of its basic ideas. She underlined the key role of adapting the curriculum to the child's developmental stages, which was one of the foundations of Decroly's pedagogy (Girtlerowa 1931, 46).

Conclusion

"Wychowanie Przedszkolne" played a significant role in propagating O. Decroly's ideas in Poland, especially among preschool teachers. The journal presented both the theoretical foundations of his concept and detailed descriptions of how to apply it during classes.

Their contributors did not limit themselves to theory; instead, they also described how to use the principle of globalization, how to teach reading and writing, and how to individualize teaching. It must be pointed out that the papers showed a fascination with O. Decroly's method

and often lacked critical analysis. Despite the fact that Decroly's pedagogy did not gain much popularity in Polish public schools, it was applied in special institutions.

Contemporary education could draw on O. Decroly's ideas, adapting his principles to current teaching needs, among other things by eliminating verbalism and passive reception of knowledge, and emphasizing that children should discover the world independently.

O. Decroly's achievements remain an important point of reference for contemporary education, albeit one that requires critical reinterpretation. The postulate of excluding verbalism and passive reception of knowledge should be understood as the consistent design of educational environments and situations where the child can undertake real cognitive activities, i.e. explore and create meanings, and generate products of work, rather than merely reproduce presented content. Central to this approach are the integration of content around problems and "centres of interest" (transdisciplinary modules), research cycles (question–hypothesis–action/experiment–reflection), field and observational experiences, manipulative material to structure the transition from the part to the whole, and individualized learning paths and pace. The education process should be systematically documented (portfolio, narrative documentation of the process) and supported by formative assessment, while technologies should serve as tools for exploration, recording, and analysis of data, rather than an end in themselves. An inclusive perspective is also key, as it makes it possible to operationalize Decroly's ideas in diverse learner populations.

However, putting these ideas into practice entails a change in the role of the teacher—from a transmitter of knowledge to a designer of the learning environment and a reflective researcher of their own practice. Moreover, it requires flexible organisation of educational time and space, cooperation with the local community, and the involvement of parents as partners. From the perspective of educational research, further comparative studies on the effectiveness of O. Decroly-inspired solutions in general and special education are recommended, as well as action research and multi-source verification of results (e.g., analysis of student work, observations, interviews) to gain insight into the mechanisms of meaning-making learning. Understood in this way, a critically updated reception of O. Decroly's concept could provide a coherent, empirically verifiable framework for practices focused on child agency.

Given the limitations of previous analyses, such as the lack of critical approaches in the literature and the dominance of enthusiastic descriptions, there is a need for further comparative research on the effectiveness of Decroly-inspired solutions in education.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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