

Successful leadership in alternative educational institutions. A case study from Montessori Cluj

Aura CADIS

*Fundația Montessori Cluj, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
schule@montessori-cluj.ro*

Mihail BUSU

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
mihail.busu@fabiz.ase.ro*

Abstract. *The European dimension of education must not limit the ability of young people to freely build their own identity. To be able to choose, however, they must firstly learn to know what the alternatives are, especially in the field of education, where orientation is more difficult chosen if models are abandoned in order not to limit the individual's freedom. In this regard, the European dimension facilitates the formation of the cultural and moral identity of the individuals. In this paper, the authors are providing an overview of the Montessori educational alternative. A history of Montessori development in Romania is described, then the authenticity of Montessori education is presented, followed by the key aspects to be considered in the daily team management and a development plan for the next 5 years.*

Keywords: Montessori method, alternative education, management plan, leadership.

Introduction

An Italian pedagogue, Maria Montessori initially worked as a pediatrician for children from lower class of society in Italy. Then she noticed that educating the preschool children, based on activities spontaneous gives better results than verbal education. She later applied this method in school children, aged 6 to 18 years old.

Her system consisted of replacing education with self-activity and self-education, based on two principles:

- a) the biological freedom of the child, in the sense that he/she took part in activities that they enjoyed it and were not imposed.
- b) development through sensory-motor exercises.

The great merit of Maria Montessori was that she stated: “In the lower stages, the child learns more by action than by thought” (Piaget, 1972). The pedagogical theory developed by Maria Montessori does not start from philosophical principles, but from observations and experiments; as a result, it spread rapidly throughout the world, gaining many followers, and creating a real current: Montessorianism. She drew the attention of contemporaries to the child, to his rights and to the need to create conditions for his development according to his/her age, achieving a balance between free and directed activity.

The concept of respect for the child - as an individual with personality and potential – is essential in the pedagogy of Maria Montessori. Montessori pedagogy has as its basic principle necessary, adequate, and continuous education - trends of current education reforms that confirms Maria Montessori's ideas and makes them applicable in practice. As such, through pedagogy.

Montessori aims to promote children's rights, expand, and intensify education and the education of parents, the formation of skills of intense intellectual activity and continuous,

adaptability and change, increasing the role of the educational environment in the whole education, in the family and in the community.

In a Montessori class, children carry out activities in their daily life, learning the child positive habits about work, encourages the development of conceptualization and observational skills. Almost all lessons are individual in preschool and in small groups in school, so each child must usually follow a different plan of activities that the educator thinks about and puts into practice of the child's interest and level. All classroom materials are easily accessible and available to children's low shelves. The child is free to choose from the materials presented before and after whoever finishes working with them knows that he/she must put them on the shelf in the same place and under the same conditions, ready for the next child interested in the same activity.

In Montessori classes the child can freely move from one part of the class to another, listening by his own inner impulse. Over time, the exercise of choice becomes a habit develops the child's ability to make decisions about himself.

In a Montessori kindergarten group, children are organized into three age levels, between 3 and 6 years. The children who started kindergarten at the age of three this year will be two more years from now in the same class. Now they are the youngest, in two years they will be the biggest. A process of growth and development that they are very enthusiastic about. This is how relationships work among the children during the program hours, which it is much more like the life outside the school, that is with real life.

Another special feature is that in the Montessori class there is only one copy of each material, which means that only one child could carry out the activity involved in that material. By default, if another child wants to use the same material, they will have to wait until his colleague finishes the activity and puts the material back on the shelf. At the beginning, conflicts could arise during the year, but over time acceptance becomes a habit. Indirectly, they are educated, so the respect for someone else's work and the patience to wait for your turn are learnt.

The purpose of the Montessori method is therefore education, not schooling. And educating means, etymologically speaking, to bring to light the potential increase. Montessori has created specific educational materials (teaching aids) for children with whom she worked in response to their individual developmental needs.

Literature review

The Montessori method has been analyzed in many research papers (Duckworth, 2006; Drigas and Gkeka, 2016; Marshal, 2017). Maria Montessori (1912) developed a more connected theory of child development from infancy to adolescence. Montessori was a doctor, and she was particularly interested in brain development in children and studied this with her colleagues. She later decided to concentrate on the education rather than medical treatment and developed a new approach to education: her theory encompasses all aspects of human potential, character, moral development, and spiritual growth (Vardin, 2003).

Moreover, Montessori focused on students of all ages from birth to 18 years old which concluded in the development of special education pedagogy. Today, Montessori practices (such as child study, a focus on individualization and the use of manipulative materials) and special education have been explicitly combined in many cases (Cossentino, 2010). Montessori training is seen as a source of inspiration for the developmental approaches, learning process and teaching methods which may change according to the age or experience.

Montessori considers that the school is encouraging the development of the responsibility between children (Certini, 2013). Furthermore, supporting student autonomy is fundamental at all

levels of Montessori's education and this is now accepted to be one of the most effective ways to enhance motivation (Montessori, 1912; Murray, 2011). In Montessori's theory, the student acts independently and constructs their potential with their own efforts (Montessori, 1912; Murray, 2011). That is, the child is his or her own teacher.

Similarly, to Montessori, other researchers believe that socialization has a crucial role in child development and uses the phrase, „zone of proximal development” to describe the background of learning (Bodrova, 2003; Gredler, 2012; Parker, 1979; Dima and Vasilache, 2016). In his approach, Vygotsky (1997) focuses on the space between the lower-level reflecting, which means independent skills, and the higher-level reflecting, which refers to skills developed with assistance from the other who is more knowledgeable (Li, 2007; Fonseca et al., 2018). The author considers that social stimulation is more dominant than the independence of children and autogenous level of success. This „zone” means the key point for human cultural achievement.

History of Montessori in Romania

The Montessori pedagogy has a long history in Romania, as Ilie Şulea Firu (Assistant to the Faculty of Philosophy) was appointed in 1931 as AMI – Association Montessori Internationale representative in Romania. In 1933 the Constantin Rădulescu Motru Association was founded, having as President Nicolae Titulescu as Honorary member. He was Honorary member of AMI and Montessori educators' entity in England. Also, there was a Montessori kindergarten "Children's House" in the Grant neighborhood of Bucharest. Georgeta Filitti, a Romanian historian, was a Montessori student in an elementary school with educators trained by Maria Montessori herself. The first Montessori kindergarten in Bucharest, alongside the Pedagogical Institute, functioned for 1-year between 1934 and 1935.

After the communism, the first two Montessori kindergartens were approved by the Ministry of Education in Bucharest and Timișoara. At present, there are over 200 Romanian Montessori educators and teachers certified AMI and 40+ kindergartens and 15+ schools accredited in the Montessori system and endorsed by the Ministry of Education.

An overview of the history of Montessori in Romania could be seen in Figure 1.

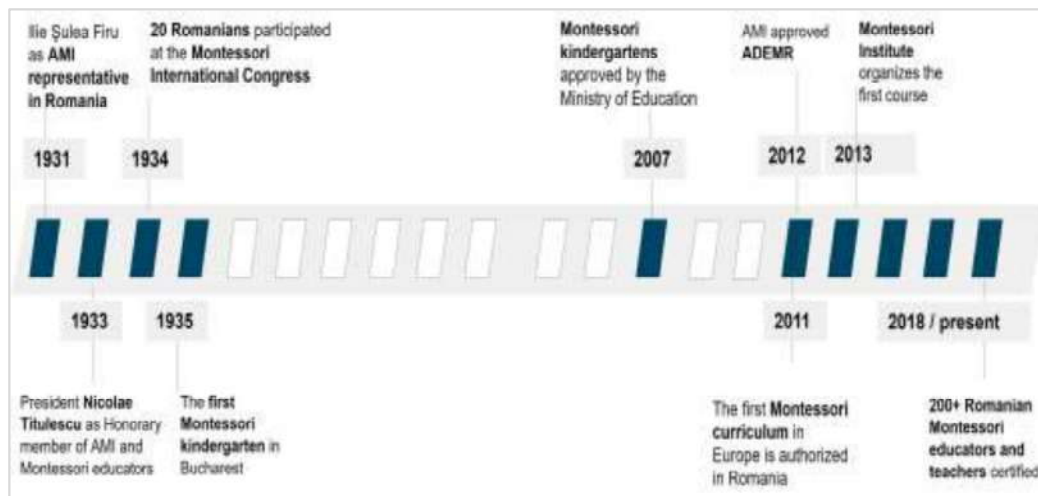


Figure 1. An overview schools and trained educators/teachers

Source: own research.

As we could see in Figure 2, more than 50% of Montessori teachers in Romania graduated the AMI Primary (3-6 years old). In Romania there are 100+ teachers trained for Primary 3-6, most of them graduating starting with 2015. For infants (0-3) there are 40+ adults trained, while for elementary (6-12) there are 25+ certified teachers. The Montessori pedagogy for adolescence ages is underdevelopment, with existing initiatives of gaining knowledge and sharing experiences.

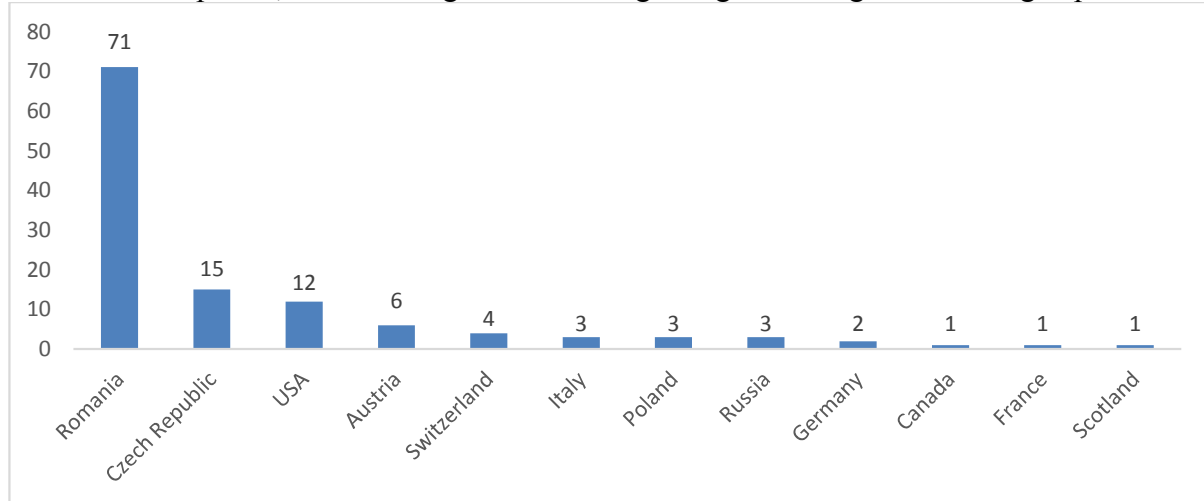


Figure 2. The distribution of Montessori trained Romanian educators, by country, in 2019

Source: own computation.

The number of Montessori certified teachers in Romania is growing each year and more than 80% of Montessori teachers graduated in last 6 years. In Figure 3 we could observe the number of certified teachers by year.

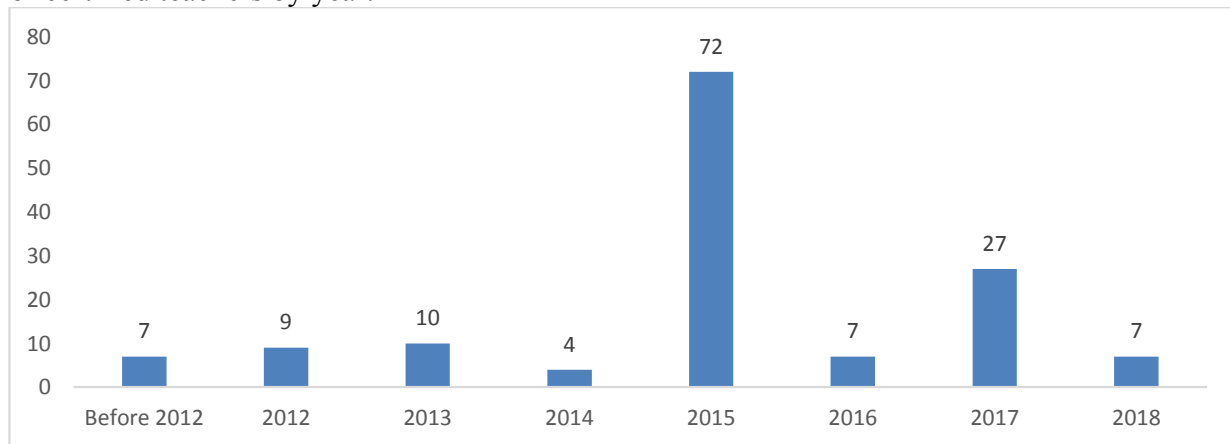


Figure 3. The evolution of the number of Montessori certified teachers

Source: own computation.

Basics in recognizing the authenticity of Montessori education.

Case study Montessori Cluj

The Montessori name has no franchise anywhere in the world, as does McDonalds or Samsung. This means that any institution can be called Montessori, without necessarily offering authentic Montessori education.

There are schools in Romania called Maria Montessori (just as other schools are called Mihail Sadoveanu), without following the Montessori curriculum or the specific principles of this approach. For parents who want to enroll their children in a genuine Montessori kindergarten / school, this can be both frustrating and confusing.

The following aspects enable the authenticity of Montessori education:

1. Educators and teachers participate in specialized and accredited Montessori courses

The Montessori teacher has specialized training or is in the process of specialization for the age level of the children she/ he works with (for example, if the teacher has completed a course for children aged 3-6 years old, she/ he will work in the 3-6-year-old class).

2. Montessori-specific materials have a specific purpose and are available to children

Montessori materials are appropriate for the developmental level of the children in the class and their ages. The materials are put on the shelf at the children level and available to children, have a smart purpose and are made of quality materials.

The beauty, quality, quantity, and authenticity of the materials, as well as the bright and uncongested space are indications of a well thought out and harmonious Montessori environment.

3. The development of the child is the main goal of Montessori education

The educator plans activities for each child, depending on their level of development and the specific interest of each child. In this way the development of the child becomes the main goal of Montessori education.

By the age of five, children choose in a natural way to work by themselves, so up to this age, material presentations are more individual. At school level, children are attracted to group work, so naturally presentations are made mainly in small groups, especially depending on the knowledge level, not necessarily according to age (for example, a passionate 6-year-old advanced in geography could work on a project with an eight-year-old child).

4. Proportional age balance is a key element of a Montessori class

An element of specificity for authentic Montessori education is the grouping of children on three age levels in the same class. For example, children up to 3 years old are grouped into non-walkers (2 months -12/15 months) and walkers (12/15 months - 3 years), based on safety and quality of care criteria. This way of grouping children involves the fact that a Montessori class is built in three years, as follows:

Multi-age groups are places where social and academic development is valuable because the young ones learn from the older ones, and the older ones offer help and are role models for the young ones, as happens, in fact, naturally in life.

5. Children are free to carry out activities in the environment without being interrupted

The uninterrupted work cycle is a specific element of Montessori through which we give the child enough time to work and rest. When working, the child manipulates materials, repeats, problematizes, explores, finds solutions at his own pace, thus building his own solid edifice of knowledge. During this time, children are free to choose activities within the workspace and to carry them out without being interrupted by optional activities included in the institution's program. The length of the work cycle differs depending on the age level of the children's class, 2 hours in the toddler's environment 3 hours in the kindergarten and school environment.

6. Freedom and boundaries are harmoniously combined for the positive development of children

In a Montessori class, children have the freedom to move, to choose the activity, to interact with others, if the respect for themselves, for others and for the environment is maintained. In other words, the child is given as much freedom as he or she needs to grow harmoniously and use his or her energy in a positive way. In a Montessori school, children are not allowed to do absolutely

everything they want, at random, as Montessori education is sometimes misunderstood, but are guided to act intelligently, within clearly set limits, for their own benefit and that of others.

Table 1. Key aspects to be considered in the daily team management



My role and role of others Continuous and daily commitment Own management rules / self-control keys	Personal Development Tools, methods, Courses (e.g., Montessori Unwrapped with Karen Pearce)	Transparency in the community Weekly diaries to parents Periodic albums Video and know how shared	Know how Sharing Presentation plan, responsible, regular meetings Sharing class situations - challenges and solutions	Documentation required Necessary reports, to be followed and managed
What do I feel responsible for and what do I take on?	How do I want to further develop and what do I need?	How can I sustain a continues transparency of good and beautiful work?	How do I get over my comfort zone when working with my students in class?	Do I know what formal responsibilities I have in our accredited institution?

In Figure 4, we could see the target organizational patterns to increase the organizational performance.



Figure 4. Organizational culture: Unleashing human power to increase business performance

Source: own research.

How to keep the employees motivated in the educational institution?

Nearly every company recognizes that employee engagement is today key to extraordinary performance. The key question is: How well prepared are You to meet today 's and tomorrow's workforce challenges? Establishing a HR framework is critical to keep the employees focused and

to generate added value to the business. A first step for a Performance and Strategy oriented Organization is the strategy alignment. An integrated performance management system develops and improves the capabilities of individual contributors and teams.

As an organization leader you need to ensure the motivation and have therefore clear answers to Vision, mission, values, strategy, and steering. Transparency and guidance is ensured by governance, structure, process, technology, and resources, while excellence in execution is given by tool support, capabilities, and skills.

A Career Development & Succession Plan will keep a motivated workforce with Functional competencies, Development program, Succession plan and Talent Management. First the integration & alignment of the team takes place, adequate targets & measures are defined, and the workforce will be motivated.

Applying the above principles, the following implementation plan for the next 5 years will result:

Consolidating the School Team (professors)

The action plan for 2022 (internal workshops, observations, know how exchange) needs to be strictly implemented as well as discovering and attracting new talents needs to remain in focus.

Improve the School image within local community

The team needs to support an online podcast, continuous presence in social media, organize open Montessori seminars to increase the notoriety of the private and public partners.

Assuring transparency and optimal communication within the community

Organizing monthly seminars with parents' community and individual family bi-annual meetings should continue without exception. To maintain the level of parents' satisfaction sending the weekly overall report and bi-annually report of each child is a must.

Increasing the number of students as long-term measure

Increasing the no of 'captive' students at school level will increase the level of confidence in the school activity while maintaining the number of students in nursery and kindergarten. A complex program for school trips, camps and activities outside the classroom need to be ensured.

Implementing the prepared Montessori environment for 0 to 18 years old

The concept and implementation of the farm school for 12-18 years old is the natural step to be followed while consolidating the locations network for toddler, kindergarten, schools' environments. The Montessori environment will be prepared at the highest standards at international level.

The implementation plan is in a continuous process of optimization and each member of the team finds its own role in the overall organization. A young team has great chances of success as the level of motivation is high. In Figure 5 we could see the distribution of team members, parent's community, and cost in Montessori Cluj.

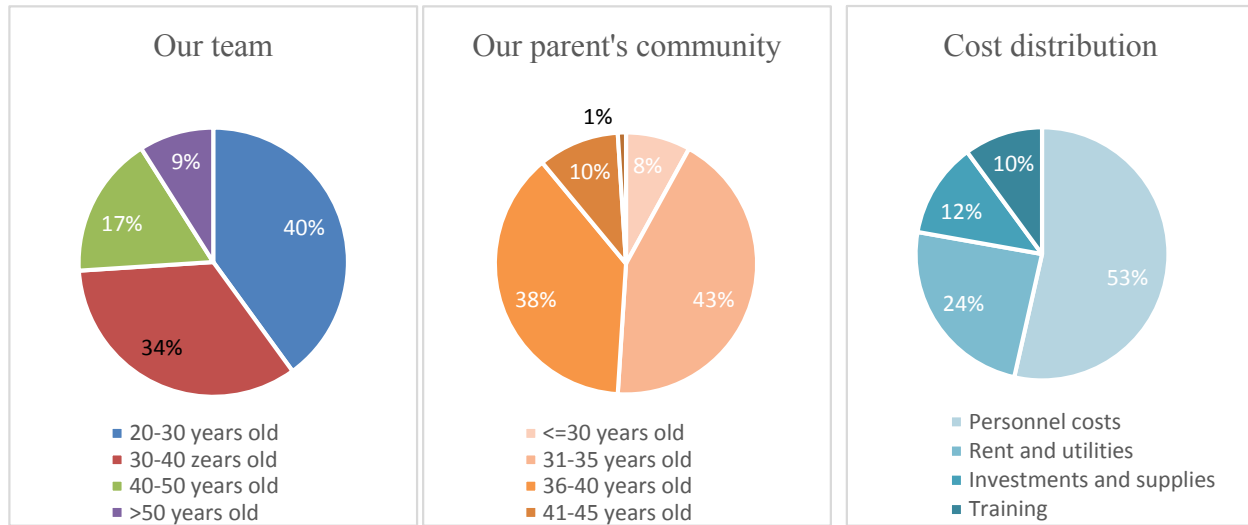


Figure 5. The distribution of team members, parent's community, and cost in Montessori Cluj

Source: own computation.

Montessori Cluj has a young team - about 75% of our colleagues are under 40 years old, while over 50% of our parents' community is under the age of 35. They have a huge responsibility to be role models for the students we guide as well as their parents. Their goal is to build a strong, positive team with high goals that overcome any fear, any barrier. Therefore, the most investment is in people, and this is reflected in the cost structure.

As we could see in the graph above, the highest percentage of costs is represented by personnel costs, with continuous training and salaries, respectively 70%. Our focus is on a larger scale and the principle of working in the team: "Build a team so strong you don't know who the boss is".

Conclusions and further development

Montessori pedagogy is based on free thinking and action, creativity applied in the formation of personality the child. Based on this method, life skills are formed according to the impressions experienced. Dramatic play and complex dramatic techniques are the forms of organization of the activity in under this program.

Through these methods the child is activated from a cognitive, affective and action point of view, putting him in a position to interact. Dramatic pedagogy offers the possibility of individualizing the learning experience and free expression of personality.

Alternative means being able to choose between two or more situations. This trend has been associated with several attempts to offer alternatives to the system educational, and these alternatives are the ones presented above. It cannot be said that one of the alternatives is the most effective. Each of them it has its own efficiency, its own importance. It is especially beneficial to introduce these alternatives because teachers and students know something else, get in touch and relate to others learning techniques that do nothing but open the universe of knowledge to them. They come to know their own limits and values, but they manage to do the same to those around them.

The authenticity of Montessori education is based on six pillars: educators and teachers participate in specialized and accredited Montessori courses, Montessori-specific materials have a

specific purpose and are available to children, the development of the child is the main goal of Montessori education, proportional age balance is a key element of a Montessori class, children are free to carry out activities in the environment without being interrupted and freedom and boundaries are harmoniously combined for the positive development of children.

Applying the principles described above, an implementation plan for the next five years will result in: consolidating the school team, improving the school image within local community, assuring transparency and optimal communication within the community, and increasing the number of students as long-term measure.

For the school to cultivate the "intellectual and practical skills" of the child, it would be needed not only to know how to do the curriculum, pedagogy, resources, and wise policies, but also what are the "duties" of each child who enters the gate. Schools, universities, parents and non-governmental organizations must agree on which direction the Romanian society goes, to create the necessary framework, so that today's children can feel "The need to learn all one's life" for one's own perfection. From Aristotle onwards (which had a dilemma in terms of education - be it moral or cultural) until today, questions about the role and purpose of the education of future generations transcend boundaries and historical periods.

The main limitation of this study is related to the availability of the data. Thus, our analysis was focused on the evolution of the Montessori environment in Romania in the past years with focus on Montessori Cluj. Further research should extend the analysis to longer time frames and to other Montessori schools as well as other alternative educational systems, such as Waldorf and Step-by-Step.

The challenge for us today is to seek and try to create a better world with the material also had in the contemporary social, human, historical and geographical context of Romania.

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