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The Role of the Educator in a Montessori Classroom

Izabela T.C. BĂRBIERU[1]

Abstract

The traditional school shows the educator as the subject in education, the keeper of information and all control. The child is considered to be the object in education, the one who passively receives information from outside. The following study introduces a new model of educator for pre-school. His role appears to be passive. Indeed, he has the knowledge, but this new conception is just to provide the child with the necessary materials for his development. The Montessori teacher shows the child how to use the materials then he withdraws, humbly, just to observe the feedback. Using the observation, this study proposes a new approach towards the child by avoiding the adult's constraint. It places the child into a free environment filled with firm, precise limits. Training the adult into the child's psychology and knowing his stages of development can lead to a better understanding and discovery of the child.

Keywords:

educator, non-intervention, Montessori, pre-school, observation, independence.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the XXth century a female doctor called Maria Montessori worked with children from a mental hospital in Rome. She made an apparatus based on her studies of early pedagogues like Jean Marc Itard (1775- 1838) and Edouard Seguin (1812- 1880). With these materials she managed to raise the children's level in such a manner that at the national examination they received better results than the normal children. This moment is considered the beginning of her success (O'Donnell M., 2007, p. 8).

In 1907, she worked with 60 children with ages from 2, 5 to 6 years old who were involved in a project from the city Hall in San Lorenzo for renovating the builings where she had to supervise the children of the workers. Therefore, this project was an opportunity for her, because using her own materials she managed to determine the children to behave, read and write in less than a year. This was the first project called Casa dei Bambini and many others followed (2007, p. 10).

In his study, *Alternative educaţionale din România,* Felea (2002) states that in Romania, the Montessori method escalated in 1933, when Nicolae Titulescu initiated the Montessori Association in Romania (MAR) having Constantin Rădulescu Motru as an executive president and Ilie Şulea Firu as a secretary (p. 49).

In 1994 it was held the first Montessori Trainig Course for Educators in Romania in Drobeta Turnu Severin (p.52). In the last years the Montessori method regained its success. Catană, L.& Cuciureanu, M.(2012) show that in Romania there are 18 kindergartens and 5 schools in the present and the Montessori Institute of Bucharest organizes courses for training educators with trainers from Norway, Finland and Holland. There is an interest for opening the next level in high school using the Montessori method (p. 84).

Regarding the Montessori method, O'Donnell (2007) says that is based very much upon **observation** (p. 13). Only observing the child moving free in his environment the educator can see the child's **true potential**. Maria Montessori (1963) says that the child's potential is revealed in his "absorbent mind, the human tendencies, the sensitive periods and in the 100 miliard neurons that the child posseses from birth" (p. 89). The educator must have knowledge of this information in order to prepare the environment. The child is a **sensitive human being**, meaning that "he learns through his senses" (p. 100). Everything he touches gives him some information. For this reason, all the materials

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in the classroom can be touched and the process of learing becomes an active one. **The materials** are child-sized, colorful, attractive and most of them made of glass. **The child is free** to move in the class, to choose his material, to work as long as he wants and where he wants (1963, p. 195). Each child has the responsibility of his own work (to set the material and to place it back to its place, to set the table and to clean after himself, to dress and undress by himself). **The educator** is trained into the principles of the method and his fundamental duty is "not to interfere into the child's focused activity" (Montessori, 2007, p.61) , to demonstrate the materials for the child and to help only when he is really needed. There is no teacher's desk and the children are not forced to sit at their tables. **The classes** are organized in mixed aged groups for the older ones to help the younger ones. The younger children can borrow books from school and, in this way, they can make contact with primary children. Teaching in the Montessori method is an active process, where children learn to take care of themselves and others, they learn how to write and to read, they learn how to count, to make addition, subtraction, division, multiplication by they are 5 years old. And this, just having fun.

1. The Role of the Educator in the Traditional Preschool

The traditional school, remarks Tudoran (2004) shows the educator as the subject in education, the keeper of information and all control. The child is considered to be the object in education, the one who passively receives information from outside (p. 65).

The same author states that the relation that is settled between the educator and the child can be varied. He mentions:

- *Communication relation*

It refers to the transmission of information, of reaction and request.

- *Guidance and direction relation*

It refers to the relation of dominance and authority from the educator and to the passive reception of the information and the inhibition of the children's independence.

- *Socio- affective relation*

Meaning the actions of the educator towards the children. There are included here trust, empathy and acceptance (pp. 66-67).

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2. Methods of managing conflicts in the traditional preschool

During the educational act in kindergartens the educators need methods to overcome the conflict that appear between children. The large number of children with only one educator makes the approaching of discipline in a positive manner very difficult. Manolache (1947) concludes that most of the methods refer to the usage of constraint and reward. These offer a way for mantaining discipline in that particular moment (p. 190).The usual rewards used in the activity are toys, decorations, prizes, medals, stimulents. In this way the reward gains "an utilitarian purpose". The child makes a good thing only waiting for the reward. The reward gives pleasure being a stimulus for repeating the good thing. A reward that is used repeatedly is no longer efficient. In this way, it needs to be always intensified but this cannot be offered without limit. Rewards in excess can lead to indiscipline (p. 195).

Pongracz& Alezar (2010) show that other methods that the educators use to help children to improve their behaviour refer to playing different games like: assertive communication games; discussions on images with different behaviours; reading texts which present characters with different emotional states; role play.

The educator also needs to avoid critics, to be affective, to encourage positive behaviour, to correct the negative ones and to control herself. A good idea can be getting out with children more often, thus altering the typical, conventional environment (p. 79).

3. Methodology

The subject of our study refers to the observation of a Montessori environment. We used the intentional and systematic observation to measure the attitude of the educators, the discipline in the classroom and the whole educational atmosphere. The observation took place in regular conditions without any intervention from the observer.

The purpose of our systematic observation taken into a Montessori environment is to identify the role of the Montessori educator and also to identify his attitude towards children in practicing positive discipline.

The questions of our research are:

- How is teaching accomplished in a Montessori classroom?

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- What is the attitude of the Montessori educator towards children in the classroom?
- What are the methods of managing conflicts in a Montessori preschool?
- How does the Montessori educator encourage independence in children?

The concrete aspect that had been followed during the observation were:

- The way the Montessori educator achieves the act of teaching.
- The attitude of the Montessori educator towards the children in managing conflicts.
- The attitude of the children towards their colleagues and the educator.
- The benefits and disadvantages of using positive discipline.

The hypothesis refers to the fact that using positive methods of discipline for pre-school and giving freedom with ferm limits can lead do an optimisation of the entire educational activity.

The observation had taken place for a period of approximately one month from March until April 2015. In this period of time there were observed 7 educators (5 leading teachers and 4 assistants). All the leading teachers were trained in AMI (Association Montessori Internationale) courses for children from 3 to 6 years old. One educator was trained in the USA, one in Romania, one in Czech Republic and two in Austria.

There were observed 79 children with ages from 3 to 6 years old in three Montessori institutions in Romania.

The observation was taken mostly in the morning period from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m in a formal context, in the classroom.

4. The observation guide

We used an **observation guide** that had two criteria: the attitude of the educator and the attitude of the children. Each observation guide must be organised on observational indicators. These are "issues directly observable, identifiable and measurable objectively" (Bocoş, 2003, p. 63).

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The attitude of the adult criterion was organised on the following **observational indicators**:

- The use of the individual way of teaching.
- Measuring the educators interventions during the child's activity.
- Setting a prepared environment according to the child's needs.
- Managing conflicts using positive methods.
- Using a high tone in mantaining discipline in the classroom.
- Modeling behaviour through personal example.
- Setting ferm limits and applying them with consistency.
- Measuring the time for the educator's observation in the classroom.
- Respecting the child's concentration.

The attitude of the children criterion was organised on the following **observational indicators**:

- Encouraging the child's independence.
- Encouraging the care for the environment and for the others.
- Stimulating different types of interaction in the classroom.

5. The interpretation of the observation data

On one hand, the systematic observation made in a Montessori environment made possible the accomplishment of a global image towards the attitude of the educator in the classroom. On the other hand, observing the attitude of the children completed the image of the educator's behaviour.

First, we will present the main criterion of the observation – *the attitude of the adult*- and its observational indicators.

- *The use of the individual way of teaching.*

The educational act in a Montessori classroom is accomplished through mostly individual lessons called "presentations". These presentations are demonstrations of the usage of the materials in the classrooms. These presentations are made only by the leading educator in the class and they have some characteristics:

- During the presentation there are used only few words. The reason for this is that the child can focus only on the movement of the hands.

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- The movements of each presentation are slower than the adults normally use, in order for the child to follow.
- Each presentation has a special focus emphasized by the educator which is called the "point of interest" of the material. This point of interest sparks the child's interest and determines him repeat the action.
- Generally, the presentations are made respecting the pattern- from left to right and from top to bottom. These make the children accustomed to a later reading and writing.

Some presentations, for example, in Mathematics can be made to a small group of children but they are mostly individual.

The systematic observation of the educators from all Montessori classes had shown the fact that individual teaching is a general way of teaching in a Montessori environment.

- *Measuring the educators interventions during the child's activity.*

The motto of the Montessori method is ***Help me to do it by myself!*** According to this message the adult has the mision to interfere as less as possible. The child needs to make his own hard work. The educator has the role to introduce the materials to the child and when he begins to work by himself, the adult withdraws, quietly. He observes the child, by far. The only reasons when the educator can interfere is when it is dangerous or distructive behaviour. This retention in action it is a very difficult job for the educator because adults are accustomed to frequently interfering in a child's activity even if only to appreciate, to praise or to argue.

„The educator must be very careful. Non- interfering means not to interfere in any way" (Montessori., 2007, p. 261).

Therefore, interference is perceived as intrusive. In all classes that we observed we noticed the fact that the intervention of the educator in the focused child's activity was almost absent. This is the reason why some think that the role of the Montessori educator is a passive one.

- *Setting a prepared environment according to the child's needs.*

Between the age of 3 to 6 years old the child passes through a period of changes and accomplishments. He likes to imitate the work of the adults near him. For this reason one of the biggest area in a

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Montessori environment is called **Practical life.** As the name says, this is made of materials that imitate the adult actions but only that they are child sized, real and attractive. In this area, we mention materials for the care of the person, like washing hands, washing clothes, cleaning shoes, etc. There are also materials for the care of the environment like sweeping, washing dishes, washing the tables, dusting, mopping, arranging flowers, etc. A very important and very interesting types of materials for the children are the ones for preparing the food. In here we mention cutting cucumbers, cutting bannanas, making orange juice, making sandwiches, cutting apple slices, etc.

Another area in a Montessori environment is the **Sensorial** area. In this area we can find the materials that were specially created by Maria Montessori herself. Each material has a certain sensorial quality to emphasize a particular dimension (height, length), visual sense (the coloured tablets), the gustatory sense (the tasting bottles), the auditory sense (the sound boxes), the smelling sense (the smelling bottles), the tactile sense (the touching boards with rough and smooth and also the thermic bottles with graded temperatures) and so on.

The next area refers to **Language.** In this area the materials provide opportunities for the children to exercise work with letters. Starting from hearing the sounds in the Sound game, from touching the Sandpaper letters that helps the memory to fix the letter into the mind through muscle memory, from the Mobile Alphabet that helps the child to handle the vowels and consonants and to make words, then sentences until grammar exercises and reading exercises.

There is the **Mathematics** area in which the children can discover the experience of working with concrete quantities and numbers. With each material children learn more achieving addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. All these only through games and children do not even realise how easily they learn these operations.

In our observation we noticed the fact that all the classroom were equiped with the Montessori apparatus. During the year the educators replace materials that are either used any more by children or they are outdated.

- *Managing conflicts using positive methods.*

In the Montessori classes the educators try to apply active discipline. This type of discipline refers to the fact that each child has the

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liberty to move around the classroom, to talk (as long as they do not disturb others), the lack of mobility being present only at the choosing of the child. The child has the freedom to choose his work, to be involved in an activity as long as he wants and where he wants (at the table, on the carpet or even outside in several environments).

In this situation the educator has the mision to keep this atmosphere in the room. He is helped by the assistant, who takes care that other children do not disturb the ones who work, the children who place the materials to their initial location in the proper setting and verifies whether can also do other activities with the children that are disruptive, until the educator is released from other presentations.

In any environment conflicts can appear. When this happens, the educator interferes only when needed. During our observation we noticed a couple of situations when the educator let the children to solve their own issues. In all the classes that we observed we had seen the fact that the educator uses a series of methods to calm tempered children : empathy, holding, taking them in another room for a talk, sending them into the library to calm themselves, by wainting there until the sand in the hourglass finishes. In one room the educator sent the child to sit on a chair and in another class the child was sent to a space in the room with cushions to sit on. Another method that was mentioned was giving alternatives such "Would you like to work at a table with a material"? or "Would you like to stay in my arms while I am making another presentation"?

We didn't observe the usage of punishment. At most, the consequence of inadequate behaviour was followed by a reinforcement of good manners (for example, if a child had broken a vaze he has to clean). We even observed the lack of praise. In one classroom the educator when asked by a child if she likes his drawing she asked back smiling: "Do you like it? Is there anything that you do not like on it"?

We also observed the lack of rewards of any kind. Children find pleasure in their work and they choose the materials only based on interest.

- *Using a high tone in maintaining discipline in the classroom*.

In all the environments that we observed the tone of the educator was a normal one. The shouting in any situation is avoided. Sometimes in order to capture children's attention the adults softened

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their voice. Even for sending a message from a distance there are some signs (for example, the educators call the assistant by making a sign). The reason for this is to give an example for the children. Using a high tone by the educator sends the message that this is the suitable thing to do. In a normal Montessori classroom, with almost 30 children and with an experienced teacher that talks loudly the whole atmosphere in the room will be rowdy.

- *Modelling behaviour through personal example*.

In all classrooms that we observed the educator tried to be a model of action. From solving conflicts, from the way of speaking, dressing, walking, the adult sends a message to the child. Being in their period in which they imitate and they whish to be as the adults in their surroundings, they absorb all attitudes without discriminating.

In two of the kindergartens we observed situations when little girls imitated the way of presentation of the educator, respecting even the smallest details. In one kindergarten, a little girl tried to solve a conflict using the words that the educator had used in similar situations (for example, "We do not hit other children. We use our words").

- *Setting ferm limits and applying them with consistency*.

Like any other organised institution, the Montessori classrooms have sets of rules. Indeed, there is some flexibility and a certain exemption that the children have, but they also have to respect some rules. Some of them are: placing the material back to its place in the correct setting; cleaning after themself; using words when solving conflicts; not running in the class; taking care of the animals and plants in the room; respecting the other children and adults.

The difficult task of the educator is to be consistent in applying the rules. He can never miss to comply because then the children will receive the message that the ground rules can be easily avoided and and that it is legitimate not to follow the rules. The educator has to respect his word no matter the tantrums of the children. Consistency during tantrums accompanied with afection give a feeling of security to the child.

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- *Measuring the time for the educator's observation in the classroom.*

Observation is a very important part of the educator's activity. Only through observation he can realise the stage of development in which the child is in, what material to give to the child and what improvement to make to the materials. The observation should be an ongoing process. Sometimes the educator has sufficient time to sit and to note down the observation on children, but sometimes the observation is made by the assistant or noted later on in the day. The observations made need to be general, on the whole class and also individual. The information needs to be objective and short.

In all rooms that had been observed the educator mainly observed the class.

- *Respecting the child's concentration.*

Concentration is also a very important part of the Montessori educator's activity. The biggest rule is NEVER to interrupt a child's focus. The main reason is that the child should be allowed to focus on the materials because this moment is decisive for the child's development. Maria Montessori thought that the first step in developing the child is the interest towards the material. After that, there comes *the work*. Through this work the child begins to transform himself and self-correct his behavioural deviations. And only after enough work, the special moment comes- *the concentration.* This moment is so precious, so spontaneous that no one is allowed to ruin it. When this moment comes, the child enters a path that leads to the main purpose of the whole activity, called by Maria Montessori *normalisation* (1963, p. 89). This refers to the development of the full potential of the child. To make him happier, full of life, capable of helping others and listening to the adult (meaning here to accept the fact that the adult is his guide and he can use the experience of the adult to live).

All the educators who had been observed respected the child's concentration and tried to encourage the other children not to disturb as well.

Further, we will present the second criterion of the observation – *the attitude of the children* and its 3 observational indicators.

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- *Encouraging the child's independence.*

Encouraging independence is an important task in the educator's activity. This independence is stimulated only through movement. A disciplined child is not mute or "devoid of any movement like a paralytic. This kind of child is not disciplined but annihilated" (Montessori., 2007, p. 51).

In the above data we have shown that children in a Montessori classroom are encouraged to do things by themselves.

In the classes observed we saw many situations when children managed to fulfill numerous tasks by themselves, such as: serving breakfast by themselves and cleaning the dishes; dressing themselves when going outside; eating by themselves; mopping after spilling water on the floor, on their own initiative; sweeping after dropping dirt on the floor, on their own initiative; replacing the used objects in materials; using the toilet; dusting when finding dust on the materials.

- *Encouraging the care for the environment and for the others.*

Most of the materials in Practical Life are based on taking care of themself and the environment. We gave some examples in the prepared environment indicator.

Concerning the care for the others and the environment we observed certain lessons that are specific to Montessori method, called „Grace and courtecy lessons". These are group lessons where the adult shows concrete ways of action in certain situations. We mention here: How do we present ouserself? How do we wish Happy Birthday? How do we observe a working child without disturbing? How do we ask for help? How do we wait the educator's help when he is in a presentation?

- *Stimulating different types of interaction in the classroom.*

A very interesting aspect that we observed during our observation is the fact that the classes have mixed ages (3 to 6 years old). The reason for this is that the older ones help the youngsters just like in a family. The older ones get enough experience with the materials that are used at the incipient stage of the class, so they are in the situation when they can become young assistants. It is a known fact that children learn faster from their own peers.

In all observed environments we noticed older children helping others but only when they really needed. An interesting aspect is the fact

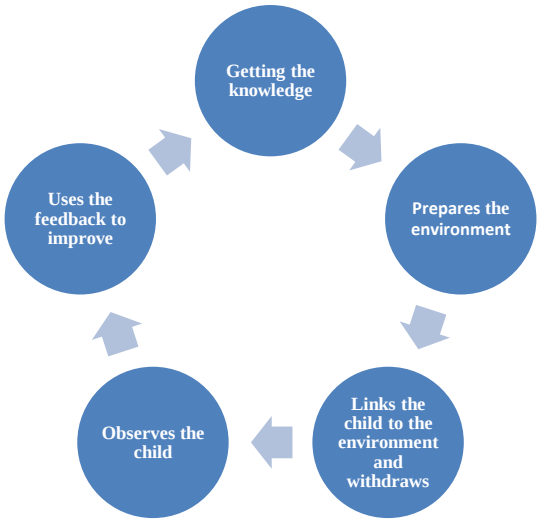
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that the children in one Montessori kindergaten were permitted to visit other classroom, including the school. This is a great advantage for the children because they get to know the new environment and this facilitates the transfer from kindergarten to school.

6. Conclusions

The systematic observation made in a Montessori environment made possible obtaining a global image towards the attitude of the educator in the classroom.

The observation helped us to discover the fact that the preparation of the Montessori educator is realised on different levels.



Getting the knowledge it refers to the fact that a person becomes a Montessori educator only after he is trained in a AMI Montessori Course. In these courses the educator learns the way of teaching, the principles of the Montessori pedagogy, he learns to make objective observation by observing children for hundreds of hours and there are also many hours of supervised practice (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 45). Only the AMI Montessori diploma gives the educator the information he needs. From now on she needs a lot of experience with children.

The next role of the educator is to **prepare the environment**. She needs to arrange the space taking into account the child's age, needs and size. Montessori (1966) encourages that the Practical Life materials to use "atractive materials, child sized, color coding, simplicity"(p.77).

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After preparing the materials the educator **links the child to the materials** through presentations. Each child needs a demonstration of the materials for them to know the use of them. These presentations are made as many times children need them. Only after the child is focused on working on the material, the educator withdraws.

She needs to withdraw to see the effects of the materials on children. In this way she can **observe** them. After each presentation the educator observes the child for a short while. If she has the time she can note down the observation or she can do this later in the day.

After getting **the feedback** the educator has the information **to improve** the environment. From this information she knows either to change the material in itself, to change an object in the material either to make a new presentation. Each feedback returns the educator back into **getting the knowledge** aspect and to begin again the whole cycle.

The questions at the beginning of our study received their answer: teaching in a Montessori classroom is mostly individual and sometimes in small groups; the Montessori educator must be positive, empathic, calm and consistent; the methods used to manage conflicts in a Montessori classroom are empathy, holding, taking the children in another room for a talk, sending them into the library to calm themselves, by wainting until the sand in the hourglass finish, giving alternatives and each child bears the consequences of his actions, but using positive reinforcement; in the Montessori environment the children are encouraged to make as much actions by themselves : to dress and undress, to eat, to wash the dishes, to clean after themselves, to use the toilet.

During our observation we noticed the fact that using positive methods of discipline gave children real positive models of action which they imitated in their relation with their colleagues. This situation made it easier for the educator to focus on the educational activity rather than only solving conflicts. The freedom with ferm limits that the children experience give them security, raise their self-confidence and basic trust. Therefore, pozitive methods of solving conflicts in the classroom connected with freedom with limits lead to a better unfolding of the didactical activity.

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7. The limits of the research

During our study we noticed a few aspects, for example, one class observed had the procedure that each year the educators should change the classroom. This aspect leads to the lack of continuity in the classroom, to a continuous accomodation and feelings of insecurity.

All classes observed had a number of children of 12 to 20 at most. The ideal Montessori classrooms have 30 children and two adults.

A few of the advantages of using active discipline in a classroom are: modelling the children to act in a positive way, to manage their anger by using the words in a positive manner, encreases self-esteem and cooperation between groups.

Another side of using active discipline in a classroom is the fact that sometimes it works difficult on short periods, it needs a lot of patience, tact from the adult, time, a very close cooperation between educator and family and consistency.

8. Discussions

The current study will be included into a larger reseach called "Discipline and normalization. A comparative study between the Montessori method and the traditional kindergartens". In order to achieve the purpose of this study we will use the systematic observation made in a Montessori environment but also a systematic observation made in traditional preschool environments.

The process of selecting the subjects was intentional. There were choosen educators that had the Montessori training and that worked in a Montessori institution. The observation was preceded by obtainig the aproval for using the collected information in our reseach from the educators and from their managers. They were informed on the confidentiality of the data and on the purpose of the study. The notes of the observation were put at their disposal.

The Montessori method is a well known international alternative. The Association Montessori Internationale in Amsterdam affiliates training centers throughout the world. These centers offers AMI diploma courses that are recognised internationally for their quality and authenticity. The subject of the study has the purpose to reveal the important role of the educator as a part of the prepared environment. Only a trained and experienced teacher can follow the child on his path.

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The study empasizes the importance of recognising a genuine Montessori educator.

During our research we realised that the culture of cooperation is very important. We hope that our work will encourage the educators to cooperate more and to realise the role of the observation in their work. Also, encouraging observation in other kindergartens can help educators to improve their attitude.

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