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## **Raising a child in prearranged environment in the perception of Polish teachers – the forgotten discourse or a new educational perspective? (Research conducted in the province of Subcarpathian)**

### **Introduction**

Child as an individual requiring a separate treatment in the process of education should be placed in a suitable environment meeting the child's needs, which stimulates cognitive processes' development, allows for orientation in the world in terms of discovering dependencies, perception of order and harmony between environment's elements, as well as gaining the ability to move independently in the world. The space in which the child remains should respond and enable to satisfy children's needs [Centner-Guz 2009, p. 274]. Hence, one of the Montessori system's major goals is to learn and create social interaction patterns in a properly "prearranged environment". On one hand, the prearranged environment is an adjusted place to live, learn and develop, responding to child's needs, on the other hand, it has to take into account cultural and civilization requirements among which the child should grow. These are the appropriate internal and external conditions providing pupil's optimal development.

Prearranged environment consists of three basic elements: physical, structural-dynamic and personal. Each of these aspects plays a key role in children's development and education but also forms an integral unit with other elements.

As the first listed first aspect, material one relates primarily to the building and its equipment including appropriate teaching and developmental aids prearranged by Maria Montessori. Children's activity place – the rooms in which students learn and develop – should have a relative size to the number of children, equipped

in very simple items adapted to children's age and responding to various forms of children's activities. The child needs to feel safe and secure in the prearranged room. The didactic material gathered in the room is a source of stimulus for activating the students [Pinesowa 1931, p. 1] and corresponds to children's need to explore, stimulate and satisfy their curiosity [Skjold Wennerstorm, Broderman Smeds 2009 p. 16]. Teaching materials should meet the following criteria: to be aesthetic, functional, characterized by simplicity and allowing the children control their errors on their own. Development material is in the basic and expanded form. Children working with aids start from executing the basic exercises, then they move to the extended material.

Working in the prearranged environment relies on some regularly repeated behaviours such as welcoming, working, cleaning and meeting in a circle, which form the rhythm of the day. In the course of everyday conversations with the teacher during the greeting, full-cycle of children's independent work, taking responsibility for law and order in the classroom as well as reports of the day, children acquire a range of academic and social competences which enable them to demonstrate their abilities [Zdybel 2000, p. 261].

Pupils' work with didactic material reveals sequentially the following elements: matching pairs, looking for contrasts, creating new opportunities and looking for the logical relations between different elements [Albinowska, Czekalska, Gaj, Lauba, Matczak, Piecusiak, Sosnowska 2008, p. 11]. Teaching materials are not only specific tips on how to perform the activities but also motivate for independent work.

For example, a room for children 3–6 years old (preschool room) includes the following groups of teaching materials: for everyday practical exercises, training the senses, mathematical education, language education, space education as well as for religious education [Miksza 2010, pp. 45–46]. Montessori developed materials, tasks and ways of working with them in such a way to isolate the sensory impressions so that while one group of senses is active the other is off. It makes it extremely easy for children to work and concentrate [Guz, 5/2004.].

Teaching aids used in the Montessori system support pupils' self-development. Children have the ability to control errors on their own by observing objects in a mechanical way, comparing them with the model, or it is done by other person – a teacher, a friend or a child performing an action. Self-control awakens the child's self-esteem, self-reliance and independence.

Structural – dynamic aspect applies to the principles of building environment and the prevailing labour standards. The main procedures developed by Maria Montessori relate to freedom, law and order, beauty, contact with the real world and nature [Bednarczuk 2007, p. 43]. Each item in the classroom has its place [Jordan, 3/2005] and didactic material characterizes with order and harmony. Order teaches children confidence in the surrounding environment and working

with it [Bednarczuk 2007, p. 45]. The principle of beauty is a standard for the prearranged environment structure and function. All objects in the environment prearranged for the child should be attractive to draw the attention with colour, appearance and structure. Pupils are free from illusion thanks to the contact with reality [Pinesowa 1931, pp. 8–9].

It is impossible to neglect personal aspect while writing about prearranged environment. Such aspect is formed by the teacher, parents and pupils group diverse in age. Although teachers have a very important role in the Montessori system, their task is limited to “children’s helper” on the way of their development. The teacher is an organizer, but also “a part of” the environment. Teacher’s functions in the classroom are defined by activities such as observing, assisting and mediating between didactic material and child [Guz 1998, p. 35]. Maria Montessori required from future teachers a rich general knowledge and willingness to improve. According to her, a good teacher should be peaceful, full of love, patience and respect for the child, as well as capable of self-criticism and self-reflection. Teacher should be a model for all mentees, to be free from pride, anger, desire to be superior to the child [Laska 2005, p. 58].

According to Maria Montessori, the most important impetus leading teacher’s work should be attitude of love for the child. Love is a feature that allows you to control the process of education in a genuine, sincere and true way [Miksza 2010, p. 88]. Teacher should be silent, should observe rather than to teach and should be humble. A man who is incapable of love sees only the others faults. Teacher guided by love for a child is a careful and reliable observer because the perception is based not only on what he sees, which helps to understand the child. This is the only situation the pupil can reveal his true nature to adults [Laska 2005, p. 63]. Teacher-educator cooperates with the pupil’s parents. The basis of goals jointly implemented by parents and teachers is the recognition of similar standards, training methods and patterns of behaviour. When children’s guardians are aware of how educational process at school proceeds, they can support their children. To make parents understand this methods specificity better, teachers organize consultations and meetings for parents.

Considering all these aspects, the conclusion is that properly designed environment enables children correct development.

### **Outline of the research concept**

From 2011 to 2013 the researchers carried out diagnostic tests in the south-eastern Poland, to understand if teachers working in kindergartens and primary schools, as well as parents sending their children to these facilities are open and ready to Maria Montessori pedagogy. The research was made as a questionnaire. A comprehensive look at the Montessori system, especially in the context of its qualities made the author to cover three groups of respondents. The first

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consisted active kindergarten and primary school teachers working in classes I to III – 84 respondents. In the second group, there were 164 students specializing in pre-school and early school education. The study also included 210 parents with children in pre-school and early school age. This group included 60 parents sending their offspring to Montessori centres. In the course of research procedure the individuals were chosen with purposive-random sampling and the research focused on four leading issues. The aim was to learn what do future teachers of Montessori pedagogy think about the system, how open are the teachers and parents to the solutions used in the Italian researcher's concept, to determine respondents' attitude towards prearranged environment as well as to recognise the system's educational advantages in the perception of parents sending their children to Montessori facilities.

The research on Maria Montessori pedagogy undertaken in this perspective, gave the author very interesting empirical data, which is the subject of separate study. This article aspires to recognise the teachers' attitude towards three basic components of Montessori system's prearranged environment, i.e. the building and its equipment and teaching aids, working with the group principles as well as teacher's role in the educational process. A questionnaire was constructed to relate to the issues in the study. The questionnaire contained 20 statements describing main aspects of prearranged environment, to which the respondents answered in the Likert's scale. Respondents had the opportunity to provide a broader response in relation to all matters contained in the sentence. The empirical data obtained in the course of questioning 84 teachers, was categorised according to the following criterion: material, structural- dynamic and personal aspect of prearranged environment.

### **Polish teachers about prearranged environment. Between acceptance and concerns**

M. Montessori's concept of prearranged environment created in the kindergarten or school is a „macroworld's microcosm”, reflecting all important relations, concepts and relationships pertaining to the world of nature, culture and civilization. As a result, children feel safe and they are stimulated to action. Therefore, a questionnaire survey was divided into two groups of questions relating to surroundings' properties and teaching aid – developmental material. The teachers' were asked in what way the children's closest environment can influence their confidence, safety, imagination, contact with nature and the world of nature, culture and civilization. Referring to the first three sentences which emphasize the sense of security and confidence as the basis of children's development, the role of stimulating children's imagination and ways of pupils' activities by stimuli coming from the environment, as well as highlight significance of relationship with the natural world, the teachers strongly approved their contents. 70% of respondents

strongly agreed with all the described solutions, while others were less intense in their opinions – they expressed their approval for these issues. Respondents, active teachers working in kindergartens and primary schools – integrated education, justified their opinions pointing out that *“it is impossible work with children, if they don't feel safe in the room, if collected items cause students' concern”* (Questionnaire No. 6, woman, years 37). *“The room, where children work, must be friendly and inspiring, hence the right colours, the structure of the material from which the items are made. I myself try to make children to be interested in them”* (Questionnaire No. 52, female, age 45). *“It is clear that the pupils are part of the natural world and everything I do with children I try to associate with what they see outside the window”* (Questionnaire No. 12, female, age 29). This group covered by the research is consistent and confident that the judgement contained in the questionnaire is correct. These people treat a sense of security, peace, inspiring and encouraging activities as elementary components of the educational process. They strongly believe that educational process and upbringing are impossible to realise in an isolation to changes occurring in nature. Environmental education is an important component of the curriculum in early education, hence the author of the study claims, the surveyed teachers pay great attention to this area. Teachers are positive towards these assumptions of the Italian pedagogue's system. Unfortunately, the statement related to placing educational process in cultural and civilization standards children grow up in, gained quite low support among teachers. Only 27.3 % of respondents strongly support it and one third of respondents (32.1%) only partially agree with this statement. It is possible that this situation reflects a peculiar distancing of some respondents from cultural civilizational change, showing a dominant belief that the educational process should be implemented within the walls of the nursery and multi-stage school. Here are exemplary responses of teachers expressing their doubts:

*“Civilization changes are not always desirable and sometimes even culture learned in the pupil's family home raises doubts, it is difficult to build educational process based on them”* (Questionnaire No. 23, female, age 52). *“I do not always keep up with the cultural and civilization changes, some are negative, I am not sure if school should reflect them so eagerly”* (Questionnaire No. 76, female, age 40).

Material facet of M. Montessori system's prearranged environment is that it also creates developmental material. Teaching aids should arise pupils' curiosity, stimulate them to action, and trigger the need to use the available items. Having multitude of proposals, children are able to make free choices and while satisfying their needs, children are made to undertake individual actions. These solutions diverge from traditional understanding of teaching aids, which are usually introduced by teacher supporting educational process. What attitude do the surveyed teachers' take towards such solutions? Respondents were presented six

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sentences illustrating the teaching aids' role in this system, i.e. multiplicity of proposals concerning developmental material in the classroom and the possibility for children to use them without restraint, stimulating role of didactic material in terms of independent work done by the student, didactic aids are simple and suggestive so that children are able to use the collected material on their own and the assumption that it is didactic material rather than the teacher itself to enrich children's work. The obtained data are rather pessimistic. All sentences gathered a group of teachers expressing their disapproval towards their content. There were over 40% of respondents who disagreed with the fact that children have the right to use teaching aids independently and without restraint. There were also 22,6% of teachers who objected the permission to move freely, direct access to support, as well as unimpeded possibility to discover how the teaching aids work. The largest group of surveyed teachers - more than half of the respondents (54.8%) - disagreed with the assumption that teaching aid is to serve children above all and is to enrich children's work. In their opinion, it is a pedagogue who is responsible for introducing didactic material, according to covered content. Respondents express their surprise: *"I cannot imagine that children can use the aids whenever they want to. This could lead to chaos, I cannot accept that"* (Questionnaire No. 41, female, age 57) as well as have significant doubts especially organizational ones. The author explains this situation with teachers' incomplete knowledge about Montessori system's work methods. Theoretically, teachers understand that there are many teaching aids in classrooms run in the Montessori system, but they still interpret them through the prism of the traditional school where it is better to take control over students using developmental material. It's hard for surveyed teachers to imagine children freely moving about the class with teaching aids. Some people express a strongly negative attitude in this area *"in terms of safety and organizing classes it cannot be done"* (Questionnaire No. 39, female, age 42).

The empirical data let to conclude that such proposals generate certain distance. Perhaps teachers working in traditional schools and kindergartens are unaware of dependence, described by Italian researcher herself, that children are more willing to work with aids they can choose themselves. Material chosen by each child makes them more focused on the activity and mastery brings an actual joy, satisfaction and awareness of knowledge they gained. Teaching aid, which makes students bored leads to an ineffective work. Hence, the author formulates a demand to teachers to improve their knowledge about M. Montessori system's detailed solutions as well as its working methodology.

Organization of work in classes carried out according to this method is based on certain principles, which have already been described earlier. To recognize respondents' attitude to the main rules governing the relations between children and prearranged environment, and the teacher, they were asked to comment on the following statements:

1. Pupils should make their own independent decisions that will teach them responsibility.
2. Self-control awakens children's self-esteem, self-reliance and independence.
3. Children are only satisfied with the work done on their own.
4. The law and order in the classroom allows children to build internal order, provides a sense of harmony and security.

Analysis of the collected empirical material indicates that the surveyed teachers had no doubt as to the validity of theses in the third and fourth sentence. Respondents acknowledge that satisfaction experienced by the child after the work done alone is a very important part of educational process (74 people out of 84 surveyed accept the issue in question), as well as they agree that environment in order builds a sense of security and favours accepting the rules by a juvenile (the approval rate is 92.8%). However, the sentence referring to the principles of freedom, as the basis for organizing activities for both students and teacher, divided the respondents into nearly equal groups. The surveyed teachers tend to disagree with the content that pupils should make their own decisions teaching them responsibility but other respondents favour such a solution (45, 2% and 40, 5% of respondents respectively). Supporters of children's independence in the course of education emphasize that *"it allows to develop independence"*, *"favours self-discipline"* and *"prevents passivity and subordination"* (Questionnaire No. 81, 10, 17). Opponents emphasize that *"leaving your child with the freedom to decide may lead to imprudent steps"*, *"threatens the safety of the child, especially so small"* (Questionnaire No. 52, 71, 27). According to one of the surveyed preschool teachers, their worries are raised by *"such an experimental way of learning responsibility"* (Questionnaire No. 1, female, age 29). Approach presented by opponents impels to emphasize that children's independence and freedom in the Montessori system has some limits determined by the common good of children's community and implementing the rules of honest self-control, assistance provided to others, finishing the activities and accepting the other children needs and activities leads to self-discipline not requiring external impulses. Continuing, it must be emphasized that a significant group of respondents (61.9%), show concern whether children aged 3–10 years are capable of self-control. They are far from denying the assumption that self-control fosters pupils' valuation but recognize that pupils in preschool or early school need teachers' control in their activities and evaluating their own actions. Teachers also have difficulty accepting a situation in which students make decisions independently - which teaches them responsibility and bearing consequences of their actions. This is clearly a traditional idea of central role of the pedagogue in the class – a well-established historical position of leadership. Nevertheless children who have the possibility to control their work and correct errors on their own, are bolder, more imaginative, more creative in solving problems because they are not afraid teacher's criticism. The student formulates



a number of potential hypotheses and by verifying them gains knowledge and reaches complacency. Basing on such work, students are able to conclude what can they do and what makes them any difficulties.

In the view of the earlier opinions, claiming that teachers are ready to implement M. Montessori's solutions is doubtful.

Reflection devoted to prearranged environment in the Montessori system, cannot do without the personal aspect. It has been repeatedly emphasized in this chapter that the point of personal aspect is a teacher who is supposed to be a link, translator and interpreter of this complicated world. The teacher's role in the Montessori method is a bit different compared to the tasks assigned to a teacher in a traditional educational institution. Montessori teacher-educator relying on love for the child, assigns the central place in child's favour and resignes from own actions following the pupil. Therefore, child's activity combines with teacher's passive attitude. Guided by these premises author also wanted to know the opinions, judgments and beliefs of teachers working in traditional manner, whether they accept or deny Montessori educator. Just as with the earlier levels of prearranged environment, undermentioned statements were formulated in the questionnaire, showing the following results:

1. The teacher-educator's role is limited to being "a child's helper" in the way of its development (80.9% – accept, 19.1% – partially accept).
2. The teacher should not interrupt child's work (57.1% – negate; 28.6% – accept).
3. The teacher should not force the child to work while resting or watching others work (40.5% – negate; 33.3% – accept).
4. The teacher should not give the students solutions to problems (79% – negate; 14.2 – accept).
5. The teacher should get to know the student through own discerning observations (97.6% – accept).
6. Teachers and parents' interaction is one of significant factors characterizing properly run educational process (94.1% – accept).

According to author's expectations, obtained data indicate that teachers only accept solutions, which are similar to those used in traditional methodology. Therefore, the respondents have no doubts in two key aspects. First, they highly agree that a purposive, planned and thorough observation of student's development in various situations is the basis of teacher's work. Observation is in educators work a source of many essential information about child's working methods, possibilities and interests. Second, they indicate a very important problem - cooperation between two basic educational environments: family and school. Majority of surveyed teachers are experienced people, thereby organize meetings with parents engaging them in work for the school and notice the positive impact this cooperation has on their children's education. Most of the teachers covered by

the surveys also share the view that the teacher is a helper in child's development. As described earlier, teachers do understand helping children by supporting them but often claim themselves a leading role in this process. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers to accept a situation in which it is forbidden to give students ready-made solutions. Clinging to the traditionally perceived teacher's role – as a person initiating, directing and controlling the educational process, often based on giving – clashes with the fourth thesis' content. Therefore, teachers rarely identify themselves with this statement. As it happened with view suggesting uninterrupted child's work. This situation is reflected in the opinions of respondents who think that the teacher: *“responsible for educational process and upbringing has the right to interrupt the child, for various reasons, such as errors”* (Questionnaire No. 65, female, age 49), as well as direct *“pupils' activity to presented content”* (Questionnaire No. 79, woman, 36). This condition can be easily explained by quite a common tendency among teachers in modern school to dominate over students and parents. In such case, the student's freedom is somewhat limited, focusing on the instructions given by the teacher and following a model diagram. It is worth to familiarize teachers with positive aspects of students' independent work described by Montessori and implemented in Montessori institutions.

### **Conclusions**

The studies make it possible to formulate the following conclusions and generalizations:

1. The majority of pre-school and early school education teachers, working in the south-eastern Poland, identify with some Montessori views concerning an important role, the prearranged environment plays in a child's life. In particular, with statements concerning: a sense of security, contact with the natural world, a child self-satisfied with its work, law and order in the classroom, as well as the need to support child development, observe a pupil in activities and cooperate with parents. The respondents approve of such solutions and acknowledge a variety of benefits arising from the method. The conclusion then is that the respondents have a general knowledge about solutions present in the Montessori system, they are interested in the substantive proposals, see the method's properties and they are able to define tasks and conditions which enable using the proposed course of action.
2. Respondents accept mainly assumptions corresponding to traditional solutions presented in modern school. They are uncertain when it comes to thesis emphasizing children's freedom to act in the classroom, to use freely the teaching aids, a thesis embedding educational and upbringing process in the context of child's living environment culture, self-control in acquiring new knowledge and skills and teacher's functioning in the background and thus limiting teacher's leading role. Respondents pursuing traditional methodological solu-

tions are concerned with organizational and material difficulties arising from the Montessori system. They notice how contradictory are the described solutions, especially in connection to teacher-educator's role with ongoing tasks and responsibilities of a pedagogue in Polish school. It effects in respondents fear and in some statements resistance towards described solutions.

3. There is a great need to raise teachers' awareness about Montessori system especially in the context of methodological solutions, including pedagogues into teaching advisory in term of practicing proposed solutions, as well as popularizing good practices based on Italian educator's system. It will allow to overcome the fears and concerns related to educating with Montessori Method and may also contribute to building a positive attitude towards innovative solutions.

**Abstract:** The Montessori system puts a special emphasis to development materials – which enable the child's internal energy to rise, to the principles of constructing the environment as well as to the teacher's personality and his values. The presented study attempts to answer the question about how is one of the most important elements of Montessori pedagogy, i.e. prearranged environment, perceived by Polish teachers living in Subcarpathian Province. By referring to her own research results, the author shows how teachers use Italian researcher's assumptions and she also outlines Polish educators' concerns often arising from ignorance of the most detailed solutions typical for the system.

**Keywords:** Maria Montessori' pedagogy, material, structural- dynamic and personal aspect of the prearranged environment.

**Streszczenie:** W systemie Marii Montessori szczególną rolę przywiązuje się do materiałów rozwojowych umożliwiających rozkwit wewnętrznej energii dziecka, zasad budowy otoczenia, jak też sposobu pracy nauczyciela i jego walorów osobowościowych. Prezentowane opracowanie jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie o sposób postrzegania jednego z bardziej istotnych elementów pedagogiki M. Montessori - przygotowanego otoczenia, przez polskich nauczycieli zamieszkujących województwo podkarpackie. Autorka odwołując się do wyników badań własnych prezentuje płaszczyzny wykorzystywania przez nauczycieli założeń włoskiej badaczki, jak i kreśli obawy polskich pedagogów wynikające najczęściej z nieznamomości szczegółowych rozwiązań typowych dla omawianego systemu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedagogika Marii Montessori, materialny, strukturalno-dynamiczny i osobowy aspekt przygotowanego otoczenia.

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