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## EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES IN ROMANIA. A DIFFERENT TYPE OF SCHOOLING

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**Abstract:** *This paper makes an analysis of the impact that the National Conference on Educational Alternatives, A Different Type of Schooling, organised by "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu, on the participants, having as purpose the improvement of the offer and the conditions for organising this kind of activities. The conference took place online on 17th October 2020 and consisted of eight workshops. Each participant could be present at four workshops. 221 teachers registered for the conference and 187 people participated: teachers, students and other interested professional categories. The survey was used as a research method, using the questionnaire as a tool. The paper is addressed to all those who want to get familiar with elements specific to educational alternatives: Waldorf, Montessori, Freinet, Step by Step, ONLINE activities specific to primary education, ONLINE activities specific to preschool education, Painting and Music. The conference enjoyed appreciation from all participants, on all measurement indicators, To a very large extent and to a large extent, over 77%. The most appreciated part was the atmosphere, during the workshops, which encouraged learning and the least degree of applicability in class of new acquisitions.*

**Key words:** *educational alternatives; educational pluralism; Freinet; Montessori; Waldorf, Step by Step*

### **Introduction**

The year 1990 also meant for Romania the return to educational pluralism, giving up the exclusive monopoly of the state in the field of education by establishing educational alternatives and private education.

Educational alternatives have recently been receiving increasing attention from educational actors and beneficiaries of education. More and more schools are opening up to operate in alternatives. Increasingly, those involved in education are noticing the need to relaunch the traditional system by taking over some of the educational alternatives that work in Romania. Moreover, much of the preparatory class-specific strategies are taken from the Step by Step alternative.

Conference on Educational Alternatives, A Different Type of Schooling was organized by "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu, in partnership with Sibiu County Teaching Inspectorate and in collaboration with the Association of Young Educators from Sibiu. It took place online on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and consisted of activities in eight workshops: Freinet Workshop, Waldorf Workshop, Montessori Workshop, Step by Step Workshop, Painting Workshop, Music Workshop, Online Activities Workshop specific to preschool and Online Activities Workshop specific to primary education.

This paper analyses the context in which the conference took place and the impact it had on the participating educational community and is addressed to all those who want to share their experience in alternatives, by exchanging good practices or want to familiarize themselves with specific elements of educational alternatives. and which can add value to the educational act in ordinary schools.

In response to the current context, in addition to the educational alternatives recognized in Romania, two workshops were added, focused on art: painting and music and other two, dedicated to online activity for primary and preschool education. There were a total of 8 workshops. Each participant was able to participate in four workshops.

### **About alternatives**

In the evolution of educational alternatives in Romania, there are several stages: the existence of local forerunners, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the current New education, which entered Romania in the early 20th century, critical takeover, application and experimentation, considered Romanian contributions in the interwar period, the lesson of silence, during the communist period and the return to educational pluralism, after 1989.

Educational pluralism began with the Waldorf Educational Alternative (1990), following the philosophy of pedagogue Rudolf Steiner (1867-1925), the father of Waldorf pedagogy, Montessori Educational Alternative (1993), following the philosophy of the psychiatrist Maria Montessori (1870-1952), father of Montessori pedagogy, Freinet Educational Alternative (1995), the parent being Celestin Freinet (1896-1966), the Jena Plan (1996), the parent being the pedagogue Peter Petersen (1884-1952), Alternative Step by Step (1994), the program was designed after the model introduced in the US in the 1960s, originally called Head Start. In Romania, the program started in 1994 under the same name, as a regional program within the Soros Foundation for an Open Society. In 1995 it was called Step by Step and since 1998 the application of the alternative in Romania has been coordinated by the Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development. Home schooling is an alternative, which in Romania does not yet have the legal framework, being able to operate only under the umbrella of some schools abroad.

Educational alternatives generally appear in a certain social context, which accepts diversity. In the case of our country, the Revolution in December 1989, created the social context, which made possible the return to educational pluralism, by renouncing the exclusive monopoly of the state, in the field of education.

The emergence of educational alternatives has generated contradictory reactions: support but also adverse attitudes. The contradictory situation continues at present, but with an increasing evolution of the number of schools and the number of those who believe in the value of alternatives and their necessity, in a democratic society.

The dictionary of pedagogy, authors Horst Schaub and Karl G. Zenke, translated at Polirom Publishing House, in 2001, defines the term alternative education as “the activity that takes place in schools, according to objectives, organization, content, forms of teaching and learning, means, the life of the school and the parents’ activity, with total or partial deviation from the unitary characteristics of the state school and which offers another option of instruction and education”.

Different ways of approaching the training-educational process are found both at the institutional level and at the level of didactic process and methodology.

Alternativeness can be understood, on the one hand, as an adaptation of some types of educational institutions that have enjoyed success in the past, trying to solve through them the current problems of education. Educational alternatives, in reality, are complementary to traditional education.

Educational alternatives in Romania are influenced by The New Education, a pedagogical movement that brings together several currents (free education, active school, work school, outdoor school, centres of interest, school communities, etc.).

### **Description of the conference activity**

Educational Alternatives Conference, A Different Type of Schooling was organized by the "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu, in partnership with Sibiu County Teaching Inspectorate and in collaboration with the Association of Young Educators from Sibiu. It took place online, on 17th October 2020, and consisted of eight workshops. The activity of each workshop took place over 90 minutes.

We can appreciate that there is a dual purpose of the conference: promoting alternatives in the Romanian educational community and getting teachers from the traditional education familiarised with elements, specific to alternatives, that could be used in the classroom to streamline teaching.

Eight workshops were held during the conference. In four of them: Freinet Workshop, Waldorf Workshop, Montessori Workshop, Step by step Workshop, alternatives that take place in Romania, were presented the philosophy, the principles, the general characteristics of each alternative and specific practical-applied activities were made.

The painting workshop and the Music one, a learning support workshop, aimed to recalibrate the importance of the arts in the activity of schoolchildren, as a response to the negligent attitude of the authorities and many schools, towards this curricular area.

Given the specifics of the painting and music workshops, the number of available places was limited; for painting 26 and for music 38.

The workshops ONLINE activities specific for primary and preschool education, were included in the conference program with the need to adapt to the specifics of the school activity, during the COVID pandemic 19.

221 teachers registered for the conference, teachers for primary education, educators, teachers for preschool education, students from Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization, teachers of other specializations, professionals from other fields, interested in alternative educational issues. 187 people participated in 385 activities. Having the opportunity to participate in several workshops, the 187 participants were present at 385 activities.

The eight workshops were coordinated by an experienced teacher who enjoys real success in the field.

Each workshop came with practical-applied activities, especially primary and preschool education, which, through transfer and with a little creativity, the participants could multiply and lead to the classes in which they work.

The Freinet Pedagogy workshop was an opportunity to get familiarised with the key concepts, fundamental for the implementation of Freinet pedagogy in the training-educational process, to identify the principles underlying Freinet pedagogy: free expression, individualization of work, experimental probing and cooperative organization, in correlation with specific learning techniques, opportunity to know and apply the concept of cooperative class, to apply democratic principles in the organization of the student body, to identify the role of the teacher in the cooperative class.

The Alternative Step by Step workshop gave participants the opportunity to get familiarised with elements, methods, techniques specific to the alternative: morning meeting, way of knowing and learning, organizing physical space in the Step by Step classroom, working materials and their distribution in the classroom, organizing the process of teaching / learning on workshops and activity centers, thematic teaching and integrated learning, the specifics of assessment in the alternative Step by Step.

The Alternative Montessori workshop proposed familiarisation with key, specific concepts, explaining the principles and values underlying the pedagogical approach in pedagogy, explaining how to apply these principles in the classroom, identifying the role of the teacher in the Montessori class.

The Waldorf Techniques and Materials Workshop proposed familiarisation with materials specific to the Waldorf alternative (tissue paper, rice paper, transparent paper, spun / non-spun wool, knowledge and setting of steps for performing work techniques).

The painting workshop was based on notions of drawing, colour, composition and artistic techniques. The practical activities aim at mastering the compositions and techniques used in painting, the study of drawing and colour. These activities represent a cultural approach that has a fundamental role in educating teachers through art, using methods and techniques specific to the creative process. In conclusion, the Painting Workshop determines the participants to discover and develop their creative energy and the qualities they are endowed with. Directed painting activities were carried out, using several techniques, suitable for preschool and primary school children.

The Music workshop, a learning support, was an opportunity to fix the language and the elements that make up the music (rhythm, melody, dynamics, etc.): lengths of time, pauses, pitch of notes, specific signs encountered in scores; developed the ability to adapt to the requirements of the group but also creativity, through the association between rhythm-movement-emotion-text, in an interdisciplinary approach.

In this workshop, connections were made between competences from different disciplines, performing interdisciplinary activities and using music, as a support in integrated learning, learning for life, interesting and motivating, at the same time.

The ONLINE Activities specific to primary education workshop proposes the meeting with pedagogical elements specific to online learning for primary education, an opportunity to get familiarised and to use applications that can be used for frontal, individual and small group work (Zoom), continuation of a gap text, expression of ideas and / or feelings (Jamboard), the use of mathematical tools and 3D resources for STEM lessons (MozaBook), the practice of playful spirit, while acquiring new knowledge and increasing the speed of reaction (WordWall), the exercise of creativity and ingenuity (Story Jumper), measuring satisfaction or simply exercising the democratic vote (Mentimeter).

The ONLINE activities workshop specific to preschool education started from the idea - Children play on their way to life and yet play is not just a game. Spontaneity, flexibility, creativity and fantasy are used and developed in any game.

The workshop aimed to familiarise participants with: games, ideas, concrete ways that can be used in online activity to develop the creativity of preschoolers, practicing web applications that can be used in online activity in preschool education: Zoom, Jamboard, Mozaik 3D, creating learning sequences using the practiced applications.

In the second stage of the conference, participants develop papers, either sharing good practices by those working in alternatives, or papers inspired by the activities offered by workshops, papers that will be published in the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy (PPSP) 2020 Conference Magazine, Educational Alternatives. Another kind of education, published online, at the Publishing House of the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu.

### **Research description**

The research aimed at an analysis of the context in which the National Conference on Educational Alternatives, A Different Type of Schooling, took place, organized by the "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu, in a partnership with Sibiu County Teaching Inspectorate and in collaboration with the Association of Young Educators from Sibiu and the impact it had on the 187 participants, in 385 activities.

The paper makes an analysis of the impact that the activities carried out during the workshops had on the participants; the degree of satisfaction expressed by the 187 participants.

The survey was used as a research method. The instrument used, the questionnaire, with ten questions, 8 closed questions and two open questions.

The questionnaire included questions used to identify the most effective channels for popularising the event (1), questions used to measure the assessments made by participants (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9) and questions that asked participants for opinions and recommendations for improving the offer and organization of the event (8, 10).

The questions were as follows:

1. How did you find out about the conference?
2. To what extent did the workshop activity encourage the exchange of ideas and active participation?
3. To what extent did the issue of the workshop respond to the knowledge needs you have?
4. To what extent did the workshop have a practical applicative character?
5. To what extent can you apply what you have learned today to your classes?
6. To what extent did the atmosphere during the workshop encourage learning?
7. To what extent would you recommend this workshop to colleagues / acquaintances?
8. Which activities in the workshop did you find most useful?
9. Please attach a global grade to the workshop.
10. Do you think that the workshop lost its impact as it took place online?
11. Appreciation / Recommendation.

The expression of the participants' opinions was used as a percentage, on a 4-step Likert scale.

Table 1 presents the data on the number of participants, the cumulative percentages of participants who appreciated to a very large extent and to a large extent, the issues mentioned in the questions: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, the average of the percentages of each workshop and the average percentages of each aspect analyzed.

Workshop	No of participants	Number of questions in the questionnaire								Average percentages	10
		2	3	4	5	6	7	9	10		
Alternative Step by Step	59	91	91	86	77	94	92	91	89	72	
Painting workshop	19	100	89	94	88	99	93	94	94	25	
ONLINE activities specific to primary education	58	98	94	100	87	98	98	98	96	45	
ONLINE activities specific to preschool education	65	96	96	94	90	100	98	97	96	30	
Freinet pedagogy	43	90	86	81	80	88	90	83	85	60	
Music, learning support	35	97	94	97	91	94	94	94	94	71	
Waldorf techniques	37	88	94	96	85	91	94	94	92	23	

and materials										
Montessori alternative	66	92	93	89	77	92	92	92	90	81
Total	385									
Average percentages		94	92	92	84	95	94	93		51

*Tabel 1 - The cumulative percentages of participants who appreciated to a very large extent and to a large extent, the issues mentioned in the questions: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9*

The answers to the open-ended questions were used to identify the strengths of the workshops and the assessments / recommendations. to improve the offer and the organization of the activity of the next conference.

### **Obtained results. Interpretation of results**

We have tried to interpret the results by making an analysis of the opinions expressed by the participants, using the percentages, on the steps given by the questions. For shading the interpretations, we used the answers to the open-ended questions.

Most of the participants (70%) appreciate that they found out about the conference from a message from colleagues / teachers, 24% from online communities and 6% from other sources. The breadth of online communication makes it the most effective way to promote scientific events.

The largest participation was at the Montessori Workshop (66 participants), followed by the ONLINE Activities Workshop specific to preschool education (65). The Montessori school is enjoying an increased popularity lately, hence we consider the increased curiosity of the participants for this alternative. To the open questions, the 65 educating participants appreciate that it is the first Webinar on the issue of online activities specific to preschool education. We believe that this detail explains the number of participants.

The aspects brought in the analysis (questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8), were appreciated, to a very large extent and to a large extent, by over 84% of the participation.

The highest appreciation (95%) at the global conference was enjoyed by the question - To what extent did the atmosphere during the workshop encourage learning? Also, in the open-ended questions, the participants emphasized the applicability of the activities.

At a very close level (94%), the issues addressed by the questions were appreciated at the global conference: To what extent did the activity of the workshop encourage the exchange of ideas and active participation? and To what extent would you recommend this workshop to colleagues / acquaintances?

At the workshop level, the best rated was the Painting Workshop (100%), to the aspect covered by the question - To what extent did the workshop activity encourage the exchange of ideas and active participation? It was the workshop with the smallest



staff, at the request of the coordinating teacher, exactly for the sake of being able to give time to each participant.

The aspect of the question: To what extent, what did you learn today can you apply to your classes?, on the global conference, was appreciated by 84%, being the lowest percentage. Although the presentations on the conference website mention the specifics of each workshop - primary or preschool education, each workshop was attended by teachers and educators, in their desire to learn as much as possible about the specifics of the alternatives. I found the explanation in the recommendations to question 11. The next edition of the conference will take place in two different days, one for each level, so that the degree of applicability of what is learned to increase.

At the level of workshops, the least appreciated (77%), Montessori Workshops and Step by Step, to the question that aimed at the extent to which what they learned can be used in class. The two workshops focused on the activity specific to the primary level, and among the participants were also educators, in proportion of 15%.

To question 8, *Which activities in the workshop did you find most useful?* the most eloquent answers were:

- at the Montessori workshop were mentioned: presentation of specific alternative materials that we can use in traditional education, materials for mathematics, the story of geometry and connection with Egypt, key concepts and learning triangle of this alternative, three-step lesson, learning methods of the table of assembly and of the table of multiplication, the presentation of the Great Lessons;
- at the Music workshop: transmitting concepts through lyrics set to music, creating songs, activity in which we learned that any type of information we can put on a rhythm to convey it to our students, compose lyrics about certain concepts taught in other disciplines, lyrics adapted to familiar songs, the musical exercise made with baking paper, the game with text and singing Bim, Bum, Bidy, the way to more easily retain a text through a melodic line, the ways to capture attention with the help of music in any discipline, the rhythmic reading of a poem and the association with a song, the composition of verses on melodic lines, to facilitate the memorization of certain information, activity based on the school curriculum, running a certain skill that we then practice by singing, making a poem, starting from a specific competence, which I sang using a well-known song, study topics presented through mu about;
- at the Waldorf workshop: a practical activity of making the star for the window, from transparent paper, ideas for conducting classes in the Waldorf alternative;
- at the Freinet workshop: a practical activity for conducting a documentary survey. Freinet techniques: school outing, diary, "appreciate / criticize / propose" panel;
- at the ONLINE activities workshop specific to primary education, were mentioned: the presentation activity of the Mozaik application, the presentation of online applications / programs: Wordwall, Storyjumper (I managed during the workshop, working in subgroups, to make the last page of the book), platforms Mozaboock, Mentti and Jamboard, the use of wordwall for roulette and the actual work with these applications;

- at the ONLINE activities workshop specific to preschool education: the multitude of ideas offered for carrying out online activities with preschoolers, dictation through drawings (I didn't know about wordwall.net), music games, transposition of activities that are usually done with concrete material, face in face in the online environment, flower dancing, African song, musical games developed to capture and maintain the attention of preschoolers (African song, sound games, spoon beat game, pea song), use the board to draw step by step model for children (drawings in verse step by step), movement games (mime, plants), ideas for activities (autumn - vegetable soup, frog pond, puppet puppets, use of the two rooms at once in Zoom, diction games , methods of involving children in the activities carried out, the activity with "Gina gospodina", the idea to change the back decor according to the topics covered, the story with the witch, Hans and the candies, the suggestions of applications and sites compatible with the online teaching of preschoolers, the game with the dice;
- at the Step by Step workshop were mentioned: the collection of objects used to lead to the formation of the notion of time, estimates with appreciation of number or quantity, the use of the graphics tablet, activities to consolidate addition and multiplication. The celebration of 100 days of kindergarten / school, by holding a party in which the children to present their collection of objects from the 100 days, the mascot and the activity diary of the group (taken home by children's rotation), organizing the morning meeting (moments, its stages), using the menti.com platform, working in groups with the organization of work tasks at centers on a topic chosen at the group level;
- at the painting workshop were mentioned: painting techniques, advice offered, suggestions received in order to apply colors, painting technique in pastels and real correction of works of art.

The activities that were appreciated as the most useful are those that included: methods, techniques, strategies specific to each alternative and represent elements that can be used in traditional education to bring more motivation, interest, practicality, efficiency.

Question 9 - Please give a global rating to the workshop, 93% of the participants expressed as appreciation: Excellent and Very good, which confirms the fact that the whole conference enjoyed a real appreciation.

Although initially scheduled to take place in April 2020, at the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, due to the COVID 19 Pandemic, the conference was postponed and took place online in October 2020. To question 9 - Consider that the workshop lost impact because it took place online ?, cumulatively, 51% of participants considered to a small extent, to a small extent or not at all. Participants in the Waldorf (77%) and Painting (75)% workshops considered that they had lost their impact, to a large extent and to a very large extent. The next edition of the conference, we intend to be held Bleanded-lernig, to meet the diverse needs of the participants and the specifics of the workshops.

At all the workshops, the most appreciated activities were those with a pronounced practical-applicative character.

The recommendations received from the respondents were: allocating a longer time to each workshop, offering the possibility to participate in all workshops, conducting different workshops, for primary education and for preschool education.

### **Conclusions and perspectives**

The large participation, beyond the organizers' expectations, confirms the interest that the alternatives arouse among the educational community.

The appreciations expressed by the participants in the administered questionnaires and the works elaborated by the participants, confirmed the positive impact of the National Alternative Educational Conference. Another kind of school enjoyed real success. At the same time we can appreciate that the proposed goal was achieved: promoting alternatives in the Romanian educational community and familiarizing teachers in traditional education with elements, specific to alternatives, which could be used in the classroom in order to make teaching activities more efficient.

Through the analysis resulted in the survey, we intend to organise the next conference using Blending Learning, so as it could meet the participants' various needs and the specifics of the workshops.

In the next edition of the conference, there will be workshops for the primary level and workshops for the preschool level, in a two-day program.

In addition to the workshops held this year, we intend to organize workshops on Home schooling and Scouting, as a response to the recommendations from the participants.

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