

## **EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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**Abstract:** *After a long phase of standardization, in the past two decades a lot of alternatives to the formal education have been enacted and promoted in the Romanian legislation: The Curative Pedagogy, The Montessori Pedagogy, The Waldorf Pedagogy, The Freinet Pedagogy, The Jena Plan, The Step-by-Step Program. Within a relatively short span of time, they have managed to evolve and improve, succeeding in involving an increasing number of children and teachers. This study aims to briefly present these educational alternatives to the Romanian education system.*

**Key words:** *educational alternative, educational system, child.*

### **General characterization**

Until 1990 the Romanian system of teaching has been guided on the strictness of a dogmatic education that led to forming multilateral developed personalities through the teaching institutions that were functioning as a unit. Within this educational frame the student was considered as being a “recipient” for information and less as a real person with individuality and developing personality.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the education is aiming to the process of forming and developing through the improvement of the performances of each of us. The teaching reform in Romania underlines the importance of moving the accent from the informative side of the educational process to the formative one.

Due to the promoting of the educational pluralism, some teaching institutions from Romania have adopted other variants of education and teaching, alternative means of realizing the same national curriculum. Thus, “the educational alternative represents the form of school organization, which sets methods of organizing and functioning of the instructive-educational activity others than specific forms of an era or which appear in a social context”<sup>1</sup>

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century in the education from Europe and the US a motion challenging the traditional education, of renewal of the traditional system of teaching based on classes and lessons with theoretical, formal, rigid contents and largely external possibilities of

choice and intrinsically motivation of the child has been outlined. Ellen Key entitled one of her works from 1900 "The Century of the Child", which was significant for the new launched trend.

The renewal trend is found under different names: The New education in France, Switzerland and Belgium, the Progressive Education in the US, The Pedagogy of the Reformation in Germany. This trend has been materialized in Romania, both in the interwar period and after 1989 when educational alternatives such as:

- The Waldorf pedagogy with the curative Waldorf pedagogy,
- The Montessori Education
- The Freinet Pedagogy,
- The Jena Plan
- The Step by Step System were introduced and declared legal

Each of these alternatives has its specifics, but one of the principles pursued by all educational alternatives is situating the child at the heart of the educational activities.

### **The Waldorf educational alternative**

The Waldorf pedagogy was created in the early twentieth century being based on the anthropology developed by Rudolf Steiner (1919) on the initiative and with the material support of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory director. In Romania, the first classes were established in 1990 in public education, without any additional tuition being charged, this form of education addressing both those who are weak when it comes to achieving performance, and to those gifted in their aspiration for notable performances. This education takes into consideration the needs and capabilities of each individual. The content of the subjects is not aimed at acquiring these disciplines, but wants to stimulate the child's interest for knowledge. Highlights of these alternative educational objectives are the development of thinking, feeling and the will of the child.

The Waldorf pedagogy works based on seven principles such as the principle of lifelong learning, the principle of rhythmic organization, the principle of creating an environment suited to the objectives, the principle of ensuring a balance between theory and practice, the principle of artistic teaching, the principle of teaching in images, and the fundamental principle of the Waldorf pedagogy which is an integrated approach of the human being according to age and having as an aim the development of the child's personality.

The Waldorf pedagogy differs from mainstream education by the following<sup>2</sup>:

- It aims to educate the whole man;
- The curricula of different subjects are comparable to those of the traditional system and approved by the Ministry of Education and Research;

- The school subjects are not seen as an end in itself but as a means of education;
- The level of knowledge is equivalent to that of the traditional school, at grade IV, the national testing and the Baccalaureate;
- Students are not graded but they receive at the end of the class a complex characterization which specifies both skills and drawbacks for each object of study and also issues related to the young man`s evolution and advice on possible directions of orientation in the study;
- The main subjects: Romanian, History, Geography, Biology, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, are taught in periods of 2-4 weeks, two hours at the beginning of each day, within the basic course. This means of working greatly reduces the number of subjects that the student must prepare for the second day and leads to a better deepening of the subject through daily rhythm. Depending on the student's age, training takes 24-36 hours a week, plus artistic disciplines which keep a great share of the curriculum.

Class1 Waldorf is taken by a teacher (tutor) and lead for 8 years. In the Waldorf pedagogy there are no manuals, this absence helping to increase respect for books and other sources as students get used to document themselves from as many sources as possible on a theme study. Also, children work on notebooks with screen ruling, being considered that clearly defined lines restrict and limit the child's handwriting to clearly established norms. The Waldorf alternative does not plead for a messy writing, but rather order and aesthetics are generally highly cultivated in school.

In conclusion, the essential characteristics of the Waldorf education are:

- The importance given to rhythm;
- The learning period;
- A school without textbooks;
- Notebooks and pens;
- The number of special courses and practical arts;
- A school without grades;
- Class lead by teacher also beyond the fourth grade;
- Peer leadership;
- Distinct subjects and activities.

### **The Montessori educational alternative**

"Never do for a child what he can do alone." (Maria Montessori)

Maria Montessori, considered the child "a divine but misunderstood being". An Italian physician and educator by profession she was the first woman doctor of Italy and in 1907 she founded the 'Casa dei bambini' for children aged 2-6 years whose parents were looking for work. Similar to

kindergarten this house was an educational community that completed and perfected the child's education in the family.

Maria Montessori pedagogy is essential in the concept of the respect for the child - as an individual with unique personality and potential. The Montessori pedagogy has as a basic principle the necessary, appropriate and continuing education, the trends of current reforms in education confirming Maria Montessori's ideas and making them applicable in practice<sup>3</sup>. The Montessori pedagogy aims to promoting children's rights, to forming skills of intellectual activity that is intensive and continuous, to expanding and enhancing early childhood and parent education, adaptability and assuming of changes; increasing the role of the educational environment within education, family and community.

In the Montessori alternative children have activities as they do in everyday life. Almost all lessons are individual, so each child usually has a different plan of activities that the teacher thinks and puts into practice according to the interest and the level at which the child is. In the Montessori classes the child can move freely from one side to the other of the class, is free to choose any work material wants, those being placed so as to be accessible and available to all children, but he also has the obligation to put them on the shelf in the same place and the same conditions after having finished, so as to be used by the next child interested in the same activity.

In a Montessori kindergarten children are organized on three levels of age between 3 and 6 years old. Children who started kindergarten this year when being 3 years old will be in the same class two years from now. Now they are the youngest but in two years time they will be the oldest - a process of growth and development that they themselves enthusiastically acknowledge. Thus the relationships between children within classes resemble much more to life outside the school, to real life. Another great aspect is that in the Montessori class there is only one copy of each material, which means that only one child can have an activity involving that material. By default, if another child wants to use the same material that one will have to wait until the activity ends and his colleague places the material back on the shelf. At the beginning of the year this situation may create conflicts, but in time accepting becomes habit. Indirectly, they can thus educate respect for other people's things and patience to wait for their turn<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore the aim of the Montessori method is educating, not schooling. And educating means, etymologically speaking, to reveal potential (Lat. Ex. Duction = extract).

When it comes to assessment, there are no grades, rewards and punishing, the assessment is done by portfolio, observations made by the teacher and record keeping.

### **The Freinet educational alternative**

"Prepare children and adolescents today to be able to act in the world of tomorrow"

The Freinet Pedagogy practiced for more than for 75 years, is based on a series of values such as cooperation, autonomy, responsibility, mutual aid and clearly established principles: a child-centered school, motivated school work, customized activity, free expression and communication, learning through exploration and globalization of the educative action.

Working in small groups is considered as the fundamental means of education. Forming groups is at the discretion of children and it lasts for 3-4 weeks. The noninterference of the educator will allow the child to realize for the first time, his value as a member of a group as well as the value of the ones he is collaborating with. In this case the educator's role will be limited to: organizing the materials necessary to education, securing and maintaining the climate of trust and building trust in the opinions of others<sup>5</sup>. Mostly the educator is only a careful observer who directs and coordinates the activities of his students.

The mission of the Freinet pedagogy is to train people not to produce students Freinet considering that a true education is the one that makes the individual adapt his own development to his environment. Education should be based on creative work, freely chosen and assumed and the school should become a place of production together decided by students through exploration, creation and acquired skills.

The Freinet pedagogy starts from the idea that any child can become the best at a particular moment of his existence. The main feature of this model is to develop working techniques. Celestin Freinet gave up classical textbooks replacing them with books and working sheets prepared and printed by students. Thus the child writes the text, at home or at school, without being constrained by a particular subject and in the morning they read and by vote, selected the ones that will be printed. To free text and school printing school correspondence is added, where children from different localities exchange texts, so as to come into contact with other habits, ways of thinking, traditions and life experiences.

In addition to these techniques new ones have been added such as: drawing freely, wall gazette, school diary, documentary investigation, patent, self assessment, studying the local environment

The Freinet pedagogy in Romania complies with the national curriculum and is part of the state alternative educational subsystem. It is applied in preschool and primary education (alternative education network), the secondary school (Freinet techniques) but also in extracurricular activities (international camp). The Freinet pedagogy is a cooperative pedagogy where the child-author has his defined place and it implements the

natural method of learning through exploratory experiments. The Freinet school is a school for all where everyone is accepted, recognized, listened to and respected.

### **The Jena plan**

This pedagogical alternative binds to the name of Peter Petersen from the University of Jena in Germany, where in 1924 he initiated a school experiment. In time, seeing the remarkable results that were achieved, the Jena Plan began to be widely used, relying on the following pedagogical principles:

- Grouping - most of the time is spent by children in heterogeneous age groups, on family model;
- core activities are the ones that define the human being - conversation, play, work (labor), celebration (festivals marking the beginning and the end of the week, anniversaries, arrival or departure of a child from school or from the core group, religious or national holidays , other important events in the life of the individual, the school or the community);
- efficient participation of children is significant in organizing educational experiences and the activity itself when it comes to spatial planning, classroom management, establishing rules etc.
- In the alternative Jena there are several types of groups:
- basic groups - that can be identified in a number of 4, which, depending on the pace of individual pupils may remain more or less, but a yearly a third must leave the group: - lower (6-9 years); - Medium (9-12 years); - Upper (12-14); - Youth (14-16);
- Mass groups - formed spontaneously around a table, according to the affinities and interests of children. There are small groups of 3-6 people and they are very dynamic;
- Working Groups – level ones, where the age criterion is linked to the capacity of understanding;

Organizing students on groups causes another organization of courses, instead of daily schedule there is only a weekly schedule. The optimal duration of a teaching-learning unit is 75 minutes, depending on the type of activity. At the beginning and at the end of the day or the week there are meetings of the group and with the whole school, where matters of mutual interest are presented and discussed.

Among the methods and the means used for the alternative education in Jena are mentioned:

- the conversation (dialogue) - in various forms, compulsory at the beginning and at the end of week;
- the game - especially in the first three years and even later as a form of review;



- the work - used in all kinds of courses, often combined with the conversation and the game;
- the celebration –which has a very important place and role in school life, with a very pronounced social character;

In terms of educational content, they are not different from those of the traditional school so that children can always migrate from a school organized by Jena Plan to traditional one and vice versa. But subjects are interdisciplinary dealt with and started - if possible - from authentic learning situations. Taking into account the age peculiarities of children at nursery and primary level, focus is particularly put on getting into a direct contact with nature and the surrounding world in general, because personal experience is the best basis for learning.

Some positive results achieved so far by those working on the Jena Plan model are: greater enthusiasm of kindergarten teachers and children for the life in their environment, greater care with which educators prepare the educational process; greater degree of independence of children from adults and thus unleashing their inner forces, stimulating their imagination and their sense of initiative, better sharing space in kindergarten; closer cooperation of the staff with the parents of the children from the kindergarten; stronger emphasis on accountability, on the power of decision, on the ownership and freedom of each member of the educational community; the results of children who are in a continuous process of natural learning.

In this system no grading is used and grade repetition does not exist. The evaluation is continuous, based on observation.

### **The Step by Step educational alternative**

"Do not let your child be limited to what you know, because they were born in another time" Hebrew proverb

This program first appeared in the US in the '60s, it was originally developed for preschool children from disadvantaged environments in terms of socio - economic state and who had no access to any form of education. The program, through its structure, is trying to cover the emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs of children aged 3 to 5 years old from families with low incomes or from migrant families.

In 1969, this program was put under the guardianship of the Department for Education and was extended in most US states. In 2005, included in the program were more than 22 million preschool children in 48,000 groups scattered throughout the United States. The program was consolidated and verified on more than 30 years of applicability and it operates in over 26 countries. The elaboration of the Step by Step method and its license belongs to the Children Resource International of Washington

- USA. The Step by Step is considered the "longest" educational program in the United States which was appreciated by many families of Americans and is currently coordinated by the Department for Child and Family and is considered as an educational alternative, especially for preschool.

The Step by Step alternative is devoted to preschool and school children of up to 13 years of age and to their families. In Romania, the program appeared in 1994 as the Head Start and in 1995 it was named Step by Step, at the initiative of the Soros Foundation for an Open Society, after signing a convention with the Ministry of Education. Since March 1998 the program is continued by the " Step by Step Centre for Education and Professional Development 'which provides new methods as a continuation of the vision of educating future generations regarding an active participation within open societies.

At the basis of the Step by Step Child programs for children stands the firm belief in the principles of democracy that encourages children to become active citizens and to appreciate the values of a democratic lifestyle, to formulate and express their own opinions, to ask questions and support discussions. The program highlights the mutual respect, responsibility towards others, honesty, civics and reliability.

The Step by Step promotes the student-centered education, the teaching targeted on the needs and interests of the students, learning is organized on activity centers and the family and the community are involved in the children's education while respecting the national curriculum and the national standards.

The alternative education through teachers wants to develop in students the ability to be creative, to form critical thinking, to have options and initiative, to take decisions and to be able to take responsibility for their decisions, to communicate easier, to negotiate, to freely express their opinions, to initiate discussion and to ask questions. The Step by Step considers communication as a key concept in forming vocational skills and qualities of knowledge about literacy, reading, writing, speech development, listening, visual arts and mathematics.

The subjects taught in the Step by Step program support the development of skills necessary for students to become responsible individuals and as they get more successful students begin to have a positive and stronger outlined self image. Through mathematics students learn to think logically, to find solutions and understand the world of numbers. Through literacy students learn to formulate and express their views in both orally and in writing. Through scientific explorations students learn about their environment, about living things around them and how to care for them. Through social studies they become aware of the historical perspective



respecting and appreciating the events and people who have contributed to this. Art offers students the opportunity to express their ideas and emotions.

The Step by Step class has two teachers who direct children when it comes to putting in practice the choices they made. The teacher's task is changing from the exclusiveness to teach to co-participation in the organization activities and the achievement of learning. The Step by Step alternative does not destroy the Romanian education, but tries to make his students minded people, people who will know how to work together and achieve enviable profits. It takes into account the skills students need to be redeemed at any time of the school day and it highlights the multiple intelligences. Teaching and learning in this alternative provides a new educational model that adheres to the individualization of teaching, complying with the efforts and the intellectual abilities of each pupil in his endeavor to acquire knowledge. In an environment as familiar as possible (comfort, teaching materials, abound stationery, audio-visual media, electronic devices) psychological, social, emotional barriers are removed, thus giving the child the opportunity to think freely, to act openly, honestly, critically and self-critically, to correct his behavior. Thus students develop their autonomy, initiative, self-control, they make choices, and even more, they help establishing classroom rules and decision-making.

Throughout the daily school work, the student is encouraged to adopt an active – participative attitude, which will help him acquire solid knowledge and develop his thinking and his positive character traits.

The goals of the Step by Step Program for primary education are set bearing in mind the child's intellectual and social development needs. The goals are unique for each school year within a scheme unit regarding the child's development. This approach ensures that organizational objectives take into account the personality of the child when the teacher makes decisions about the curriculum, the instruction and the assessment process. Clearly defining and maintaining high standards in fulfilling these objectives, the Step by Step program for primary education provides a good quality of the teaching and learning process. In a class organized on the principle of development, the interests and the needs of the children help to determine what material is to be taught. In addition, as an important of a role is also played by the fact that the teachers know the scientific theories about child development and about patterns of normative growth.

The Step by Step program adheres to an individualization of the teaching process that respects the efforts and the intellectual abilities of each child in his effort to acquire knowledge. "Educators must open way for students to explore the world around them, to stimulate them to ask questions and to find answers, to help them understand the complexity of the world" (Brooks,1993, p.5). Thus, the Step by Step program creates classes focused

on child development in which learning is valued and relieved, forming a framework for exploration, troubleshooting group, investigation, effective dialogue. The teacher helps children to understand the phenomena, to get used to ambiguity and to work in order to find answers to questions that may arise in their minds. "When the learning environment in which students spend most of their time is organized in a way that encourages the interaction student-student, when cooperation between students is cherished, themes and materials are synthesized, and students are free to pursue their own ideas, children become more willing to take risks and work so as to be able to respond to current intellectual challenges. Such a perspective on teacher also shapes environmental conditions and contributes to creating a respect for children, as future intellectuals." (Brooks, 1993, p.9)

To describe the classroom organization focused on child development we have taken the comparison made by Kate Burke Walsh between the program of the classes dominated by the teacher and the one of the student-centered classes.

<i>Comparing Classes<sup>8</sup></i>	<b>The class dominated by the teacher</b>	<b>The class focused on the child's necessities</b>
<i>Philosophical hypothesis</i>	-the school prepares the students for life,	- the school is part of life
	- the teacher makes the knowledge available for the students	- the knowledge is discovered by the child himself
	-schooling is a duty to be endured	-schooling is interesting and cheerful
	-education is regarded as a result	-education is regarded as a process
	-the learning process takes place in a linear progression by mastering the information and the skills they acquired	-the learning process is seen as a spiral that keeps expanding, having content depth and width
	-students are passive consumers of information and authority	-students are actively involved in solving problems and they participate in all projects
<i>The content of the curriculum</i>	-the content of the curriculum is globally presented	- the curriculum is conceived according to the students' requirements and also to the teaching plan and adapted by the teacher
	-making decisions is hierarchical and centralized	-making decisions is divided between the participants

	- the curriculum encourages adapting to the expectancy of the group both as far as social behavior is concerned and also the levels of the theoretical realizations	- the curriculum is due to develop skills and positive experience, favourable to learning
	-the cultural and individual differences are ignored because it is assumed that students adapt themselves to the dominant culture	- the curriculum acknowledges the reality of a multicultural and different world in order to be able to better prepare the student for the future
	-the activities are based on manuals and exercise books	- the activities are based on primary data sources and manipulating the materials
	-focus is set on learning basic skills	-focus is set on understanding important concepts
<i>The teacher's role and teaching strategies</i>	-teachers are the only source of information	-teachers are the ones that facilitate and guide the students within the learning process
	-teachers are considered to be fully trained	-teachers are learning together with children
	-teachers present information through reading	-teachers create learning situations based on direct experience, social interactions and research
	-the teachers' questioning techniques are focused on right/wrong answers or closed questions	-teachers demand children to ask questions and they stimulate their thinking by open questions
	-skills are taught as aims to be achieved	-skills are presented as instruments and they are tied to a certain content
	-the teachers are responsible for the class behavior and they are seen as being the supreme authority	-teachers and students establish together rules of behavior which are focused on assuming responsibilities
	-teachers generally behave in a didactic manner, offering information to students	-teachers behave in an interactive manner being mediators in the learning process
	-teachers see students as white pages where information has to be written on	-teachers see students as thinkers that elaborate theories about the world
	-students work mainly alone	-students work in pairs and in small groups
<i>The participation of the family</i>	-parents are seen as outsiders and they are not involved	-parents are seen as the first teachers and also partners

	-the communication with the families appears mainly when there is a problem	-the communication with the families starts at the beginning of the school year and is focused on setting objectives of co-working and planning for each child
	-parents have a fix day to visit the school	-parents are welcomed to school at any time
	-involving parents in the school activity is only connected with surveying homework	-the parents role is to complete the studies made in class
	-the community is seen as being separate from school	-the community is an important learning source
<i>Evaluation</i>	-the evaluation is made at fixed moments by an annual schedule	-the evaluation is continuous and cumulative
	-the evaluation is conceived in a pre-established format	-the evaluation uses open type formats
	-the evaluation is based on an unique situation	-the evaluation is focused on revising and is based on a variety of situations
	-the evaluation instruments are reported to a pattern	-the evaluation instruments are reported to criteria
	-the evaluation is totally controlled by the teacher	-the student is involved in the evaluation process
	-the evaluation is based on competitiveness	-the evaluation is seen as a means of individual perfecting
	-the evaluation takes into account the memorized information, specific to a certain place and moment	-the evaluation is made on a long period of time through collaboration
	-the intelligence is measured in linguistic and logical-mathematical skills	-the intelligence is seen as including artistic skills and it is measured in the solutions found from the problems in real life
	-the right answer is searched by the teacher as a validation of the knowledge gathered by the student	-the student's point of view is searched for with the aim of understanding his current perceptions and to use them in accumulating future knowledge
	-the evaluation is seen as being separated from the teaching	-the evaluation is combine with the teaching

### Conclusions

Clearly, the presence of various alternatives can be advantageous within a dynamic and concise educational system, these highlighting, from a

self perspective, details less observed in the classic educational system. They promote ways of making the educational process that confer other variants of organizational type and functional order compared to the ones specific to the traditional school, as a result of certain general visions for various major contemporary educational systems, but also for modern school practices in the world.

The model of alternative pedagogies was created and it was improved in many forms, having the concrete aspiration to provide actual solutions to current pedagogy and in particular to develop a current reality in relation to the classical foundations of pedagogy. The educational alternatives have represented more of a concrete opposition compared to the traditional pedagogy. These have managed to change the approach of the educational practice and of the work of pedagogic type. One could see the individual activity of children, which is based on a combination of the concise labor with the abstract study. The program is determined based on the interests of spontaneous type of the children. In some situations school republics are made within which the judgment of critical type and the sense of freedom are progressively developed. The social tasks are divided between children. Such schools may be described by the presence of an aesthetic atmosphere and by underlining the importance of improving moral conscience.

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