



Educational Alternatives in the Pre-University Education, From The Parents' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The educational alternatives, as part of the national educational system, represent a different organizational approach to the pre-university education, as compared to the traditional education. The parents have the legal right to choose the educational pathway of their children, and to opt either for a traditional school, or for one of the local educational alternatives. Their motivation and preference for choosing the traditional or the alternative educational pathway emphasize some important aspects and concerns regarding the actual educational system, and the findings could be also used for improving the traditional education.

The perceived quality of the existing educational alternatives, from the parents point of view, is high, and that's why this alternatives are increasingly requested by the well-informed parents (mostly with a higher education), despite the fact they are not enough promoted.

KEYWORDS : Educational alternatives, motivational factors, perceived quality

Introduction

The educational alternatives, even they were included in the Romanian educational system more than two decades ago, are quite rarely on mass-media, and, because of this, what the parents know about them it's not always very accurate: many parents think the educational alternatives are addressing only the children with special needs, that they are only a form of private education, or the teaching is done exclusively in some foreign language. In reality, an educational alternative propose forms and methods of organization and functioning of the educational process, different from the traditional ones; it could be either governmental or private. There are classes or groups in alternative education functioning as independent school units, while others are „hosted”, from the infrastructure and administrative point of view, by a traditional school. There are, yet, significant differences coming out from the vision on education of the alternatives, as compared to the traditional vision, and they are visible at the level of methods, techniques, and means for reaching the educational objectives. Regardless of the amplitude of these differences, the important fact is that every alternative promotes new ways of realizing the educational outcomes.

Currently, in Romania are functioning six educational alternatives (Waldorf, Step by Step, Montessori, Freinet, Curative pedagogy, Jenaplan), but the Regulations for organizing and functioning the alternative pre-university education specify that other educational alternatives could be also created.

The educational alternatives have some common characteristics, the most important being the following: they are more flexible and open for communication and collaboration with all educational partners (especially, with parents); promote the holistic development, using the children potential at its maximum; promote the individualization of the learning process; develop and maintain healthy social relationship between all members of the educational community (apud M. Cuciureanu, 2011, page 8).

For parents, to choose the school for their children is a legally granted right, so they can opt either for the traditional educational system, or for an educational alternative active in their community. The motivation of the parents' choices and their preferences for alternatives underline some important issues regarding the pre-university education, and the findings can be translated and used also in the traditional education.

Purpose of study

The parents' perceptions about the educational alternatives have been collected and analyzed within the larger framework of the most recent research regarding the alternative education in Romania, called "Bridges between the traditional education and the education based on alternative pedagogical models, in the Romanian education system", conducted in 2011 by a team of researchers from the Institute of Educational Sciences in Bucharest. The research was conducted on three types of subjects: school inspectors (central and local education authorities), school teachers (principals included), and

parents (with children in a pre-school or primary-school educational alternative).

This paper represents a cutting up of the above-mentioned research and it is focused on the opinions and perceptions of the parents with children in one of the six accredited educational alternatives. Its main purpose is to facilitate a better understanding about the reasons of the parents who have chosen an educational alternative, to evaluate the overall perceived quality of these alternatives, and to identify some positive aspects to be translated or adapted into the traditional pre-university education.

Research methodology

The method used for data collection was the inquiry based on questionnaires. The sample population has included 468 parents with children in a pre-school or primary school educational alternative, representing 6,13% from the total school population involved in alternative education, according to the official data for the school year 2010-2011 (kindergarten classes Step by Step are excluded from this total number). The sample distribution for each educational alternative is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Sample distribution based on the educational alternative

No.	Educational alternative	School population	Sample
1	Freinet	266	14
2	Montessori	138	39
3	Jenaplan	1461	95
4	Step by Step (without pre-school)	5244	292
5	Waldorf	475	23
6	Curative pedagogy	39	5
	Total	7623	468

In the study were included 91 schools (representing about one third from the total number of schools involved in the pre-university alternative education), from 29 counties (out of a total number of 42, Bucharest included, respective 38 counties with schools involved in alternative education), respecting also a proportional territorial distribution. In average, in one school were questioned 5,1 parents with children in an educational alternative.

Most of the responding subjects (365, representing 78%) were living in an urban area, considering the fact that the majority of the schools involved in alternative education are based in major towns. The rest of the respondents (103, representing 22%), living in a rural community, have the children enrolled only in the Step by Step or Jenaplan alternatives.

Findings

The answers of the parents represent perceptions of the main beneficiaries about the quality of the educational alternatives. The explanations given by the parents, although refer to the quality of the services offered by some educational alternatives, can be seen as directions for improving the quality of the traditional educational services. The analysis of the answers to the questionnaire addressed to parents shows that the interest for an educational alternative can be justified either by educational reasons, or by other types of reasons (constraining factors, affective factors, positive previous experience with an educational alternative etc.).

The majority of the parents participating in this study have considered that there were at least two factors that intervened in the decision making process regarding the educational pathway of their children. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 2
Parents' motivational factors for choosing an educational alternative

Motivational factor	% from total answ.	Answers from parents		Z-test
		with pre-school child.	with primary school child.	
Distance from home	29,9%	41,1%	22,6%	2,51
Convenient school hours	36,1%	22,7%	44,9%	3,10
Interesting educational curriculum and methods	50,6%	60,0%	44,5%	2,00
Own opinion about education, in line with those promoted by the alternative	49,6%	42,7%	54,1%	1,47
Previous positive experience with an educational alternative	13,2%	18,4%	9,9%	1,53
Group of friends/ relatives going together to school	6,6%	7,6%	6,0%	0,40
Recommendations from trustworthy people	29,5%	29,7%	29,3%	0,05
Other factors	4,1%	3,8%	4,2%	0,17

In the above table, the total percentage is different from 100%, considering a parent could choose one or more factors (an average of 2,2 motivational factors per person has resulted).

Alongside with the overall percentage for each identified motivational factor, there are presented the differences between the answer of the parents with pre-school (kindergarten) children and those of the parents with primary school (I-IV grades) children. In order to underline the differences of opinion between these two categories of parents, it was used the statistical Z-test, for comparing the answers. The critical value for this test is 1,96, which allows us to say that the differences of opinion referring to the first three motivational factors are statistically significant for the two categories of parents.

One of the questionnaire's items has been asking the parents to choose, from a list with ten possible answers, the educational aspects they have appreciated for the educational alternative chosen for their children. The results are presented in the next table.

Table 3
Educational aspects appreciated by parents, regarding the educational alternatives

Educational aspects	Overall %	Pre-school %	Primary school %
Freedom of movement	31,8	36,2	29
Activities management	62,6	54,6	67,8
Pupils grouping	26,9	23,8	29
Independence and responsibility	54,1	50,3	56,5
Freedom of expression	51,9	43,8	57,2
Work procedures and methods	50,9	43,2	55,8
Pupils' level of knowledge and skills	57,5	52,4	60,8
Relationships between pupils	26,7	25,9	27,2
Relationships between pupils and teachers	35,3	27,6	40,3
Assessment methods for pupils	41,9	31,4	48,8

Conclusions

The parents' confidence in the educational alternatives is high, as it comes out not only from their answers, but also from the fact that these alternatives are in an increasing demand, despite an insufficient promotion among the target population. The parents have a positive appreciation for the most elements of the alternative education environment: the teachers' competences and their overall professional quality, the way the education process is conducted, the learning environment, the relationship school-family, the fact that the children are not stressed or inhibited, the diversification of the activities, and the education centered on pupil.

Due to the fact that information about the educational alternatives are insufficient and sporadic, we consider that elaboration and dissemination of informative materials for parents are absolutely necessary, especially in the communities / areas where these alternatives are active, in order to be able to make an informed choice regarding the available educational possibilities.

The number of the parents having participated in this study is relatively low, but the received answers highlight real education needs and expectations, which can be better fulfilled, in the parents' opinion, by the alternative education, as compared to the traditional one. From here, it could be said that the development potential of the alternatives within the education system is given by the way these alternative pedagogies adequately meet the beneficiaries' needs. Even it is clear that the alternative education does not have, for the moment, an impressive weight (numerically speaking) into the national education system, some educational aspects could be translated and adapted to the traditional education, in order to provide a better adaptation of the pupils to the school requirements.

The parents seem to most appreciate, in an educational alternative, the freedom of movement and expression, but also the quality of the relationships within a class, as opposed to the control that might be imposed by the teacher, in a traditional class. For them, at least in the beginning, the performance assessment is less important than the methods and techniques used by the teacher to support learning, and the relationships between the children or between the children and the teacher are more important than their level of knowledge. They appreciate more an educational environment in which the cooperation is stimulated, resulting in the development of balanced and harmonious personalities, instead of a competitive environment, in which the school results are translated into hierarchies.

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