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Acting “out-of-the-box” in Montessori teachers’ narratives – research report

Summary

In this article the author analyses the situations in which Montessori practitioners experience acting “outside-the-box”. This includes specific “events” in everyday professional practices that are unique, unexpected, somehow special, and therefore do not have any previously prescribed solutions or scenarios. Based on semi-structured, qualitative individual interviews analysis the author outlines the occurrences (usually child initiated) that invite Montessori teachers to “leave” well-known routines, explicitly described procedures and perhaps even the zone of comfort. One of the main results of the research is quite paradoxical. A teacher wanting to act “out-of-the-box”, needs to be consistent with one of the most important Montessori principles, which is following the child. In this sense, Montessori pedagogy can be seen as an open and educational system, inviting various interpretations, and promoting creativity, critical engagement, and innovation, rather than strict rules, clear and reliable methods, or precise techniques mastered during various teacher training courses.

Keywords: out-of-the-box, creative educational practices, Montessori, interview analysis, teachers’ education

Słowa kluczowe: nieszablonowe, kreatywne praktyki edukacyjne, Montessori, analiza wywiadów, edukacja nauczycieli

Introduction

This article was written for the special issue on Maria Montessori’s pedagogy. The research results presented here are a side thread of a larger project in which semi-structured qualitative interviews constituted one of the primary methods of data collection, in addition to observation, document analysis, and informal conversations, classic for ethnography. In embarking on the preparation of this article, being in a way provoked by the title category of this issue of the journal i.e. “thinking out of the box,” I asked myself about the contexts and circumstances of such actions that could be identified in the narratives of Montessori practitioners. In other words, the research question I am interested in here is the issue of

acting outside the established pattern, a pattern possibly acquired through the training programmes and repeatable routines in which Montessori practitioners participate.

The article presented here is structured as follows. I begin by outlining the category of “thinking/acting-outside-the-box.” At this stage I pay particular attention to the category of the **box** itself. Having established how it can be thematized, I then synthesize the methodology of the study. In the results section of the article, I cite, and briefly comment on, excerpts from the interview transcripts that refer to the out-of-box actions experienced by Montessori practitioners. The results of the study are the starting point for formulating an interpretation of the findings and recommendations for a specific mode of action that is called here the outside-the-box practice. I conclude the article with a discussion of the results, pointing out the limitations of the adopted research procedure, and suggesting further directions of possible future research.

Conceptualizing “the Box” in the context of Montessori Education

In the Montessori approach, the concept of “thinking outside the box” resonates deeply with the philosophy of fostering independence, creativity, and critical thinking in both teachers and children. It may emerge as a necessity when traditional methods turn out not to work. One could say that the Montessori approach is itself thinking and acting outside the box, the box of traditional education, the box of traditional childcare and upbringing (Woods, Rosenberg 2016).

Comprehending the “box” is thus essential for understanding the value and implications of transcending it, especially within the Montessori framework which can be treated as fixed convention (Weisberg 2009).

Thinking “inside the box” could signify the adherence to the established norms, routines, regulations, and practices treated as correct or/and effective. In a Montessori setting, this conformity can impede the natural curiosity and creativity of both educators and children. It leads to stagnation, where innovative approaches are stifled by rigid systems and by commonly accepted unquestionable norms. In-the-box thinking may mean viewing problems through a narrow lens, dismissing new ideas and experimental practices owing to risk aversion. This mentality might thus hamper innovation as well as lead to the inability to envision beyond conventional solutions. Such an attitude prevents long-term progress and potentially brings the risk of the Montessori approach becoming another close-ended technique (Lord, Emrich 2000; McLean 2007; Boge 2013).

In Montessori education, a paradigm crisis often serves as a catalyst for shifting from in-the-box to out-of-the-box thinking (Darn 2006). These crises may occur when one realizes that, for some reason, a presentation or other form of working with children does not work. This realization necessitates discarding old patterns, leading to personal chaos and insecurity. Resolving such crises involves developing new skills, including improvisation, balancing order with creative disorganization, and fostering careful (auto)observation (Darn 2006).

Creativity in the Montessori context might be therefore perceived as emerging through the rejection of old ideas and embracing new ones. The “box” represents the constraints formed by past experiences, which limit our thinking. Psychologists who study creativity, recognize that breaking free from these constraints is essential for fostering innovation and serving children (Abernathy 1999; Darn 2006; Dingli 2008).

Several methods are designed to facilitate out-of-the-box thinking, with brainstorming being one of the most well-known. In Montessori education, similar methods could encourage the generation of numerous new ideas by discarding constraints that typically inhibit creative thinking. This approach aligns with the Montessori principle of allowing children the freedom to explore and innovate within a prepared environment. Idea factories, or collaborative creative sessions, are assumed to produce novel ideas even without deep domain expertise, suggesting that creativity can flourish when conventional knowledge is minimal so as to avoid constraints (Atkinson 2004).

Thinking outside the box remains a valuable metaphor for encouraging innovation (necessary for serving the children) in Montessori education. It involves a fundamental shift in perspective and approach. This shift emphasizes the need to step outside psychological comfort zones and explore new ways of perceiving the world, requiring the acceptance of emotional and cognitive discomfort. The transition to out-of-the-box thinking is closely linked with emotional intelligence (Darn 2006). Self-awareness, mood management, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship management are essential in navigating the shift from conventional Montessori to innovative thinking. These skills facilitate the balance between order and chaos, enabling the development of new cognitive and perceptual frameworks vital for educational innovation in Montessori environments. The concept of thinking outside the box is particularly relevant in Montessori education, as educators from whom the idea of following the child is close must be willing to step outside their comfort zones, challenge existing norms, and embrace new methodologies (Darn 2006).

This involves continuous self-development and openness to alternative approaches, drawing from fields such as theory of education, philosophy, and psychology. Montessori educators must be – in this perspective – perpetual students (Lewis 2013; Zhao et al. 2020), continuously evolving both professionally and personally to foster environments that encourage creativity and ultimately help children to be out-of-the-box thinkers and doers themselves. To effectively think and act outside the box, Montessori educators thus must adopt specific strategies, including questioning the *status quo*, breaking free of routine, searching for alternative solutions by asking reframed questions, or seeing educational challenges as opportunities (Boge 2013). Having shed some light on the idea of the box acting out-side-the-box, let us now turn to the methodological aspect of the research presented in this paper.

Method

Between 2019 and 2024, I conducted thirty-seven in-depth, individual, semi-structured interviews, which were subsequently analysed using phenomenography (Martön 1986; Richardson 1999) and the seven steps of analysis and interpretation. These steps include: a) thematizing; b) designing; c) interviewing; d) transcribing; e) analysing; f) verifying, and g) reporting (Kvale 1996; Kvale, Brinkmann 2009). The time frame of this research is significant as it encompasses the COVID-19 lockdown period, which many scholars have reported as having influenced Montessori education (Murray et al. 2021a, b). This context impacted both the research findings and educational practices. During this period, teachers faced numerous challenges related to student engagement, the limitations of the prepared environment, and setting boundaries with early childhood education (ECE) students. The sample comprised thirty-seven female Montessori teachers (aged 23–59) working in 15 institutions (10 kindergartens, 5 elementary schools). The primary research question guiding this project was: How do Montessori teachers experience their professional reality? This issue, or closely related themes, has been extensively researched in ECE contexts globally under various social conditions, using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Malm 2004; Beatty 2011; Christensen 2016, 2019; Aziz, Quraishi 2017; Ender, Ozcan 2019; Andrisano Ruggieri et al. 2020; Siswanto, Kuswando 2020; Efe, Ulutas 2022).

It is undoubtedly a significant issue, as it has the potential to frame experiences and practices (Damore, Rieckhof 2021, Bavli, Uslu Kocabaş 2022) not only in ECE, but also in relation to teacher trainees (Slovacek, Minova 2021), high school Montessori education (Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi 2005), and other alternative pedagogies (Dodd-Nufrio 2011). Some reports indicate that teachers possess unique personal theories that may affect their practices (Bell 1991; Wood, Bennett 2000; Tsangaridou, O'Sullivan 2003; Takahashi 2011).

For this article, which focuses on the category of thinking/acting outside the box, I have narrowed the analysis to those parts of the narratives identified as relevant to the problem category. An open coding process was implemented using QSR NVivo and MaxQDA software, as suggested by (Feng, Behar-Horenstein 2019) to formulate analytical categories. The analysis procedure involved the following steps: a) examining the natural sense units (verbatim interview transcripts) for specific parts of the narratives; b) open coding the extracts (Jacques 2021); c) condensing and comparing the codes; d) identifying, labelling, and describing analytical categories; e) illustrating the categories with representative quotes, and f) providing evidence-based interpretations (Kvale, Brinkmann 2009).

Results

In the research procedure adopted in this project, the results of the study are treated as an outcome space that emerged in the course of analysing the empirical material. In the case of

the study presented here, the aforementioned outcome space is constituted by five categories of description. In the following part of the article, I will briefly present each category, illustrating them with a “representative” fragment of transcripts of the interviews.

Category one: beyond the classic (use of) Montessori material

The first category described here concerns practices related to the lack of possession of classical Montessori material and/or the use of this material by children in creative, unexpected ways. In other words, both the school’s lack of possession of the complete material and allowing the children to working unconventional ways can initiate an “out of the box” practice (cf. Palmer 1912; Lillard 2012, 2013; Lillard, Heise 2016).

I left the public system, the traditional school system and I decided to become a Montessori guide. So first I took the AMI course to be a children’s house guide, and then I also did the course to become assistant to infancy, so between zero and three years of age. [...] And now you come into the classroom, and you think OK I want to do the Montessori, but I have no clue how to do it without materials. So, this was important moment as I started to think [...] do I use everyday objects? Do I go to the forest and collect some sticks, stones and use it. **Is it still Montessori?** I wonder what my trainer would say if they saw it. But I did it, and I think it is actually still Montessori. [14]

So, I was working with a group of seventeen children, between one year and a half and three years. So... that was brilliant, I loved every moment of it. I just, I was doing my, my course, I was just finishing my course... my AMI course, and... I was the leading guide, let’s say. I was speaking Spanish with the children, and I had two very kind and qualified assistants. They were talking in English with the children. It was a bilingual school... and it was beautiful. The first thing you would think when you entered this place was, wow, this place is really beautiful. Everything was well prepared and well arranged. So, everything was settled and prepared and **then the kids came and you could throw all your plan into the bin it hardly ever happened that we followed the scenario that we had really planned before. They didn’t care about the albums, and yet they seemed to benefit a lot.** At the beginning it was really difficult for me. You never know really what is going to happen at your work. [18]

Category two: free work/play in safe environment

This descriptive category concerns a specific approach to understanding “free work” in Montessori pedagogy. The interviewees pointed out that the basis of free work is not only the non-directive presence of the teacher, but also the creation of a space in which there is emotional security. Appreciating acceptance of the child’s freedom to act freely contributes to the emergence of phenomena that cannot be predicted before they happen. In other words, it is the space for free work/play that triggers out-of-the-box action, but only when

it is really **free work** and not just the part of the day that is devoted to working with the material. In this context, the notion of **free work** is expanded, the importance of **free play** is appreciated and the boundary between the two is blurred. The distinction between work and play, traditional to Montessori discourse, is questioned here (cf. Brehony 2000). The play that is child-initiated and, at the same time, has pro-developmental potential, becomes **work** in the Montessorian sense of the word.

Well, it all depends, what kind of child you have in front of you, but you can let the child decide how to spend the time during free work period, because, some of them, they arrive, and they are very clear about what they want... So, some of them, they need to be comforted, so you spend time with them being very warm, and, and, and kind with them, and then, then maybe they will be open to an activity. **So, emotions first, reading the emotions, and your emotions, and then they seem to have mere play, but it is not mere [stress] play.** Perhaps it is the work that Montessori wrote so much about? **So where is play and where is work?** I don't know exactly but I know freedom in free work means also accepting free play. [127]

Okay, so... the teacher is the one, who takes care of the, takes care of the progress, you know? So, we have those... we have the curriculum, the AMI curriculum, and we decide what kind of progress we want to have with children. There is one exception though, there is one exception though... and this is the work of the child. If this is good for them, isn't it what we all want? [...] **but are we ready for such a chaos? Sometimes I think that this freedom in Montessori is just an empty cliché.** [134]

Category three: boredom of the child

The third category identified during the analysis of the empirical material points to the potential of boredom as a trigger for acting out-side-the-box, which is a phenomena investigated by various researchers (Elpidorou 2014; Raffaelli et al. 2018; McDonald 2019). As mentioned above, this article is primarily concerned with teachers' actions, however, also in this category – as was to some extent the case in category two – the specific approach of the teacher to his/her practice and to the children can be an inhibitor of out-of-the-box action in a prepared Montessori setting. In this context, the discourse of using time **productively**, so popular now also in the context of education, becomes questionable (cf. Korsgaard, Zamojski 2023; Zamojski 2023). The time of boredom experienced by children is described here as a moment in which the child experiences a dilemma about how to manage his time, what activities to engage in, what to work on a particular day. The recognition by the teacher that the child's experience of boredom is an important aspect of development allows the child to act outside the box.

It's difficult, because I, I think some of them, it **can be overwhelming, you know, the, the amount of freedom we guarantee in the Montessori classroom**, some of them, they... until then they were not allowed to think about what they like or to do something just for

the sake of doing it, because, because you enjoy doing it, because... some of them, some of them they, they, they stay there in the middle in the classroom, and they don't know what to do and that's fine too. [I6]

[...] on Monday morning the children arrived and I do remember... the, the first thing that, I mean the biggest thing that came out was, “What shall we do here? So that, that was nice, because they were..., some of them didn't say anything, they didn't say much, they were puzzled the moment they came in. [...] I noticed then how important it is to decide what to do for the children and in order for this to happen they **need to experience boredom** and decision making space. [I11]

Category four: encountering the Other(ness)

During the analysis of the empirical material, there were some excerpts from the narratives identified which referred to the challenges presented by the teacher's encounters with a child who, for various reasons, does not undertake the work in a traditional way. Such situations range from children with specific learning needs to those who are reluctant to work with classic Montessori material. Interviewees described such children as “different” or “other” but it is these encounters with this otherness that trigger or force a creative approach to the teacher's work. Let us present sample excerpts from the interviews:

And there are children who are totally different. [...] We also have a visually impaired boy who has more problems with his graphomotor skills, so... we had consultations with a typhlopedagogue who gave us some advice on how to organize his environment in order to encourage him to work. All this usual Montessori practice that we were trained in didn't work. We simply had to find ways how to be consistent with Montessori and work with this boy. [I22]

There are other children who don't give a damn about the Daily Diary, which also, let's say, reassures me that it's not like that, they are not I don't know, mechanical robots who just fill in the blanks one by one. There are some people who are, let's put it this way, completely unusual. But, as I say, we don't get too worried and look for solutions. [...] We constantly remind ourselves sometimes not to act like a Montessori policemen. [I2]

Some educational researchers point to the distinction between “individualized” and “personalized” education (Bray, McClaskey 2012; Tetzlaff et al. 2021). In this context, the individualization of the teacher's work with the child could mean, for example, the selection of appropriate Montessori materials for a particular child based on prior observation.

In contrast, the activity which we refer to here as acting outside the Montessori box would be closer to a ‘personalized’ education approach. In this mode the teacher not only adapts the didactic material to the needs of the child, but also creatively generates different pedagogical forms to address the subjectivity of the pupil.

Category five: the silent ones demand a voice

The last category discussed here concerns “going out of the Montessori box” as a result of children’s verbally expressed demands. This category was inspired by two teachers who drew attention to the specificity of the behaviours and functioning of children and adolescents between the ages of six and eighteen, which corresponds to the second and third developmental planes in Maria Montessori’s pedagogy (Baker 2001; Grazzini 2004; Green 2022; Kahn n.d.). Formerly “obedient” children, following the adult (first plane of development) (Grazzini 2004; Haines n.d.), with their significant social, emotional, and moral development demand the organization of a prepared environment according to their openly expressed needs. The resistance to the activities proposed by the adult causes the teachers who listen respectfully to the voices of the children and adolescents to modify, extend, and reorganize the prepared environment as well as invent strategies for pedagogical interventions they had not thought of before.

Six to twelve children, well they’re different. They are debating a lot, talking a lot... putting, you know, their arguments on the table and then finding an arrangement, then negotiating all the time, and they are so... they are so obsessed with justice. I have no option but to follow them. Sometimes I come to the classroom with a plan and within minutes it is upside down and we go to the museum. They are not... anymore... calm Casa [3–6] kids. [I17]

Well, I usually know what to do. In a sense it’s “albumed” [shows inverted commas]. It’s just the way we learn on the course, the way we have it written out in the album as well, well that’s, that’s the way we try to do it but I found out that – if you don’t ignore what your children say – you constantly need to change the ideas of spending time together. Sometimes they just refuse to cooperate. Some simply say – my way or no way [laughter]. I think some training organizations should just change, and start to say that the pink tower is not the answer to all question, that children can knock it down in a metaphorical way, and they really don’t have to construct it block by block, cube by cube... if you know what I mean. [I29]

Discussion and conclusion

The study conducted aimed to identify contexts in which Montessori practitioners act outside the box. The analysis of the empirical material made it possible to present five categories of description. The outcome space sheds light on the circumstances in which out-of-the-box practices emerge, as well as on specific teachers’ ways of understanding educational practice that make out-of-the-box action possible. Maria Montessori’s pedagogy is particularly interesting when it comes to the issue of creative, non-schematic action.

On the one hand, there is a tried and tested way of doing things, a fairly clearly defined convention of teacher behaviour, which can make it difficult to act outside the box. This is

what we often call the Montessori method. On the other hand, on the level of values and general philosophical assumptions, Montessori pedagogy means a deep respect for the other, following the needs of children, respecting the right to individual construction of one’s own interests and passions. Taking into account the results of the conducted research we can speak about the tension between the technical approach to Montessori work, gained through many hours of training in procedures of working with the child offered by numerous teacher education centres, and being inspired by Maria Montessori’s pedagogy at the level of assumptions concerning relations between people, the general aim of education, the essence of harmonious coexistence of all people.

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the theme of acting outside the box was not the main research problem of the project, which should be seen as an obvious limitation of the analyses presented here. The issue of acting outside the box was addressed *ex post*. For the analyses, only those fragments of the research were selected that were relevant to the theme of the article. The results obtained in the course of the analyses can be treated as directions for further research in this area. Arguably, systematic empirical research focused on the issue of the creative interactions of Montessori guides would deepen the knowledge of teachers’ understandings of educational practice.

Research conducted in a qualitative paradigm does not allow the results to be generalized beyond the study sample, and – in this sense – it is not possible to speak of objective research results here. Definitely, the use of quantitative research carried out on large, randomly selected, controlled samples would make it possible to identify the contexts and the intensity of the occurrence of teacher practices outside-the-box.

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