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Freinet and Montessori in practice. A comparative analysis of the meanings attributed to the process of learning by early education teachers – research report

A small boy was industriously drawing a green cow. His teacher approached and told him, “There are no green cows.” He replied calmly, “That is why I am making one.”

Montessori (2005: 13)

Summary

The article presented is a qualitative analysis of the early education Freinet and Montessori teachers in relation to their educational practices in the scope of educational constructivism. Understanding constructivism as a metaphor describing process of learning, the authors outline similarities and differences in the conceptions attributed to the processes of learning between the two researched groups of teachers. The results of the analysis show the opposite “direction” of the thematizations. Freinet teachers concentrate on the techniques and then – in their narratives – outline the values related to education whereas Montessori teachers’ narratives are oriented at values and only illustrated with some technological examples. The outcomes of the analysis can be formulated in a form of provisional synthesis: The realization of constructivism in education is not connected so much with so called “active learning techniques” but rather with values, individual and shared axio-educational orientations and the quality of relations between various subjects involved in education. Such a hypothesis leads to the questioning of the tendency according to which teachers’ education should be practical. On the contrary, we claim that such a conception on teachers’ education might be an obstacle to the wide implementation of constructivism in educational practices.

Keywords: Montessori, Freinet, teachers’ education, constructivism

Słowa kluczowe: Montessori, Freinet, edukacja nauczycieli, konstruktywizm

Introduction

The main aim of the presented article is to outline some of the research results conducted among two groups of early education teachers working in grades 1–3 in Polish alternative elementary schools. Nevertheless, our specific intention here is focus on the educational practices in relation to the metaphor of **pedagogical constructivism** since this concept tends to be perceived globally as the opposition to mainstream, traditional schooling rooted in a behaviouristic paradigm of learning (see e.g.: Bruner 1960, 1971; Bower, Hilgard 1981; Ertmer, Newby 1993; Boghossian 2006) or/and educational assessment (Ahmad et al. 2020) and thus it is treated as a psychological – rather than epistemological – frame of various progressive pedagogies.

Nonetheless, it must be clearly articulated that we, following arguments formulated by many scholars and empiricists alike, do not conceive of constructivism as the **theory of school** or a unique **pedagogical approach** but, at most, a theory of **learning** (Gash 2014; Osborne 2014; Hobbiss 2018; cf. Mareschal et al. 2007).

We also agree with Biesta that the gradual disappearance of the lexis of **teaching** and **education** in the last three decades and the growing dominance of the **learning** discourse is not only a conceptual mistake, but it also has a negative influence on education *per se* and undoubtedly is not coincidental (Biesta 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012).

This also implies the assumption that a particular pedagogical approach, including Maria Montessori and Celestin Freinet, is rather a bundle of various concepts, beliefs and practices grounded (at times) on diverse psychological, sociological, pedagogical and political ideas.

For instance, Angeline Lillard (2007) shows that within Montessori pedagogy we can easily identify various theories, including (among other) humanism and constructivism. At the same time one must not forget that, at the initial stages of the development of this pedagogical concept, the psycho-educational dispute was predominated by the “nature-nurture” opposition as well as by the desire to create so called objectively-scientific pedagogy (Moll 2004), and Montessori was, at least to a certain extent, part of it and not so far from some of Edward Thorndike’s arguments (see e.g. Thorndike 1905, esp. pp. 187–198; 238–259) who, of course, is one of the key figures in early versions of behaviourism.

Freinet pedagogy cannot be identified as one specific and homogenic theory either. For instance, Victor Acker (2000) shows that we can find some arguments of Rabindranath Tagore or Ovide Decroly in his pedagogy as well as clear inspirations from Adolphe Ferrière, Jean Piaget and... John Dewey, especially when it comes to the role of the school as a centre of democratic life (Acker 2000: 4).

Having said that, our claim is not that constructivism is wrong. On the contrary, we firmly believe that its main characteristics might serve as orientation points to which early education should refer. A learning environment that incorporates constructivism is far more optimal than any other form of traditional, transmission-based and conservative education (Schwab et al. 2016: 194–206; Zolkoski et al. 2016; Perzigian, Braun 2020: 351–364).

Thorough analysis of the two alternative pedagogies has been done a number of times before, and the scholarly literature is very rich (see: e.g. Acker 2000; Aleksander 2014: 101–106; Issacs 2018) so it is needless to include detailed descriptions of these approaches here. Nonetheless, some major characteristics must be mentioned. Let us start with Célestin Freinet.

This educational approach tends to be regarded as a set of practical techniques, but in fact it is the pedagogic movement that goes hand in hand with the major postulates of the New Education Movement and thus it is much more than just a bundle of lesson ideas. This pedagogy is oriented at building a space for the holistic development of children, including their academic, emotional and social education (Freinet 1975). Helping children to develop a prodemocratic attitude, shaping social skills and the partnership relations of all the subjects intertwined in education, with the teacher building the scaffolding for these processes, are the pillars of this approach (Freinet 1975; Schaffer 2003: 167).

The educator creates the aforementioned space for the student who independently experiences and **constructs** knowledge. The development of social skills is enhanced by a few specific techniques such as: self-exploration experience, class councils and discussions, the printing press, school and class newspapers, class self-governments or books of life, the technique of responsibility – just to mention a few (Freinet 1993). For instance, the **class council** – during which the participants use the **class newspaper** – is a weekly class meeting with the teacher in which the whole community discusses important issues, form complaints suggestions and proposals as well as casting votes. The role of the newspaper, which is divided into three sections – thanks, critiques and proposals – is to help the students to share ideas in a frank and appreciative way. The other technique of building the class community is keeping the **book of class life** or chronicle in which all the members of group are invited to write their own significant memories from shared experiences. The inseparable part of Freinetian class life are voting and debates which help the pupils to learn to appreciate, comprehend and take part in democracy. The technique of responsibility involves performing specific functions in class where the teacher shares responsibility with the children (cf. Lindström 2018).

All the techniques create a specific climate in the class which becomes both the context but also the content of education. The **tacit** and personal knowledge (Polanyi 2009) of each and every child plays a crucial role in this pedagogic idea, and taking into consideration most of the techniques (esp. children's conferences, presentations, projects, and artistic forms), this approach is coherent with social constructivism, especially in the interpretation of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Jerome Bruner (1960, 1996; cf.: Wheatley 1991; Klus-Stańska 2003; Adams 2006: 243–257) where the individual development of the child takes place in a wider class community, which supports the knowledge construction of the individual (Oldfather et al. 1998: 115; Fosnot, Perry 2005: 34).

Montessori pedagogy is at times referred to as “the aid to life” (Montessori 2007: 15–16), and it is not an eye-catching cliché, but rather a prerequisite for all the pedagogical actions undertaken within this approach. According to Montessori a child goes through

four six-year developmental planes (Grazzini 1996: 208–241), each with specific characteristics and thus demanding a carefully designed learning environment, congruent with their contemporary needs (Montessori 1964, 1973, 1994). In this environment the child is invited to explore various branches of knowledge during uninterrupted three-hour independent and free work cycle (Issacs 2018: 31–45). They might work individually or in small groupings, usually created by the children themselves. One of the trademarks of this pedagogy is the didactic material in the form of materialized concrete objects, through which children research and construct abstract concepts, and develop attention and self-discipline, especially in nurseries and the first years of elementary education (Montessori 1973). Freedom and the individual, the constructive rhythm of life and spontaneous activity are the conditions in which children learn in their own pace and choose the contents of learning (Duffy, Duffy 2012).

Method

Our research can be characterised as an in-depth qualitative exploration of early-education teachers' professional biographies (Atkinson 1998; Warren, Karner 2005; Creswell 2012). Nonetheless, for the purpose of this article it is much narrower and we present here one of the aspects that has turned out to be part of the outcome space. In fact, we have focused on teachers' practices of organizing educational occasions or experiences for their students. In this way, we have made an attempt to investigate how various forms of constructivism and other edu-psychological foundations "work" in the processes of education in these two alternative pedagogic approaches.

We have conducted (in total) 28 in-depth, qualitative, individual interviews that initially had been designed as phenomenographic (Marton 1981: 177–200; 1986) but in the course of our conversations all of them eventually transformed into **life stories** (Connelly, Clandinin 1990; Clandinin 2013). The sampling method is purposeful (purposive sampling), but also the snow-ball technique has been used (Patton 2002). As a result, the total sample consists of 14 Montessori and 14 Freinet teachers working in the first three years of elementary schools in Poland, which means that their students are from six to nine years old. All the interviewees are women aged between 28 and 60. There is a significant difference in the employment conditions between these two groups.

While all of the Montessori teachers work in non-state institutions, the Freinet are all employed in state schools. The place of work of the interviewed teachers is consistent with Polish educational reality. Montessori education in Poland is dominated by non-state institutions unlike Freinet education whose techniques are incorporated almost entirely in state schools.

Freinet teachers also represent much more diverse educational environments. Here we have managed to talk to small village schoolteachers as well as to those working in a large metropolis. Also, the age factor is different in two groups. All the Montessori teachers are be-

low forty-seven with less than twenty years of professional experience, whereas the Freinet group consists of teachers between thirty and sixty with three to thirty-five years of career.

Their status in their institutions is also incomparably diverse. Some Freinet teachers implement this pedagogy independently, while working in relatively transmission-based schools, while others are employed in institutions for which Freinetian pedagogy is the only model of operation. All Montessori teachers work in schools that incorporate this pedagogy thoroughly, which means that we have not had access to those who implement some elements of this approach.

All the interviews lasted between thirty-five and a hundred and twenty minutes, and have been transcribed and analysed according to the rules suggested by Steinar Kvale (2009). The initial, and, in majority of cases the only, interview questions were:

- What does being a Montessori/Freinet teacher mean for you?
- How come that you're here as a Freinet/Montessori teacher?

During the first phase of the analysis each group of teachers was explored separately. In this way we have created two outcome spaces consisting of two sets of collectively shared conceptions/meanings attributed to various aspects of educational processes. Having described and interpreted both outcome space results we have identified similarities and differences as well as existing references between two sets of meanings.

Results

Before offering some synthetical comparative attempt at interpretation let us outline some of the extracts of the transcripts in order to shed light on the narratives and thus various modes of the teachers' thematizations in relation to the main topic of this article.

Freinet teachers:

I managed to write a book with kids, which we then normally printed and we have it in our library and the kids borrow it and read. This is our finished work, so that we have closed this publication. (FT2)

I also make inquiry flashcards¹, most willingly the one in the forest, an inquiry flashcard Oh! (FT4)

I have organized two-week cycles in which there was freedom. Freedom of choice, content, time when you do something, when you start and when you finish. (FT5)

¹ The **inquiry flashcards** is one of didactic aids used while working with one of the Freinetian techniques that is referred to as **inquiry experience**. Inquiry flashcards are created by children in order to verbalize their cognitive needs as well as suggested intellectual activity. This idea is also becoming influential in the context of HE (Oppl 2017: 229–250).

Free text for sure! Inquiry flashcards as well and all the trips are based on them. So yes, the inquiry flashcards must be there. And it works (...) and we organize debates. (FT6)

My job is to plan work, to follow the child, not to make, but to encourage and we use the techniques of: planning the work, complexes of interests, newspaper (...) and children then can show who they are, they can speak publicly, they say what they think and they are not afraid. All that has been created through the complexes of interests, through things which I have created on the basis of their free texts. The children have a lot of ideas and I cannot let them down. (FT7)

I very often rely on debates – to talk, and every child’s voice matters. (FT9)

They [the children] use free texts when something is important for them, these topics. It is so developing for them and you can see how it is all changing, first in the picture, and a few months later they are able to write free texts. For me this is such beautiful evidence of how they are developing and how this ability to write is growing. (FT10)

In my class these are the children’s conferences, prepared by them, that work very well. The children are able to wonderfully talk about their interests, and when they do so they also talk about their achievements and about what else we could do since there are no failures here. (FT11)

Autocorrective flashcards² have turned out to be an ideal solution since the children who finish shared work, just sit around and take a math task or mother tongue task or science and they do them. (FT11)

I manage the book of life. This book of life is a chronicle in which children take down [class] events and they do it completely independently, with images, illustrations and free texts. After writing free texts, one group of children type them on the computer and then we publish a newspaper. (FT13)

We kept interclass correspondence, that we started in class two from [name of the town]. The beginning was about the location of our school, our town, their town. Then we had individual letters between particular children or sending recordings on how the patron’s day had looked like at school. (...) So, this correspondence did not only include letters but also other forms of children’s work. (FT 14)

In their narratives, Freinet teachers construct their conceptions according to a certain sequence (Fig. 1).

² **Autocorrective flashcards** is a technique used in Freinet pedagogy to foster independence and help to personalize the process of education. Usually these are two flashcards, one consisting of a given task, the other one with the correct or suggested solution. In Montessori methodology this aid is called “control cards” but the idea behind this didactic solution is very similar.

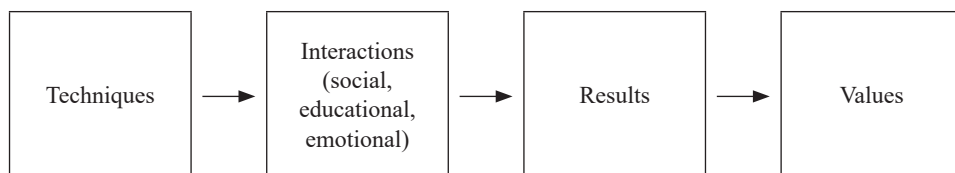


Figure 1. Freinet teachers' sequence of conceptions on educational processes.

Source: own research.

They describe precisely (a) certain technique(s) and then go on to reflect on how children **interact** while working in a specific way. This interaction is seen here in three inter-related domains: social, educational and emotional.

The teachers verbalize the connection between a given technique and children's interactions paying attention not only to possible/desired and purely academic '*outcomes*' but also to their social and psychic potential. These interactions are described with the lexis of "observable" and "tangible" behaviours.

Moreover, despite the fact that they do refer to the implemented educational solutions as **techniques**, it is clear that in this mode of thinking they are far beyond techno-logic tools. These are rather **pedagogic(al) forms** (Masschelein, Simons 2013, 2018).

The next element of the aforementioned sequence is '*outcomes*' which – again – is perceived much more broadly than just "digesting" some knowledge. The '*outcomes*' are thematized in the context of individual, multi-dimensional development, with special scope to the significance for a particular child. In other words, the '*outcomes*' are not objectified, but conceptualised in the context of a unique child's life.

Finally, in their narratives, the Freinet teachers refer to the **values** that are important for them and constitute this pedagogy. The intriguing fact here that the values appear as the last element of the sequence and therefore can be 'read' as the deepest dimension of their practices. Here, these declarations function as more general justifications for specific practices and seem to function as the bottom part of the cultural metaphor of iceberg, that is located beneath the surface of what is clearly visible.

Let us now turn to some examples of the Montessori teachers' narratives. Again, first we present a few "illustrative" extracts and then we focus on possible interpretations.

Individuality is the key word here. I work in order to support their individualities. (MT1)

In my class I try to create *hygge*³ where everybody feels safe and comfortable. You can only do some education if the relations are ok. Otherwise, we have taming, not learning. We meet

³ Cambridge English Dictionary defines this term as: "a Danish word for a quality of coziness (= feeling warm, comfortable, and safe) that comes from doing simple things such as lighting candles, baking, or spending time at home with your family. Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/hygge>, 12.12.2020.

in the morning in a circle which gives us this feeling of togetherness. For about 25 minutes we talk about their weekend, important events in their lives and then go on to planning their daily work. And then they go and work by themselves. (MT3)

For me it is mostly *tea-time*⁴. The place is very small. We're close to each other this is important. You know, in the double sense of the word. Being together in peaceful and understanding way – that's it. Before that I was a completely different English teacher, believe me. Montessori is a way of life for me, and I hope also for the kids. It is not normal school, it is life. (MT4)

As you know [laugh] we are here to give the beginning of a more peaceful world. So, we start with great stories. It happens somewhere at the beginning of each year. We are all together, that hall here is dark, we bring some artefacts and tell one of the five stories⁵, one after another, one after another. (MT5)

You know it all started partly thanks to you [laugh]. I graduated from BA early education and started working in primary school. It was very traditional. I immediately knew, I was not "from this fairy-tale", and then I decided to go back to university and start my MA and in the meantime, I volunteered in [the name of a Montessori school]. Oh gosh! From the very beginning I knew that was my place on this planet, I could finally breathe. Freedom, now I am thinking about the *Braveheart*⁶ main character – do you remember this Scottish warrior? [laugh] I felt the same, at last. And I knew I had to do everything to provide these kids with freedom and non-violence experience. The rest is just addition. Yes, we have wonderful didactic material, yes we take part in regular professional development, yes I am relatively well paid, but as I say – this is not the issue, the issue is our relations. (MT7)

Montessori is not about the material or not even so much about the prepared environment. It is the freedom and love. Love for the child, love for the other love for the nature. I am sorry for the pathos, but I cannot talk seriously about my job without it. I know it is now maybe not so well seen, but for that's the starting point. This appreciation, acceptance and understanding – they are the pillars of my job. (MT8)

⁴ As we got to know later, teatime in the practice of this teacher is a specific pedagogic form. The students are invited to prepare tea in the traditional English manner and then sit at the table with a group of four and five and freely talk in English (as a foreign language). The assistance of the teacher is minimal. They may offer a topic or simply sit in the corner and take observation notes in order to prepare activities for the future.

⁵ The interview refers here to „The Five Great Lessons” which are unique part of Montessori curriculum for lower – elementary students. They include: 1) Coming of the Universe and the Earth; 2) Coming of Life; 3) Coming of Human Beings; 4) Communication/the Story of the Alphabet/The Story of Language; 5) The Story of Numbers (cf. Duffy, Duffy 2014).

⁶ *Braveheart* is a 1995 American epic historical fiction war film directed and co-produced by Mel Gibson, who portrays William Wallace, a late-13th-century Scottish warrior. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braveheart>, 12.12.2020.

Nothing is predictable here. But what is in fact constant, is the way we perceive the child. They are most important here. Through these glasses we look at them, or at least we try to. That's why we constantly ask this ritual question everyday: 'What are you going to do today'. (MT11)

It must be something important for the child if they are to learn something. If they are not "touched" [shows the symbol of inverted commas] they won't learn it. No matter how we'd try. Have you ever really, seriously learned something that is not important to you? I guess, not and so this is the way we try to do it. Unfortunately, we live in this reality here and now, so from time to time we "have to" [shows the symbol of inverted commas] do some stupid things from the national curriculum, but even then we do not pretend we like it. We're authentic and frank. "Yes, we don't like it either but that's the law, sorry Montessori" [pretends to cite herself/ laughs]. (MT 12)

I am a complete anarchist [laugh] always planning, never following the plan from A to Z. [laugh]. I am not sure whether the need for order⁷ is what we have in our class [laugh] but what I know for sure is that my kids feel well and safe here. That is the key to any learning. (MT14)

Montessori teachers' narratives on education differ significantly from the Freinetian ones in their sequence and content (Fig. 2). They begin with the values and then concentrate on the relations, sometimes illustrating them with certain techniques which, however, are sparse and much less varied. This group of educators pays more attention to the ethical justifications and optimal conditions for constructing the knowledge, but does not focus on the technicalities of processes.

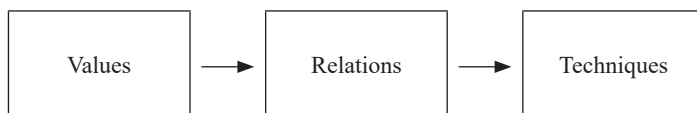


Figure 2. Montessori teachers' sequence of conceptions on educational processes

Source: own research.

⁷ The interviewee refers here to the Montessorian concept of "*sensitive periods*" which are the moments in life when children can naturally, without effort and with joy, develop certain competences or create a given attribute of personality. This concept is one of the most important elements of Montessori pedagogy. The *sensitive period* for order is characteristic for children at the level of *Casa dei Bambini*. It starts at birth and has got its peak during early toddlerhood and finishes when the child is around five years of age. That is why the "kindergarten" environment is organized to be so orderly, and that is why the presentations offered to children are given in a specific manner. The concept of sensitive periods has got its roots partly in the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, and partly in the work of a Dutch geneticist and botanist – Hugo de Vries, but contemporarily numerous schools of psychological thinking confirms empirically this idea (Montessori 1972: 37–59; cf.: Frankenhuis, Fraley 2017).

It might be connected with the importance of the adult preparation and the role of the environment. One must also bear in mind that lower elementary Montessori spaces, although there are some characteristic materials there, are, to a certain extent, diverse and modified not only according to the needs of particular children but also in line with the national curriculum as well as some deeply rooted local educational practices. It is not particularly unusual to find typical coursebooks in Polish Montessori elementary schools, not to mention the prevailing presence of conventional curriculum contents presented in more or less traditional form.

Observing Montessori on the level of “educational aids” one might come to the conclusion that it is quite conservative in Poland. Nevertheless, we know too well that no educational system depends on what is visible above the surface (aids, techniques or even contents) but rather these are the deeper layers that play a crucial role and perhaps even prejudice the nature of knowledge acquisition/construction/absorption.

For instance, the great lessons, which are stories enriched with presentations, might be treated as a form of transmissive teaching. It is an undeniable fact that when the children take part in them, their main role is to listen and watch, and thus only the receptive skills seem to be involved. This however would be a reductionist or even purely ideological point of view.

The question that must be posed after the analysis, is whether or not, children have the opportunity to actively **construct** their knowledge not only while “learning-by-doing” or during the activities proposed by constructionism (Tangney et al. (eds.) 2020), but also **while** or perhaps as “*a consequence*” of listening or watching. If such stories do really activate the urge to know, stimulate creativity, provoke “big questions” – isn’t that a form of knowledge construction?

Conclusions

Freinet teachers start with thematizing **the techniques** that undoubtedly are typical of constructivist pedagogic forms. Then they elaborate on and justifies them with the language of romantic liberalism at the level of values. In this way they teach us that, even the most modern and innovative “tools”, when deprived of consistent values, will not be a decisive factor in creating the possibility of constructivist education.

Montessori teachers show how important the (school) environment is, if it is to open up opportunity for significant education. The techniques, although important, are not what we should focus on while thinking about constructivism in education. This is the vision of a child, the optimal relations (of trust, freedom and respect) and a constant coming back to the ethical and ideological issues that might open the opportunity for constructivism to come into being in educational practices.

If so, we cannot escape the question of teachers’ preparation in HE. The overwhelming tendency to promote practical skills, glorifying the need to keep teachers’ education enter-

taining and as **innovative** as possible, are – in the perspective of the results of the research presented in this article – an obstacle to the successful implementation of constructivism in education.

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