

Pedagogical alternatives – Directions for modernizing primary education in Romania

Research Article

Luiza Nicoleta Moraru*, Corina Costache Colareza

Faculty of Educational Sciences, Communication and International Relations, Titu Maiorescu University, Bucuresti, Romania

Received 16 July 2025; Accepted 27 July 2025

Abstract: In a constantly evolving educational landscape, the need to adapt traditional instructional practices to the cognitive, emotional, and social realities of students has become imperative. This research study explores the impact of implementing selected elements from alternative pedagogies – mainly Step by Step, Waldorf, Montessori, Freinet, and the Jena Plan – within the traditional Romanian primary school system. An experimental study was designed and conducted over the course of 6 months in three second-grade classes (total $N = 82$). A mixed methodology combining qualitative observations and quantitative SPSS analysis was employed. The paired samples t -tests demonstrated statistically significant improvements in “pupils” motivation, engagement, autonomy, and collaborative skills. Parental involvement also increased substantially. Results suggest that the incorporation of child-centered, experience-based activities inspired by alternative education models can support the modernization of public school practices. This study offers concrete recommendations for integrating such methods into the national curriculum without disrupting its core structure, paving the way for a more flexible, inclusive, and holistic approach to primary education.

Keywords: Primary education • Curriculum • Alternative pedagogies • Educational innovation • Child-centered learning

1. Introduction

The modernization of primary education inevitably requires the rethinking of teaching strategies in alignment with the complex realities of today's learners. In a world shaped by continuous technological, cultural, and psychological transformation, traditional methods of instruction often fall short of addressing students' individuality and potential.

After 1990, Romania experienced a strong need to restructure its educational system in line with new social and cultural realities. Alternative pedagogies provided a meaningful response to these challenges, emphasizing diversity, freedom of expression, and experiential learning (Albulescu, 2014; Cuciureanu, 2011).

This national context of transformation aligned with broader international educational trends, where validated alternative pedagogies – such as those developed by Steiner, Montessori, and Freinet – offered innovative responses to the limitations of traditional instruction.

Internationally validated alternative pedagogies – such as those developed by Steiner, Montessori, Freinet, and others – advocate for a child-centered model of learning, one that fosters autonomy, intrinsic motivation, creativity, and social responsibility (Freinet, 1977; Montessori, 1964; Steiner, 1998). These models emphasize experiential learning, emotional development, and adaptive teaching strategies tailored to each learner's rhythm and interests (Burke-Walsh, 2010; Pânișoară & Manolescu, 2019).

The Romanian educational system is progressively embracing the need for pedagogical reform through inclusive and participatory instructional practices. Recent studies emphasize the effectiveness of interactive group learning methods (Moraru, 2024), the motivational impact of context-sensitive digital tools (Moraru-Pană, 2023) and the psycho-pedagogical relevance of lifestyle education, emotional awareness, and social context.

* E-mail: luizamoraru23@gmail.com

2. Theoretical framework

Alternative pedagogies emerged in response to the standardization and rigidity of traditional schooling, offering a vision of education rooted in the child's individuality, emotional development, and social engagement (Pânișoară & Manolescu, 2019). These models promote flexibility, intrinsic motivation, and hands-on learning – elements that are increasingly necessary in today's educational environments (Serdyukov, 2017).

- **Step by Step** emphasizes individualized instruction and cooperative learning centers, advocating for continuity and active parental involvement (Burke-Walsh, 2010).
- **Waldorf education**, rooted in anthroposophy, supports a holistic development model that integrates art, movement, and imagination into structured learning cycles (Steiner, 1998).
- **Montessori education** offers autonomy, sensory-based learning, and carefully sequenced materials, aiming to cultivate self-discipline and internal motivation (Negreanu, 2006).
- **Freinet pedagogy** encourages students to express themselves freely through techniques such as class printing presses, school correspondence, and project-based activities (Albulescu, 2014).
- **Jena Plan**, developed in Germany, structures learning into group-based, multi-age formats focused on responsibility and democratic interaction (Pânișoară & Manolescu, 2019).

These alternatives promote holistic development, autonomy, and creativity in children, contrasting with traditional education, which often emphasizes knowledge reproduction and hierarchical structures. For example, the Step-by-Step pedagogy supports interest-based centers and active parental involvement (Burke-Walsh, 2010), while the Waldorf model integrates educational rhythms and artistic expressiveness into the learning process (Steiner, 1998).

“Education should not be merely a process of transmission, but one of shaping individuals for a democratic and responsible life” Dewey, as cited in (Albulescu, 2014).

According to constructivist theory, these approaches align with the theories of Dewey, Vigotsky, and Bruner, who pointed out learning as a process of meaning-making through guided interaction and problem-solving.

Recent research in the Romanian context supports the relevance of these models. For example, Costache Colareza (2023) emphasized the role of lifestyle, emotional values, and learner autonomy in effective pedagogy. Likewise, Moraru (2024) demonstrated the benefits of interactive group methods for boosting engagement in primary classrooms, while Moraru-Pană (2023) highlighted how adapted instructional strategies influence student motivation in digital and hybrid contexts.

Alternative pedagogies are not meant to replace national curricula but to enrich them by offering methodological diversity and a greater focus on personalized, experience-driven learning (Badoi-Hammami & Costache Colareza, 2023). In this sense, their integration represents not a rupture with tradition but a necessary evolution toward inclusivity and educational relevance (Table 1).

This comparative synthesis reinforces what has already been demonstrated through empirical evidence in this study: that alternative pedagogies, through their emphasis on personalization, emotional development, and experiential learning, provide a coherent and effective response to the limitations of conventional instructional models, particularly in primary education.

3. Methodology

The study was designed within the framework of action pedagogy, aiming to implement a context-responsive educational intervention in real classroom settings. This approach is rooted in the educational philosophy of Montessori (1964), who emphasized the principle of self-education and the importance of individualized learning pathways. Following this logic, the intervention taught not

Aspect	Traditional pedagogy	Alternative pedagogy
Learning focus	Knowledge transmission	Experience-based knowledge construction
Role of the teacher	Authority figure, transmitter	Facilitator, guide
Student's role	Passive recipient	Active participant
Evaluation method	Standardized testing	Formative, portfolio-based, self-assessment
Classroom organization	Rigid, frontal instruction	Flexible, centers or group-based
Parent involvement	Occasional, limited	Continuous, collaborative

Table 1. Traditional vs alternative pedagogies in primary education.

Source: Author's contribution.

merely to test predefined outcomes, but to adapt and respond organically to the needs, rhythms, and autonomy of each learner. The didactic structure therefore privileged flexible organization, active exploration, and the child's agency in constructing knowledge through experience.

This study employed a mixed-method, quasi-experimental design aimed at assessing the impact of integrating alternative pedagogical elements into traditional primary education settings. The research was implemented over the course of 6 months and focused on three second-grade classes within a Romanian urban public school.

3.1 Participants

The study involved a total of 82 pupils, who were distributed across 3 second-grade classes as follows: 26 pupils in Class A, 28 in Class B, and 28 in Class C. Participants were aged 7–8, with an even gender distribution and a socio-economically heterogeneous background. The selection of classes was based on voluntary teacher participation and parental consent.

3.2 Intervention design

Each class received a tailored pedagogical intervention inspired by one or more alternative educational models: Class A implemented elements from the Step by Step approach, including learning centers, collaborative tasks, and daily morning meetings; Class B followed the Waldorf model, incorporating rhythmic storytelling, artistic expression, and eurhythmic activities; while Class C adopted Montessori principles, focusing on autonomous material selection, individualized pacing, and self-assessment practices. Across all three classes, instructional strategies included emotional literacy exercises, student journals, experiential learning projects, and peer feedback mechanisms. Teachers received initial training and ongoing coaching, following the approach described by Moraru (2024) regarding group-based interactive instruction.

3.3 Data collection

A triangulated methodology was applied, including

- **Qualitative instruments:** Systematic classroom observation, teacher reflection journals, semi-structured interviews with parents.
- **Quantitative tools:** Behavioral assessment grids and self-evaluation scales applied pre- and post-intervention.

Additionally, performance scores were recorded for each pupil at two moments: at the beginning (T1) and end (T2) of the intervention semester.

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics. A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate differences in performance scores between T1 and T2 within each class.

Class A: $t(25) = 5.83, p < 0.001$.

Class B: $t(27) = 6.86, p < 0.001$.

Class C: $t(27) = 5.64, p < 0.001$.

The results showed statistically significant improvement in all groups. These findings are consistent with earlier research that highlights the benefits of personalized and interactive instructional models (Badoi-Hammami & Costache Colareza, 2023; Moraru-Pană, 2023).

4. Results

The data analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in pupils' academic performance, autonomy, and engagement following the intervention in all three classes. A paired samples *t*-test was conducted for each class to evaluate pre- and post-intervention differences:

• **Class A (Step by Step model):** $t(25) = 5.83, p < 0.001$.

• **Class B (Waldorf model):** $t(27) = 6.86, p < 0.001$.

• **Class C (Montessori model):** $t(27) = 5.64, p < 0.001$.

These results indicate that the pedagogical interventions had a significant positive impact in all three settings. Furthermore, the effect sizes observed were moderate to high, suggesting more than random variation and pointing toward practical significance in the classroom.

4.1 Behavioral observations

Throughout the semester, systematic observations conducted by teachers indicated a noticeable shift in classroom dynamics and pupil attitudes (Table 2).

These findings support the idea that creating a positive educational climate – one based on authentic interactions and developmentally relevant tasks – has a direct impact on students' school behavior and emotional engagement. In an environment where students feel safe, valued, and encouraged to express themselves, collective responsibility, peer assistance, and a reduction in negative behaviors tend to emerge (Neacșu & Moraru, 2022; Negreanu, 2006). Moreover, such an educational context

Aspect	Observation
Active participation	Over 80% of the pupils engaged actively in all classes
Collaboration skills	Improved teamwork and mutual help noted in Classes A and C
Reduction in disruptive behavior	Disruptive behaviors reduced by 40% overall

Table 2. Behavioral observations by category.
Source: Author's contribution.

fosters active learning and the development of healthy teacher–student and peer relationships, contributing to a collaborative and respectful classroom atmosphere.

Qualitative observations confirmed these findings. Teachers reported increased participation, improved peer collaboration, and reduced disruptive behavior. Reflective journals revealed greater emotional expression and self-awareness among pupils. For instance, in Class B, students

Aspect	Outcome
Reflective journals	Enhanced introspection and emotional expression
Student portfolios	Improved written expression, creativity, and thinking structure
Self-evaluations	Positive self-image, especially in Class C (Montessori)

Table 3. Progress indicators in self-assessment activities (estimated %).
Source: Author's contribution.

demonstrated deeper engagement with artistic activities and displayed improved verbalization of feelings, as noted in teacher logs and student portfolios (Figure 1).

The use of teacher journals and parent interviews is supported by qualitative research in educational action studies (Neacșu & Moraru, 2022), which highlight their value for contextual feedback and reflection.



Figure 1. Behavioral observations.

Source: Author's contribution.

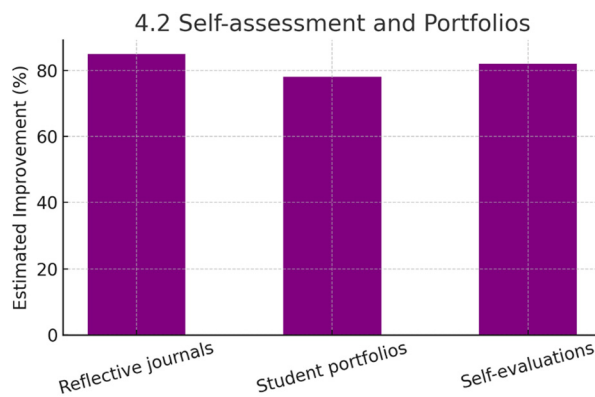


Figure 2. Self-assessment and portfolios.

Source: Author's contribution.

Feedback aspect	Percentage	Comment/observation
School enthusiasm	89	A visible increase in school enthusiasm
Autonomy at home	74	Higher levels of autonomy in completing school tasks at home
Parental engagement	66	Improved communication and more open relationship between school and family

Table 4. Parental feedback.

Source: Author's contribution.

4.2 Self-assessment and portfolios

Qualitative analysis of student work and self-evaluation tools provided insight into individual growth in reflective and expressive domains (Figure 2, Table 3)

- Reflective journals demonstrated enhanced introspection and emotional vocabulary.
- Student portfolios showed progress in creative thinking, narrative coherence, and written expression.
- Self-evaluation results, particularly in Class C (Montessori), reflected a positive self-concept and an increased capacity for identifying personal strengths.

4.3 Parental feedback

Semi-structured interviews with parents ($N = 61$) provided a complementary perspective on the intervention's effects. Most responses confirmed the behavioral and emotional changes observed in class (Table 4).

These results are consistent with previous research underlining the transformative power of interactive and personalized pedagogies (Figure 3) (Badoi-Hammami & Costache Colareza, 2023; Moraru, 2024).

4.4 Limitations and challenges

Despite the positive outcomes, the implementation process also revealed several constraints (Table 5):

- The need for extended preparation time to design and implement differentiated activities.
- Initial parental skepticism, particularly concerning non-traditional learning strategies.
- The lack of systematic teacher training in alternative pedagogy methods.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the pedagogical and developmental value of integrating alternative educational models into traditional primary school settings. By applying tailored strategies inspired by Step by Step, Waldorf, and Montessori approaches, the intervention led to consistent improvements in student motivation

Challenge	Comment
Extended preparation time	Teachers required more time for differentiated planning
Parental skepticism	Some parents resisted non-traditional approaches
Ongoing teacher training required	Training in alternative pedagogies is crucial for sustainable change

Table 5. Limitations and challenges.

Source: Author's contribution.

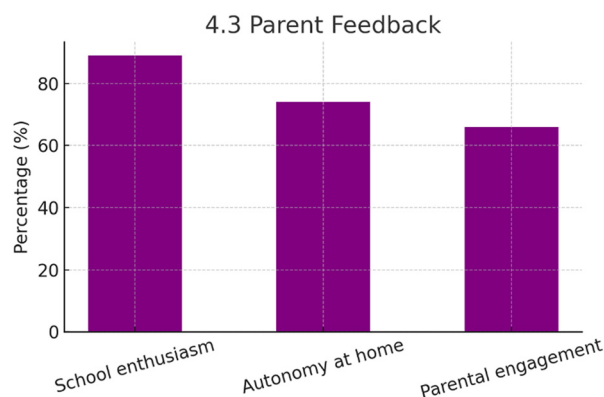


Figure 3. Parental feedback on student development.

Source: Author's contribution.

and engagement, collaborative behavior and peer support, self-regulation and autonomy, as well as stronger school–family communication.

These outcomes validate previous research that emphasizes the role of personalized, experience-based learning in modern education (Costache Colareza, 2023; Moraru, 2024). The use of reflective journals, self-assessment tools, and differentiated instruction allowed pupils to express themselves more authentically and grow at their own pace – particularly evident in Class C under Montessori principles.

Importantly, the study revealed that alternative pedagogical methods can be successfully integrated without displacing national curricular requirements. They offer a meaningful way to humanize education, making it more responsive to the real-life needs of today's students. However, for long-term sustainability, systemic efforts are needed especially in teacher training and stakeholder communication.

These conclusions reinforce the idea that alternative pedagogies do not reject the national curriculum but rather represent an opportunity for methodological diversification and personalization of the teaching process as a summary of the main findings: improvement in motivation, autonomy, collaboration, parent involvement provide further clarification that alternative pedagogy complements the national curriculum.

5.1 Recommendations

Considering the findings, several strategic recommendations emerge to support the effective integration of alternative pedagogical approaches within the Romanian primary education system. First, we suggest the gradual introduction of structured morning meetings and activity-based learning centers in public schools, to foster student autonomy, emotional regulation, and classroom community. Second, there is a pressing need to develop and institutionalize national-level teacher training programs focused on the principles and methods of Step by Step, Waldorf, and Montessori education, ensuring that educators are adequately prepared to implement these approaches with both fidelity and contextual flexibility. Third, the success of such reforms depends heavily on active family involvement; therefore, parents should be engaged as collaborative partners through structured dialogue, participatory school projects, and workshops that align school goals with home environments. Finally, to ensure coherence with national standards, we recommend the development of methodological guides tailored to the

Romanian curriculum. It closes with a reflection that this model can be replicated nationally to modernize primary education.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the primary school staff, participating teachers, pupils, and parents for their valuable support during the study.

Funding information

Authors state no funding involved.

Author contributions

Luiza Nicoleta Moraru and Corina Costache Colareza contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this article. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript and are equally responsible for its content.

Conflict of interest statement

Authors state no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

- Albulescu, I. (2014). *Educația copilului în societatea contemporană*. Polirom.
- Badoi-Hammami, M., & Costache Colareza, C. (2023). The impact of self-detected learning strategies on achieving more effective learning outcomes. *International Journal of Advanced Research (IJAR)*, 1037–1044. doi: 10.21474/IJAR01/17315. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/17315>. ISSN 2320-5407.
- Burke-Walsh, K. (2010). *Predarea orientată spre copil*. Step by Step.

- Costache Colareza, C. (2023). Motivational landmarks of adolescents in the context of lifestyle and social reality. *Plus Education*, 33, 28–49.
- Cuciureanu, M. (coord.). (2011). *Punți de trecere între învățământul tradițional și cel bazat pe modele pedagogice alternative în sistemul românesc de învățământ*. Institutul de Științe ale Educației.
- Freinet, C. (1977). *Education through work*. Modern School Movement Publications.
- Montessori, M. (1964). *The Montessori method*. Schocken Books.
- Moraru, L. (2024). Impactul metodelor interactive de grup asupra elevilor din ciclul primar. *Editura Didactică și Pedagogică*.
- Moraru-Pană, L. N. (2023). The impact of online learning on motivation of primary school students. In *ICERI2023 Proceedings* (pp. 7803–7807). IATED. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2023.1976>
- Neacșu, I., & Moraru, L. N. (2022). Training intercultural competence through education. strategic and resilient amplifiers. *International Conference RCIC'22. Redefining Community in Intercultural Context* (pp. 19–25). Editura Academiei Forțelor Aeriene “Henri Coandă.” ISSN 2285-2689 - ISSN-L 2285-2689. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1112665>.
- Negreanu, E. (2006). Pedagogia Montessori. *Revista de Pedagogii Alternative*, (Nr. 1–12), 1–12.
- Pânișoară, I. O., & Manolescu, M. (2019). *Modele alternative în educație*. Editura Universitară.
- Serdyukov, P. (2017). Innovation in education: What works, what doesn't, and what to do about it. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 10(1), 4–33.
- Steiner, R. (1998). *Educarea omului în lumina antroposofiei*. Triade.