



Jarosław Jendza

[orcid.org/0000-0001-7598-9085](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7598-9085)  
University of Gdańsk

## The Change Is in Me. The Transformation of Adults to the Role of the Montessori Guide. Qualitative-Biographical Research Study

Zmiana jest we *mnie*. Transformacja dorosłych do roli przewodnika Montessori. Raport z badania jakościowo-biograficznego

### KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Montessori qualitative research, adult transformation in the Montessori approach, Montessori guide, educational change, tacit knowledge

The article presents the results of the qualitative-biographical research carried out in two groups of participants in Montessori training courses. The main aim of the research was the analysis of meanings given to a change. The research question was formulated as follows: How do the participants of the Montessori course (6–12) thematize their process of transformation? The article addresses the notion of the educational change in the context of tacit knowledge and personal theories, and then focuses on the procedure of collecting and analysing the data from twenty-five in-depth, qualitative interviews that were later analysed in accordance with Kvale's idea of seven steps. The results show that the educational change is initiated as an over-thought decision and may be characterised by two major categories: radical transformation and biographical correction. In the conclusion, based on the collected data, the author emphasizes limited possibilities related to imposing the educational change and, following the opinions of the research participants, suggests desired conditions for the occurrence of possible changes: giving teachers freedom to make decisions and create their own didactic solutions, democratisation of the sector of public education, and supporting teachers' sense of dignity.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

jakościowe badanie  
Montessori,  
transformacja osoby  
dorosłej w podejściu  
Montessori,  
przewodnik  
Montessori, zmiana  
edukacyjna, wiedza  
milcząca

Artykuł stanowi sprawozdanie z badania jakościowo-biograficznego zrealizowanego wśród dwóch grup uczestników biorących udział w kursach Montessori. Podstawowym celem badania była analiza znaczeń nadawanych zmianie. Pytanie badawcze sformułowano następująco: Jak uczestnicy kursu Montessori (6–12) tematyzują swój proces transformacji? Artykuł podejmuje kwestię zmiany edukacyjnej w kontekście wiedzy milczącej oraz teorii osobistych, a następnie opisuje procedurę gromadzenia i analizy danych z dwudziestu pięciu pogłębionych, jakościowych wywiadów indywidualnych, które następnie poddano analizie zgodnie z opisanymi przez Kvale’a siedmioma krokami. W rezultacie analiz udało się zidentyfikować i opisać dwie główne kategorie: radykalną transformację oraz korektę biograficzną. W końcowej części artykułu autor w kontekście zebranego materiału zwraca uwagę na ograniczone możliwości narzucania zmiany w edukacji i – podążając za głosami uczestników badania – rekomenduje pożądane warunki do zaistnienia potencjalnych zmian: tworzenie nauczycielom warunków wolności do podejmowania decyzji i kreowania autorskich rozwiązań dydaktycznych, demokratyzację sfery związanej z edukacją oraz wspieranie poczucia godności wśród nauczycieli.

## Introduction

The educational change<sup>1</sup> is related to the law regulating this sphere of life, or it is described in the context of socio-economic and cultural, as well as historical, shifts (Biesta, 2006, 2013; Masschelein & Simons, 2013). These contexts or related to macro or mezzo *conditions* or *frames*, as they were called by Goffman (1974), are undoubtedly crucial in the processes of change, but it is also worth investigating the emergence of educational alterations in particular individuals.

The relation of the *individual-self* and the *social* and *political-selves* has been theorized and researched in diverse ways in all possible fields of humanities and social sciences (e.g. Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and there seems to be a fairly widely shared consensus that the change in individual modes of thinking and acting can change the shared, communal values, habits and rituals, and, in consequence, also practice conventions and cultures. At the same time, it is worth noting the significance of so-called personal theories and their influence on professional practices. Tacit knowledge, i.e. knowledge gained throughout one’s living

<sup>1</sup> The concept of *educational change* can be understood, in broad sense, as any alteration to educational practices, modes or thinking or solutions, and in this sense we use it in the article. The reader interested in this term may explore it in: *The concept of fundamental educational change* (Waks, 2007).

experience related to individual values, norms and patterns of behaviour (Polanyi, 1966, 1969; Mascitelli, 2000; Lejeune, 2011), directs one's actions and may serve as a "reservoir" of accessible meanings or concepts. A professional – be it a teacher – follows the directions provided by these deeply rooted, latent dimensions of professional judgement (Prax, 2000).

In this sense, the change in education cannot be fully explained by the top-down or bottom-up narratives since both perspectives assume that the change is primarily one-directional process whereas our suggestion is to analyse the alterations and alternatives in education as a feedback loop in which the (re)construction of the tacit knowledge plays the essential role. Having said that, we do not imply that the change in educational cultures cannot be enhanced by policy makers, state agencies or other decisive social actors. What we mean is that one of the "factors" that ought to be taken in consideration if one wishes to analyse alterations in educational practices, are the processes of change on the individual scale (Gerholm, 1990; Lee & Yang, 2000).

The research oriented at identifying the role of *tacit* or, as it is also often referred to, *implicit* (Durant, 2000) knowledge, show that trainee teachers develop their competences tacitly, especially when they have the chance to socialize with experts, mentors and other – sometimes more experienced – fellow trainees (Gerholm, 1990; Sternberg et al., 1995).

If we agree that this form of intuitive, practical, difficult to verbalise and impossible to formalize, form of knowledge is developed through observation and practice of certain repetitive actions (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985) it is necessary to address the problem on epistemological level and thus on methodological level that can be expressed by the question on how we, as researchers, might get the access to such latent structures of practices (Venkitachalam & Busch, 2012).

If we follow the main claim of Polanyi related to the concept of 'tacitness' which is the observation that human knowledge consists of more than can be said (1966, p. 4), and that it is practical and so naturally taken for granted (Polanyi, 1962, pp. 48–50), one might get an idea that the objective, expressible and declarative knowledge is a completely different domain and these two distinct forms of knowledge form a sort of an opposition. This is not exactly the case in the perspective of Polanyi's viewpoint.

Maria Montessori believed that it is through personal and professional transformation that one may become a Montessori guide<sup>2</sup>. In one of her books (Montessori, 1963), the famous Italian pedagogue says:

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<sup>2</sup> The reader interested in the details of the biography of this famous Italian pedagogue may find these publications useful: *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (Standing, 1998); *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (Kramer, 1976). Montessori pedagogy, current issues related to it, and applications all over the world, are thoroughly presented in: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education* (Murray et al., 2023).

The teacher needs to be “initiated” into his or her inner preparation. He is too preoccupied with bad tendencies in the child, with how to correct his undesirable actions, or with the danger to his soul left by the residues of the original sin. Instead, the teacher should begin by seeking out his own defects, and such tendencies in himself as are not good (Montessori, 1963, p. 116).

This quote shows that it is the domain of *tacit knowledge* and its modification that are vital in Montessori teachers’ preparation and thus perhaps also in the change of the dominant model of education. Obviously, we need to bear in mind that this postulate should be treated as an assumption, rather than Montessori’s empirically proven observation. The process of transformation is oriented at the shift of the “inner” self, and seems to consist of two stages. The first one is getting rid of prejudices, questioning well established patterns of behaviour and questioning the values underlying the judgment of children and other people. The change is, therefore, aimed at discovering and thus verbalising inner, tacit knowledge and then recreating oneself from inside (Montessori, 1963, p. 115).

In this sense, it is necessary to rethink not only the intellectual dimension of preparation that includes training as well as studying psycho-pedagogical knowledge and theories, but also turn to spiritual, emotional and physical preparation by developing humility, generosity, stability, patience, and healthy life habits, which would be the second stage of the aforementioned change (Montessori, 1948, p. 5–7; Buckenmeyer, 2009, p. 56–69).

Naturally, we do not assume that *all* Montessori teachers who take part in various forms of “training” actually go through the process of transformation. However, we do humbly assume that some teacher candidates or trainees may experience this deep, inner change.

## The purpose of the present study

In this study, the main research question was formulated as follows: how do trainee Montessori 6–12 guides thematize their process of transformation? Therefore, the main purpose of the research is the identification, description and analysis of the meanings attributed to the process of change by the participants of two Montessori 6–12 training programmes. The courses (International Montessori Guide 6–12 Diploma) were affiliated by AMI and were conducted between 2020 and 2022.

## Method

As previously mentioned, our main interest in this research are the latent or tacit dimensions of pedagogical knowledge or – to be more precise – the experience of its change thematized by the research participants, and that is why the non-objectivist, ideographic research strategy was incorporated. Following other researchers, Ambrosini and Bowman (2001, p. 816) show that there are different levels of ‘tacitness,’ and suggest social constructivist position or phenomenological methodologies (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967) of possible ways of analysing those latent forms of procedural knowledge.

Ambrosini and Bowman suggest a list of possible methods through which we could get the access to tacit knowledge. Apart from the detailed description of casual mapping strategy, i. e. the ethnographic research, they also point to semi-structured interviewing. In such interviews, the researcher might ask about the daily routines but also about organizational failures and successes (2001, p. 818), and pay special attention to the *metaphors* such as possibly transmitting and outlining tacit knowledge (2001, p. 821).

We followed this recommendation and used biographical and semi-structured interviewing as the main data collection technique that will be characterized in more detail later. The main research data collection approach was thus qualitative, in-depth, individual, semi-structured interviewing with the elements of a narrative, biographical research (Misoch, 2019; Atkinson, 2012).

In each of the twenty-five conducted interviews, the procedure was similar. First, the narrators were asked to tell their Montessori story as a first-person narrative about their life in the context of professional involvement. In practice, all participants went back to their early childhood experience, first encounters of school and family relations and situations, and only later did they focus on their experience as educators. This part of the interviews was not interrupted by the researcher following the prerequisites by Atkinson (2012).

After the main biographical narrative, the researcher asked internal questions (referring to the narrative) aimed at deepening and/or clarifying some of the issues mentioned before, and finally the external questions (that had already been prepared before the conversation) were offered to the interviewees. In this stage of interviewing, we never used the notion of *transformation* but asked the participants the following questions:

- What has this course been to you?
- How could you describe the participation in the course?
- What does taking part in this course mean to you?

The length of the interviews varied considerably – from 45 minutes to three and a half hours.

The question of sampling, when it comes to the appropriate number, tends to be tricky in the theory of qualitative interviewing, as various authors mention a different “sufficient” amount. Nevertheless, most authors agree that it is the *theoretical saturation* that seems to serve as an accurate criterion for the dilemma of the number of informers involved, and it varies between 6 to 30 (Creswell, 1998; Guest et al., 2006; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In this perspective, twenty-five interviews seems to be a justified number.

The other problem to solve is the sample choice scheme as well as the sample composition. In the research presented, the author used non-randomised, purposeful sampling scheme, and the cultural and experience diversity was a prerogative in the process of data collection. In other words, we tried as much as possible to constitute a cohort that would be as varied as possible and therefore the data collection was conducted during two international Montessori training programmes between 2020 and 2022 in Northern and Central Europe.

In this way, we got access to the group of sixty-seven people from thirty-one different countries, but – as stated before – twenty-five of them took active part in this part of the research, five of whom were males. Although all the participants signed an informed consent form, some details concerning first names, proper nouns and other sensitive data details were changed in the report to secure the anonymousness of the informants. Later in the text, when we quote the interviews, we will be using the same numeric code.

The table below shows the structure of the final sample. The information provided below should serve as the source of data on the group diversity rather than “variables.”

Table 1. The interview research sample

Code of interview	Country of origin	Age span	Gender
1.	France	30–39	F
2.	France	50–59	M
3.	Hong-Kong	30–39	F
4.	Pakistan	20–29	F
5.	Ivory Coast	40–49	F
6.	Romania	30–39	M
7.	Romania	20–29	F

Code of interview	Country of origin	Age span	Gender
8.	Spain	30–39	F
9.	Spain	40–49	M
10.	Wales	50–59	F
11.	England	40–49	F
12.	England	30–39	F
13.	Ireland	50–59	F
14.	Bulgaria	40–49	F
15.	Kazakhstan	40–49	F
16.	Russia	40–50	M
17.	Switzerland	20–29	F
18.	Czechia	30–39	F
19.	Sweden	50–59	F
20.	Denmark	40–49	F
21.	Germany	40–49	F
22.	Italy	30–39	F
23.	The Netherlands	30–39	M
24.	Poland	20–29	F
25.	Poland	30–39	F

Source: The author's own research

All the interviews, apart from those with the two Polish participants, were conducted in English, and only for five people English was their mother tongue or the second language, which is a methodological flaw of the research.

The analysis of the research was conducted following Brinkmann's and Kvale's idea on seven stages of interview investigation – thematizing, designing, interview, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and outcome space modification, and reporting (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The stage of analysis consisted of four six subsequent stages: (1) reading the raw transcripts three times to achieve general understanding of the empirical material, (2) highlighting similar “threads,” (3) grouping the threads, (4) open-coding,

(5) analytical categories naming, (6) categories description and comparison. As a result, we have created the outcome space that is going to be outlined in the next part of the article.

## Results

The analysis of the material led to the creation, description and interpretation of the outcome space that is constituted by two main descriptive categories. The first one is called the *radical transformation* and the second – *biographical correction*. Within these two main categories we can name two subcategories.

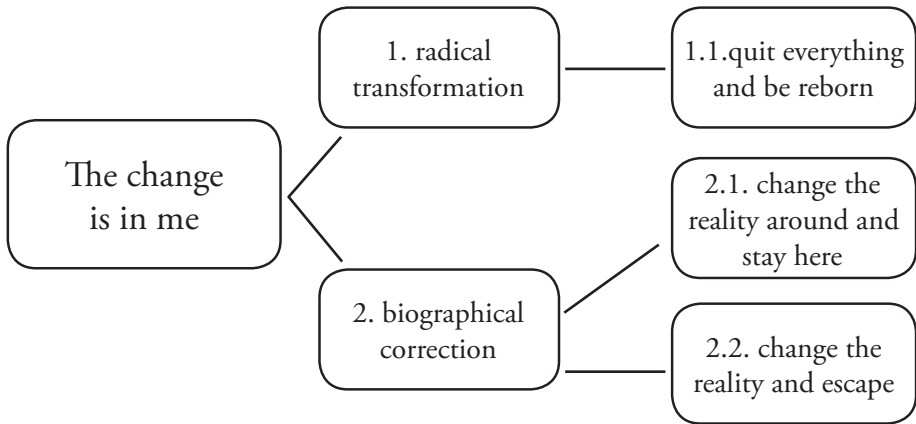
The analysis shows that the change starts alongside with the critique of the *status quo*. At certain stages of their careers, the respondents realise the life they are leading or/and their work and the values “behind” them, are not the ones they “are happy with” [19]. The negation of the surrounding reality is sometimes initiated by a particular negative *event* that has been transformed into the critical incident (Brookfield, 1990; Tripp, 1993) [2, 7, 16, 22] or/and has become the object of *rumination* (McIntosh, 2021) [4, 5, 6, 24]. In other situations, it is difficult to specify the moment of such negation, but it is somehow related to the feeling of the meaninglessness of life.

It is also worth mentioning that the educational change starts with the change in the individual. The informers, regardless of the type of thematization, underline the necessity of one’s own work, sometimes painful [19], and sometimes leading to drastic changes in other aspects of life. The critical awareness and the readiness to change one’s life bring about the educational change on the individual level and thus probably contributes to the transformation of school and schooling experience on, at least, the *mezzo* level.

As Miles and Huberman (1994) and Hammersley (2008) suggest, it is good idea to visualize the representation of the outcome space, and some researchers point to the fact that visualising the syntheses of the research may bring about more rigour into the reports (Langley & Ravasi, 2019). Let us now then present the outcome space in a graphic form, and then turn to more detailed description of both main categories, starting with the radical transformation.



Figure 1. The outcome space map



Radical transformation refers to the narratives in which life of the respondents “went upside down.” This change does not relate only to the professional aspect of life, but it relates to many changes happening in various moments in all (or almost all) significant aspects of existence. One of the informers puts it in this way:

I was working as an economist for about eight years. After that, I realized that I don't like it anymore, and I don't find satisfaction in my work, and **I decided to change something, and...** It was the time when I started travelling, **I decided to go from the Czech Republic to Portugal by bicycle. It was a crazy idea at that time. And... my life actually changed** because... I had a problem with my bicycle – it was stolen in Spain, and after that I... I went to Portugal on foot. There is a pilgrim route called “Camino de Santiago,” and **during this pilgrimage I changed the way I see things.** I came back to the Czech Republic, and then I travelled again; this time for three years in total. And, during the travel, **I had a lot of time with myself and... and I managed to discover what I want to do, and what my life should look like. And I decided [...] that I would like to... to do something more for the community,** and for the... for the people around me. Before coming back, my last visit was to Tibet. I spent about nine months there, and I saw how people live there – you know, the people were very poor. They didn't have food, and **I realized they don't really have any opportunities in their lives. That was the time I decided to... to involve more in the life of the community and... to give something to the community. That was the moment when I said: that's enough! And I got involved in the charity program “Teach for a better World,” and later I discovered Montessori** [18].

Another narrative is also an example of the radical change in life that finally led to the involvement in Montessori and various attempts to change the educational reality at the regional level. Such a change also led to the divorce, to the change of the place for living, and to the complete abandonment of the “old life.”

[...] and **I then started to understand that I was not losing just time, but I was losing something much more important. And I just started thinking what to do**, and realized that, if I want to go further, if I want to continue and still be a successful lawyer, I should make some decisions. **The problem was it was not correspondent with my soul and my mind. And when I realized it, and I saw, and then... I screamed to myself “Oh no! I don’t want to be a part of this world, because it’s the world of cruelty, and it’s cynical, divided into the rich or ‘not rich.’ It’s something strange and unfair.”** And I tried to find something more social-oriented and went for an observation to the Montessori class. **I found something very special, in..., we can say, insight** [14].

Radical transformation is thematized as the process that is well thought out – a “ruminated” decision. In the narratives we do not see the institutions of teacher education such as universities or training centres in the moment of change, but they do appear afterwards. The informers say that, once they made their important decision, once they decided to sacrifice for someone else, they are ready to go through the transformation on the intellectual level.

Let us now turn to the second identified category that we refer to as biographical correction. While in the previous mode of change the narratives displayed completely “new life” [2, 7, 13, 14, 18], here the interviewees modify their professional engagement in such a way that they leave conservative, transmissive education, and discover Montessori. They experience the change in two diverse ways. Some change the place of work, find some other school or get involved in homeschooling communities, whilst others decide to change the organizations they have been in for a long time by staying there and making attempts to change their model of instruction towards the Montessori approach.

**I have been working as a primary teacher for eight years; I have been working for the public system. The traditional public system in France.** So, eight years after becoming a teacher I became interested in Montessori, because I got interested in cognitive neuroscience. And... **that was my... my entrance to Montessori principles, but I didn’t leave the public system, the traditional school system, I just decided to become a Montessori guide and blow up the good old school from inside** [laughter]. So, first I took the [name of the organization] course to be a children’s home guide, and then I also did the course to become an assistant to infancy... Hm... **to me, there is no way back, I need to fight to... you know... the traditional school system, because I think, and when I, when you look at the data, it’s quite clear, we are, at least in France, we are making the gap even larger between different backgrounds.** So, we are a kind of aggravating the gap between the wealthy backgrounds and the kids from poor, poorer backgrounds. And it didn’t seem fair to anybody in the first place, so... this was what I loved about the Montessori approach... [1].

The willingness and readiness to bring about the change leads to various attempts to change the traditional schooling by providing children with Montessori education. The rationale for that are the values of social justice, sociological data related to the functioning of educational system in a given country, as well as the newest discoveries of science that – from the perspective of this informer – additionally justify the necessity to shift from educational conservatism to the liberal Montessori approach. Again, in this case we can notice a deep understanding of the function of education as eliminating the socio-economic gap and providing children with optimum conditions for individual development.

Some other narratives thematize the change by making a decision to leave their place of work and find a school that is consistent with their values. The informers do not want to “lose energy on fight with a bull” [24], or do not believe that it is possible to change the whole system [23], and that is perhaps why they search for the learning environment that will be in line with what they believe and what they are devoted to:

[...] so, **I couldn't stand the school anymore and I decided to quit**. Soon I was working with a group of seventeen children, between six and nine years. So... that was brilliant, **I loved every moment of it. The first thing you would think when you entered this place was: wow, this place is really peaceful and beautiful. I could work there even without payment** (laughter). We, we used to arrive early in the morning, get everything super settled, super prepared... to promote and encourage them to be... **to be independent, and to gain dignity in the process. I realized, then, that they needed it as much as I did**, so that's, that's what I loved about the lower elementary community, how this independence and responsibility processes lead to dignity and self-assurance in children [19].

## Conclusions and discussion

The research results show that the educational change is thematized by the interviewed Montessori guides/trainees as an individual decision which may lead to the complete change of life or to changing professional involvement without too drastic modifications in life. From the perspective of the respondents, a real and thorough change in education is not possible without independent, self-governing teachers. If so, perhaps the policy makers should support self-reliance, authorship, creativity and democracy in educational systems. It is also the dignity of the educators that is built not only by reasonable wages but also by providing proper working conditions.

It is fairly obvious that this research project has many limitations. First of all, although the author made an attempt to invite a diverse group of participants, we must bear in mind that the group was fairly homogeneous. All the narrators took part in an expensive, not state-funded form of a teacher education program, and they must

have been very motivated to spend almost a year away from their homes, studying the Montessori method.

For this reason, it would be advisable to continue the research on the educational change in other groups of teachers, perhaps involved in different, non-traditional pedagogical approaches. It would also be interesting to verify some of the interpretations offered above in a big scale, objectifiable quantitative analyses. Another flaw of the research is the fact that all but two interviews were conducted in English, which – for most of the research participants, is not a mother tongue.

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**ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE**

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Jarosław Jendza  
University of Gdańsk  
e-mail: [jaroslaw.jendza@ug.edu.pl](mailto:jaroslaw.jendza@ug.edu.pl)