

Maria Montessori's Method as a Part of a Humanistic Orientation during the Transformation of the Russian Educational System

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore how Maria Montessori's pedagogy relates to the humanistic orientation of contemporary Russian education. The study is grounded in humanistic learning theory, the central tenets of Montessori pedagogy, and primary Russian policy documents, such as the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation" and the Federal State Educational Standards (Standard). It first demonstrates that, in the post-Soviet period, humanism emerged as a key organising principle of Russian education policy. It then compares the main features of Montessori education—respect for the child, the prepared environment, learner autonomy, and the teacher as facilitator—with the aims and requirements set out in the Standards. The comparison reveals a high degree of convergence in official documents, but also noticeable discrepancies between formal aims and everyday school practice. Age-graded classes, a centralised curriculum, exam pressure, and the current approach to digitalisation restrict the possibilities for Montessori-inspired practice in regular preschool and primary classrooms. The paper argues that Russian reforms and Montessori education are often discussed separately, making it difficult to see how they might inform one another. It concludes by outlining the conditions under which Montessori's humanistic ideas could be more widely adopted in Russian schools and by suggesting directions for further research on learner-centred reforms in Russian education.

Keywords

Montessori Method, Humanism, Russia, Education Reform, Transformation

1. Introduction

Nowadays, parents and teachers are looking for the right way to raise and educate children from an early age. Many educators have become interested in educational theories that offer new perspectives on how students acquire and retain knowledge. Of particular interest are learner-centred and autonomy-supporting approaches, which link deep understanding to students' independence and their ability to process information. Some theories emphasise the need to focus on students' predisposition to certain types of activities and their interests (Null, 2011), while others foreground the skills and methodological knowledge of teachers, or shift the focus to educating people who have to prepare learners for participation in the economy and labour market (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

J. Wesley Null (2011) stressed that curriculum development should connect with students on a deeply personal level and be grounded in the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers about the importance of considering students' individual skills. It is essential to underline that, since ancient times, education has been grounded in philosophical thought. Since the end of the Soviet period, the central philosophy of Russian education has become humanism. With the introduction of the Federal State Educational Standard (Standard) (The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024) and the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation" (2012), humanistic education in Russia has been grounded at the legislative level. Russian research (Bakulina et al., 2024) highlights that the updated Standards explicitly emphasise personality-oriented, value-laden outcomes, including prosociality and the development of the "whole child", thereby reinforcing this humanistic turn at the level of regulatory frameworks.

One of the most famous representatives of humanistic pedagogy is the psychologist and teacher Maria Montessori. Her educational philosophy of teaching was promoted in the Soviet Union even before the Second World War and has regained relevance in contemporary debates on humane, child-centred education. Recent works (Anisaturrizqi et al., 2025; Vázquez & Sarracino, 2025) emphasise that Maria Montessori's ideas of children's respect for the child, independent activities, and carefully prepared environments remain a powerful humanistic alternative to more performance-accountability-oriented or test-driven models of schooling. Today in Russia, there are some pre-school educational institutions and elementary schools that are entirely built according to her methods. In contrast, some schools partly implement elements of the prepared environment she proposed. The humanistic orientation of the Montessori theory fully aligns with the main provisions of the Standard and many Russian state legislative documents.

Although the Russian education system has officially embraced humanistic principles through educational policies and Standards, classroom practice remains strongly shaped by centralised curricula, age-graded classes, and assessment (Dneprov, 2017; Suleymanova, 2018). International research on learner-centred reforms shows that such structural features often limit the depth of humanistic and

autonomy-supportive practice, creating tensions between rhetoric and everyday classroom realities (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). At the same time, Maria Montessori's pedagogy is widely recognised as one of the most consistent practical realisations of humanistic education, built around the learner's autonomy, a prepared environment, and the teacher's role as facilitator (Anisaturrizqi et al., 2025). In contemporary Russia, however, the relationship between this humanistic turn in official policy and the concrete principles and practices of Montessori education remains conceptually under-explored. As a result, there is limited understanding of how far current reforms promote, constrain, or selectively appropriate Montessori-inspired approaches in preschool and primary school education.

In the field of research on Russian education, there are studies analysing the trajectories of post-Soviet reforms and the implementation of new standards, as well as thematic studies of the Montessori system as an alternative approach in individual educational institutions. However, in works devoted to the implementation of educational policy, the Montessori system, as a specific humanistic concept, is rarely considered. At the same time, Montessori-focused publications pay limited attention to the regulatory and structural features of the Russian school system (Akulova, 2022; Bakulina et al., 2024). There is still no systematic analysis that brings together: 1) Humanistic learning theory, 2) Montessori principles, and 3) The legal and Standards framework of Russian education to map points of convergence and tension. This conceptual gap makes it difficult to assess whether and how Montessori pedagogy can inform the ongoing transformation of Russian education, and under what contextual constraints.

In parallel, global and national debates on the digital transformation of education are re-shaping the conditions under which humanistic and Montessori-inspired practices can be enacted. International reports emphasise the need to update the "social contract" in education, grounded in humanistic, student-centred principles and equity, in the context of rapid technological change (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Russian and post-Soviet studies point to both new opportunities for flexible, personalised learning and significant risks of excessive standardisation, which may reduce opportunities for sustainable pedagogical interaction if priority is given to monitoring functions during implementation, and if digitalisation is primarily driven by infrastructural and managerial considerations (UNESCO, 2023; Starichenko, 2020). Russian policy practice has also been shaped by large-scale modernisation and digitalisation agendas, including federal initiatives in the field of digital educational environments (Ministry of Education, 2019), implemented within the framework of national educational projects. International policy analysis shows that effective digital transformation depends on infrastructure, governance, data ecosystems, and alignment with pedagogical goals (Boeskens & Meyer, 2025; OECD, 2023). For Montessori education, which is based on bodily, sensory experience and a specially prepared environment, these trends raise questions about how digital tools and platforms

can be aligned with humanistic goals rather than undermining them.

Against this backdrop, this conceptual paper examines how Maria Montessori's humanistic pedagogy intersects with the current transformation of the Russian educational system. By situating Montessori principles within the framework of educational policies and the Standard, the paper seeks to clarify both the potential and the limitations of integrating Montessori-inspired approaches into mainstream Russian schooling.

1) How is humanistic education conceptualised and operationalised in Russian education policy and Standards?

2) Do these policy formulations converge with the core principles of Maria Montessori's pedagogy?

3) How are Montessori approaches currently positioned and practised in Russian preschool and primary education within this policy framework?

4) Which features of the contemporary Russian school system enable or constrain the meaningful implementation of Montessori-inspired practices?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Humanistic Education

The theory of teaching is based on the theory of human nature. The central idea in this line of thought is that the human being is viewed as possessing an inherent, natural potential for growth, rather than being entirely determined by social conditions. [Susan R. Madsen and Ian K. Wilson \(2012\)](#) have identified two main definitions of humanistic learning theory in their research: humanism and learning. Humanism (from Latin *humanus*—humane; *humanitas*—“extra-humanity”, *humanus*—“man”, *homo*—“man”) means the views and ideas that affirm human as the highest value. Humanism focuses on the freedom of action of people, and [Thomas Nemeth \(2018\)](#) emphasised that for some humanists, the paramount prior values are justice, equality, and respect for everyone around, regardless of economic and social status, as well as educational level.

In the book of [Jeanan Fowler \(1999\)](#), she links the humanistic concept of education to independence and self-reliance, critical thinking, personal development, and the rejection of a narrow approach to learning. The overriding message of humanism is that human beings have unlimited potential for growth and development, inherent from birth ([Ya & Aung, 2020](#)). Development refers to the acquisition of new knowledge, behaviours, skills, and values through learning, practice, and experience. It is “the process by which behaviour is changed, shaped, or is under control.” ([Knowles et al., 2015: p. 15](#)).

Some researchers ([Firdaus & Mariyat, 2017](#)) emphasise that humanistic education is student-centred education and is characterised by the fact that the child himself is responsible for his education. The humanist teacher is the “facilitator”, not a distributor or primary source of knowledge. Educators are the people whose purpose is to develop the intellectual and psychomotor abilities of students, as well as to build self-esteem and self-confidence, creating conditions and stimulating

students to achieve goals during learning (Ya & Aung, 2020). Thus, from the standpoint of humanism, one of the ultimate goals of education is to enable each person to become a full-fledged subject of activity, cognition, and communication, i.e., a free, self-employed person. The degree of humanisation of education is determined by the extent to which society creates the prerequisites and conditions for the self-realisation of the individual, the disclosure of the inclinations and abilities inherent in it, and the formation of the desire for freedom, responsibility, and creativity. Another purpose of humanistic education is to develop students' ability to use critical thinking if they have problems during the learning process (Firdaus & Mariyat, 2017; Ya & Aung, 2020).

According to Firdaus and Mariyat (2017), the humanistic approach assumes that every person is unique and capable of shaping their own development. In education, this line of thinking is often traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that teaching should grow out of children's natural inclinations and help them take responsibility for their actions and future work (2007). In many respects, these ideas anticipate both Montessori's view of the child as an active constructor of development and the personality-oriented focus of the Standards. Rousseau's insistence on following the child, supporting self-directed activity, and cultivating a sense of duty thus links classic humanistic philosophy to the contemporary policy language about autonomy, responsibility and the "whole child" in Russian education.

Humanistic educational theory is concerned with improving the quality of individual education and rejects the group educational system. This emphasis is typically framed as prioritising individualisation and learner agency rather than as a literal rejection of all group-based instruction formats (Madsen & Wilson, 2012; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Humanists believe that education should start with the individuality of the student, which most schools downplay, as well as the teacher-student relationship. According to humanists, education should be a process of developing a free, self-actualising personality, a method based on students' feelings.

A humanistic approach to education should be used even at the preschool level to align students along with the educational trajectory (Ya & Aung, 2020). The humanist teacher needs to help students identify the educational goal that will move them toward the independence and autonomy necessary for productive learning. Thus, education should be non-coercive, and students may be active and encouraged to make their own choices. A teacher who follows a humanistic theory emphasises teaching and assessment based on students' abilities and needs.

Berliner (1994) defined five main goals for a humanistic view of education; to promote positive self-direction and independence (development of the regulatory system), the development of the ability to take responsibility for what they have learned (regulatory-affective system); develop creativity (divergent thinking of knowledge); curiosity (exploratory behaviour, a function of imbalance or dissonance in any system); and an interest in art (primarily to develop an effec-

tive/emotional system).

2.2. Maria Montessori's Theory

Montessori became the first licensed female doctor in 1896, developed her own teaching methodology for children, and created a teacher-training program. After that, she was nominated for the [Nobel Prize \(1950\)](#) before she died in 1952. Throughout her life, she continued to establish schools and train teachers worldwide. Her main goal was to help children reach their full potential and learn to live together in harmony and peace ([Thayer-Bacon, 2011](#)). Against the backdrop of major conflicts during her lifetime (the First World War (1914-1918), the Second World War (1939-1945), and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)), Montessori placed particular emphasis on peace education and on protecting the educational environment from politicised agendas. She taught children to be independent, confident, and self-reliant, and to develop critical thinking skills to become democratic citizens.

Initially, the methodology of Maria Montessori was created for children with mental disabilities, but on January 6, 1907, with the support of the Italian millionaire Eduardo Talamo in San Lorenzo, M. Montessori founded the first “La Casa dei Bambini”—a school for normal but neglected children. From then until the end of her life, Montessori dealt with the problems of raising and educating children. Activities at La Casa dei Bambini are based on Montessori principles. [Akulova \(2022\)](#) identified the following humanistic principles and ideals that underline the methodology: respect for the personality of the student, recognition of his own dignity, individuality, and faith in his ability for self-development.

In 1915, there were over 100 Montessori schools in the United States, and many more were opened in the rest of the world, including the Soviet Union. Currently, Montessori education is implemented globally, but the exact number of schools varies depending on definitions and membership accounting. A recent global census-based report estimates the scale and cross-national diffusion of Montessori provision, while also highlighting the governance challenge posed by the absence of a centralised “Montessori trademark” and by the lack of accounting for Montessori programs across countries ([Debs et al., 2022](#)).

Dr. Montessori believed that all children are born with innate abilities that must be reflected in a specially created, structured environment. So, in 1901, a specially developed environment was presented, which is called “prepared” or “learning” environment and encouraged the development of natural manifestations of innate tendencies ([Lillard, 2012](#)). [Kramer \(1976: p. 188\)](#) in her book “Maria Montessori: A Biography of Montessori,” she emphasised that the idea of the school was

“a prepared environment in which the child is free to develop at his own pace, unhindered to spontaneously reveal his natural abilities through the manipulation of a series of self-correcting materials designed to stimulate his senses

and ultimately his thinking, leading from perception to reason”

Another important distinguishing feature of this technique is the teacher’s position: an observer and facilitator, while the child freely explores his environment. According to the Montessori Centre ([Association Montessori International USA, 2022](#)), the child, the teacher, and the prepared environment are the three main components of interaction that the Montessori method of teaching emphasises.

In the book “Curriculum from theory to practice”, [Null \(2011\)](#) pays special attention to individualised teaching methods, allowing students to choose the learning pace and route that suit their interests. Despite the freedom of choice afforded to children, Montessori schools are strictly structured around the materials they use, which are designed to appeal to students’ interests. It should be emphasised that dozens of special materials ([Lillard, 2011, 2013](#)) and activities that provide learning through action are an integral part of the Montessori education system.

Scientists ([Knowles et al., 2015](#); [Lillard, 2013](#); [Okuo, 2014](#)) note that the educational materials develop executive functions and creativity, and help achieve tremendous success in early reading, increase vocabulary, improve academic achievement, foster social understanding, and foster a mastery orientation.

Recent evidence synthesised in a Campbell systematic review of 32 rigorous Montessori studies indicates that Montessori education has modest but meaningful positive effects on children’s academic outcomes and on non-academic outcomes, including executive function, creativity, and social-emotional skills, compared with traditional education ([Randolph et al., 2023](#)). In addition, a recent national randomised controlled trial of public Montessori preschool reported positive impacts at the end of kindergarten on reading and several cognitive and socio-cognitive outcomes ([Lillard et al., 2025](#)). Also, [Okuo \(2014\)](#) emphasises that children who study according to Dr Montessori’s method do well on school assignments, especially on tasks considered beyond their abilities.

At the same time, debates and analyses indicate that some members of the professional community and students’ parents are cautious about the educational reforms ([Berg-Nordlie & Bolshakov, 2018](#)). The primary issues were to the stability and clarity of curricular requirements, the academic burden on students, and the perceived dependability of conventional teacher-led instruction, rather than an outright repudiation of humanistic ideals. In this context, student-centred techniques that promote autonomy may be seen as introducing ambiguity into classroom management or as failing to fit well with an accountability system centred on examination outcomes. This may lead schools and families to be hesitant to experiment with Montessori-inspired practices that emphasise children’s choice, individual pacing, and reduced reliance on whole-class instruction, even though such practices are, in principle, compatible with the Standards.

3. Transformation of the Russian Educational System: Humanistic Turn in Policy

Changes in the country’s social ideology and political direction were accompanied

by calls to reform the content of education. [Elena Aydarova \(2014\)](#) mentioned that even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian society was transforming. In the 1980s, the political and ideological changes of “perestroika” created much space for debates and discussions about the necessary changes in education. Proponents of educational reforms argued that the Soviet education system had to be rebuilt on principles different from those that had characterised the Soviet period, i.e., democratisation, diversification, decentralisation, humanisation, and individualisation ([Holmes et al., 1995](#)). Following the institutional transition of the early 1990s, the Law of the Russian Federation “On Education” in 1992 laid the legal foundations for post-Soviet schooling and introduced a more pluralistic policy language in official documents. Later, a new Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” (2012) was adopted, which systematised previous changes and further strengthened the humanistic and personality-oriented discourse in official documents. Although explicit ideological references characteristic of the Soviet period was removed, many structural features of the previous system were preserved. In her analysis, [Akulova \(2022\)](#), argues that Russian education, even now, continues to undergo consolidation and re-conceptualisation of aims, rethinking and seeking a new approach to personality formation grounded in humanistic philosophy.

Article 7 of the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” (2012) defines general education as a system of educational programmes implemented by accredited institutions in compliance with safety requirements and the mandatory basic curricula of primary general education.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the following main problems ([Aydarova, 2014](#); [Dneprov, 2017](#)) were identified in the Russian education system:

- A substantial workload for students. For a long time, the country followed a path of extensive expansion of school education. Thus, the information value for each subject is increased while avoiding unnecessary, outdated scientific information.
- Health risks to children. Concerns regarding possible effects on children’s physical and mental health were raised by the combination of a lot of educational content in every subject and a mostly sedentary, desk-based daily routine.
- Increasing attention has been drawn to the financial aspects of schooling, including diversification of school-level funding sources and growth in household spending on supplementary educational services.
- Constraints on school development. The existing content of school education was seen as limiting schools’ capacity for renewal and as challenging the sustainability of innovative projects and practices.
- A perceived mismatch between school learning and everyday life. Despite the breadth of encyclopaedic knowledge, many pupils found it challenging to apply what they learned to real-life situations ([Adamovich et al., 2019](#)). Similar concerns persist in current discussions about the aims and content of Russian schooling.

The underlying problems and Russia’s accession to the Bologna process in 2003

(Skupchenko, 2013) highlighted the importance and need for the urgent creation of the Standard. The development of a new Standard of general education was based on ten basic principles that together constitute fundamentally new conceptual foundations for establishing an educational standard. These foundations made it possible to take a cardinal step towards transforming the Standard from a mechanism for conserving the content of school education (as it had been built over 10 years by the Russian Academy of Education) into a mechanism for updating and developing this content.

Let us briefly consider these basic principles for creating a new Standard of general education (The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024):

1) Modernisation of the content of education in accordance with the requirements of modern times while maintaining the best traditions of the Russian school.

2) Unloading the content of education and ensuring the mental and physical health of students.

3) Compliance with the Standard, with the age patterns of development of students, their characteristics, and opportunities at every level of education.

4) Personal orientation of education; demand for its results in life; ensuring variability.

5) Freedom of choice in education.

6) The activity nature of education, orientation Standard for the formation of generalised methods of educational, cognitive, communicative, practical, and creative activities, for students to experience this activity.

7) Strengthening the social and humanitarian orientation of education that promotes the values of civil society and supports the formation and socialisation of the individual student in the modern world.

8) Orientation towards ensuring a competence-based approach to the content of education, that is, the formation of the ability and readiness of students to use the learned knowledge, skills, abilities, and methods of activities and events in real life to solve practical problems.

9) Developing the potential of the Standard.

10) The educational potential of the Standard, its direction on the formation of the spiritual and moral sphere of personality, positive social and significant attitudes, and originality. Integrity of the content of education and its quality at different levels of the school.

In the first generation of Standards, general education was formally divided into three components:

- The federal component—is established by the Russian Federation and makes up at least 75% of the total study time;
- The regional (national and regional) component, which accounts for at least 10% of the total study time;
- The educational institution independently establishes the educational institution's component, which accounts for at least 10% of the total study time. This element was added and is a significant breakthrough in giving the school more

autonomy. Subsequent Standards abandoned this tripartite percentage structure, focusing instead on requirements for learning outcomes, programme structure and conditions (The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024). The federal component developed by the Provisional Research Team is the central part of the Standard of general education and covers three levels: primary, fundamental, and high school.

4. Analysis of the Implementation of the Maria Montessori Method

4.1. Standard and Pre-School Education

The modern system of preschool education is based on the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” (2012), approved at the whole and significant level of education, as the initial level in the system of general education, providing continuity with primary school. The purpose is to create conditions for the versatile development of each child, taking into account their age and individual characteristics.

With the advent of the Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education (2019), the unconditional value and uniqueness of the younger generation’s personality are recognised and embedded in the educational space through the ideas of a student-centred approach. The setting of innovative goals and the implementation of the preschool education system’s principles determine the choice of teaching methods and approaches for children’s development. Thereby, a preschool-age child begins to feel the need to learn something new, shows a desire for independent action, and interacts positively with others. One system aimed at fostering individual development in preschool children is Maria Montessori’s pedagogy. Given the Standard’s content, the following points should be highlighted to clearly convey the principles and ideas of the Italian scientist.

The Standard requires the creation of conditions for implementing the general education program. *Clause 3.2.1 Psychological and pedagogical conditions (2019)*:

- 1) Adult respect for the human dignity of children, the formation and support of their positive self-esteem, and confidence in their own abilities;
- 2) The use in educational activities of forms and methods of working with children that correspond to their age and individual characteristics (inadmissibility of both artificial acceleration and an artificial slowdown in the development of children);
- 3) Building educational activities based on the interaction of adults with children, focused on the interests and capabilities of each child, and taking into account the social situation of their development;
- 4) Support by adults of a positive, friendly attitude of children to each other and the interaction of children with each other in various activities;
- 5) Support for the initiative and independence of children in activities specific to them;
- 6) The opportunity for children to choose materials, types of activity, partici-

pants in joint activities, and communication;

Clause 3.3. Requirements for the developing object-spatial environment.

3.3.4. The developing object-spatial environment should be rich in content, transformable, multifunctional, variable, accessible, and safe.

Maria Montessori argued that a prepared environment, a humble teacher, and scientific materials are the three main conditions for successful educational work.

According to the Standard for Preschool Education, the targets of early childhood education (Section 4.6) describe socially and normatively expected characteristics of children's development, including emotional, social, and behavioural aspects that emerge in the everyday life of a preschool institution ([Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education, 2019](#)). Montessori education speaks about the same process in different terms, using the concept of "normalisation". Here, "normal" does not mean "average" or "typical". For Montessori, normalisation is a specific developmental process observed in children under appropriate conditions. [Standing \(1998\)](#) lists its key features: love of order and work, spontaneous concentration, independent activity, the ability to make real choices, spontaneous self-discipline, internal obedience, and cheerfulness. These characteristics directly correspond to the personality-oriented outcomes formulated in Standards, which highlight self-regulation (spontaneous discipline and control of behaviour), responsibility and initiative (independent choice and acceptance of work), cooperation (positive attitude to others and readiness to help) and a positive attitude to learning (interest and persistence) as core results of preschool and primary education ([The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024](#)). In other words, Montessori's "normalisation" provides a concrete pedagogical pathway towards the same personality development goals that Russian policy formulates in regulatory documents.

4.2. Standard and Primary School Education

In humanist learning theory, schools and various textbooks discuss concepts such as the open-access curriculum, unclassified learning, and age grouping, all of which consider the uniqueness of the individual. Nowadays, in Russian elementary schools, where students are divided into age groups by academic stage (first grade, second grade, etc.), it is unrealistic to implement the Montessori system in its original, complete form. Therefore, such schools are either private or teachers use only some aspects of the methodology. At the same time, the points of federal laws and Standards regarding the education of students in the context of humanistic education remain unchanged.

The main result of school education should be its compliance with the goals of advanced development. The emphasis is on equipping schoolchildren with the skills and technologies that will be useful to them in their future lives. At the same time, the subjective and creative nature of such activities is emphasized in school activities: creation of research projects and a creative activities system, during which schoolchildren learn to invent, understand, and master new things, be open

and able to express their own thoughts, be able to make decisions and help each other, formulate interests, and realize their capabilities.

In the second-generation Standards' requirements, the task of developing a child's personality through universal educational activities is brought to the fore. It is worth noting that if it is impossible to physically organise the learning space using specially designed Montessori games and teaching aids. Teachers and the school administration are obliged to create the necessary developmental space within the lesson.

The priority goal of modern Russian education is not the reproductive transfer of knowledge, skills, and abilities from teacher to student, but the whole formation and development of the student to independently find a problem, formulate an algorithm for solving it, control the process, and evaluate the result, i.e., teach to learn. This will be the key to successful adaptation in a rapidly changing society.

The main results of education in primary school, according to the Standard of a new generation, should be:

- The formation of the subject and universal methods of action that provide the possibility of continuing education in the basic school;
- Education of the ability to learn is the ability to self-organise to solve educational problems;
- Individual progress in the main areas of personal development—emotional, cognitive, and self-regulation.

5. Discussion and Implications

The analysis in the previous sections allows us to return to the four research questions that guided this paper and examine them more closely, taking into account Russian reforms and Montessori's ideas. The discussion that follows takes four steps to address the guiding questions of the paper: It explains the following: 1) how humanistic goals are articulated and implemented in the Standards; 2) where Montessori principles align with these goals; 3) how Montessori is currently positioned in Russian preschool and primary settings; and 4) what structural elements facilitate or hinder meaningful implementation. This helps to see where the two frameworks genuinely meet and where significant gaps remain.

5.1. Humanistic Education in Russian Policy: Ideas and Practice

At the level of laws and Standards, the humanistic turn in Russian education is clearly visible. The Education Law and the Standards explicitly address the value of the individual, the development of the “whole child”, and the importance of autonomy and responsibility (Bakulina et al., 2024; *Federalnyy zakon “Ob obrazovanii v Rossiyskoy Federatsii” ot 29.12.2012 No. 273-FZ [Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” of 29.12.2012 No. 273-FZ (latest edition)], 2012; The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024*). The key principles behind the Standards—personal orientation, activity-based learning, competence formation, spiritual and moral development—closely align with how hu-

manistic learning theory describes good education: as a process of self-realisation, meaningful engagement, and growth (Fowler, 1999; Knowles et al., 2015; Madsen & Wilson, 2012).

From the outset of the reform period, Russian debates have repeatedly pointed out that rigid sequencing of compulsory subject content, lesson-by-lesson pacing, and the dominance of traditional instructional routines only partially align with the idea of personal self-determination. Exam preparation takes up an increasing amount of school time, which may lead to formal pathways to higher education but does not necessarily foster independent study skills, responsible life choices, or sustained ownership of one's learning trajectory.

Simultaneously, these principles are put into practice within a system that has inherited numerous retains. In addition to being humanisation tools, the Standards are policy tools that integrate accountability requirements with value objectives. They set personality-oriented goals while also establishing mandatory content, standardised tests, and educational paths, as previous research on Russian reforms (Aydarova, 2014; Dneprov, 2017) has noted. To put it another way, humanistic discourse is now a part of official discourse, but it functions within frameworks that continue to place a premium on uniform accountability and evaluation procedures.

5.2. Convergences with Montessori's Core Principles

If we compare this policy framework with Montessori's pedagogy, the conceptual overlap is striking. Montessori's approach is built around respect for the child, trust in the child's inner drive to learn, and the idea that education should nurture independence, responsibility and self-discipline (Akulova, 2022; Montessori, 2004). The prepared environment, the teacher as observer and guide, and the emphasis on internal motivation all fit comfortably within the humanistic aims that the Standards declare: activity-based learning, support for initiative and the development of universal learning actions (Federal State Educational Standard for Pre-school Education, 2019; Prokofyeva, 2019).

The notion of normalisation is a good example. When a child develops love of order and work, the ability to concentrate, act independently and make real choices, Montessori sees this as a sign of healthy development (Standing, 1998). Russian Standards describe very similar goals using different terminology, focusing on self-regulation, responsibility, initiative, and readiness for cooperation. Both sides, in their own language, are defining what it means to become a mature, self-directed person. Philosophically, this continuity can be traced back to Rousseau's idea that education should follow the child's nature and help children become responsible for their own lives (Fowler, 1999; Rousseau & Archer, 2007). In this sense, Montessori does not contradict the humanistic orientation of Russian policy; she makes it concrete.

5.3. Montessori in the Current System

Within this policy landscape, Montessori institutions in Russia occupy a some-

what ambiguous position. On the one hand, there are preschool and primary settings that fully adhere to Montessori principles, as well as many others that borrow specific elements, such as self-correcting materials or classroom layout (Akulova, 2022). Schools and groups demonstrate that it is possible, at least locally, to build practice that reflects the humanistic language of reforms: children choose activities, work with materials at their own pace, and the teacher shifts from direct instructions to careful observation and support (Lillard, 2012; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). The broader global diffusion evidence suggests that such local adoption patterns—full implementation versus partial borrowing—are typical across countries and linked to governance and monitoring differences (Debs et al., 2022).

On the other hand, these examples are still exceptions. The mainstream system continues to be organised around a unified federal curriculum, age-based classes, and high-stakes examinations. In an ordinary preschool or primary school, a teacher who wants to adopt Montessori ideas must fit them into existing schedules, class sizes and reporting requirements. Some degree of choice or individual work is possible. However, this rarely changes the overall logic: the topics must be learnt by all children within the same timeframe, and success is still primarily measured through tests (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). In this case, the Montessori system is often perceived not as a holistic alternative model, but as a set of techniques that complement conventional practice. A common misclassification of Montessori partly drives this reduction as a generic form of play-based learning. While Montessori shares with play-based pedagogy small didactic objects, one-to-one presentations, elements of choice, peer presence, enjoyment, and the absence of external rewards, it is also defined by a prescribed set of specialised materials, carefully bounded freedom in how they are used, the framing of activity as “work”, and—importantly—the limited role of pretend play. These distinctive features of the forms make “partial borrowing” particularly likely: schools adopt outwardly visible tools, while the underlying logic of the pace of learning, assessment, and the teacher’s role remains unchanged.

5.4. Structural and Digital Constraints

Several systemic features help to explain why the overlap between Montessori and the Standards remains largely on paper. First, the organisation of learning by age cohorts makes it almost impossible to create multi-age classes, which are central to the Montessori vision of a community where older and younger children learn from each other (Holmes et al., 1995; Lillard, 2012). For administrators and policymakers, age grading simplifies management and accountability, especially in times of social and economic uncertainty. For Montessori, however, it removes an important source of social and cognitive development.

Second, the strong emphasis on centralised curricula and examinations limits the room for genuinely individual pacing. Montessori assumes that children move through materials at different speeds, guided by their interest and developmental readiness. In the Russian context, teachers are accountable for ensuring that entire

classes reach specified content benchmarks at fixed points in time.

Research on autonomy-supportive teaching suggests that aligning external requirements with students' internal motivation is more likely when teachers can support learners' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Patzak & Zhang, 2025; Prokofyeva, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Here, "relatedness" matters not only as classroom climate but as the social condition for internalising shared norms: autonomy-supportive teaching does not remove external requirements but can help students transform them into personally endorsed values. Under continuous pressure to "cover" the programme and optimise test performance, however, this internalisation process becomes fragile and heavily dependent on teachers' discretionary time and professional skill.

Third, digitalisation has changed the conditions for both humanistic and Montessori-inspired education. The rapid spread of digital platforms, online resources and distance learning in Russian schools has created new tools for individualisation, but also new risks (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021; Starichenko, 2020). Specific digital tools (e.g., adaptive learning software that adjusts task difficulty based on students' performance) may support Montessori's key goal: allowing children to progress at their own pace and receive immediate feedback without constant external control. In this regard, the same tool category can function in two opposite ways depending on its design and governance. If adaptive learning systems provide instant feedback, allow for self-correction of errors, and maintain the importance of the child's choice of task sequence rather than imposing a predetermined path, they can support individual learning pace in accordance with Montessori principles. Platforms that prioritise performance dashboards, compliance monitoring, or regular standardised testing, on the other hand, tend to shift control to external factors and move the focus from self-regulation to outcome optimisation. Virtual manipulatives can complement the visualisation of concepts, but they rarely replicate the tactile, proprioceptive, and fine-motor aspects that are purposefully developed with Montessori materials. Moreover, the foundation of Montessori pedagogy is sensorimotor interaction and sustained work in a carefully prepared environment. During distance learning, children lose access to the material environment that allows them to work independently for extended periods, and screen-based substitutes cannot fully compensate for this loss. Digitalisation itself does not contradict Montessori principles. However, there arise questions about whether these tools are used to promote standardisation and a logic of control, or to enhance autonomy and purposeful activity. Additionally, well-designed virtual manipulatives can enhance work with tangible materials and aid in the visualisation of abstract concepts (Laurillard, 2008; Luckin, 2010).

However, many widely used digital solutions do not align with Montessori principles. Screen-based tasks that require mainly clicking through decontextualised exercises do not reproduce the rich sensory and motor experience of handling concrete materials. Virtual objects lack weight, texture and resistance, which are

central to Montessori's sensorial curriculum. When digital platforms are implemented primarily for monitoring, reporting and standardised testing, they strengthen external control rather than internal motivation and self-discipline. In such cases, digitalisation not only fails to extend the prepared environment but can also undermine it by displacing time for hands-on activity and live interaction. However, international policy analysis highlights that the effectiveness of digital transformation depends on governance and alignment: technology can easily reinforce monitoring and managerial logic if pedagogical goals and teacher agency are not prioritised (Boeskens & Meyer, 2025; OECD, 2023).

On the contrary, if digitalisation is planned primarily from a managerial and infrastructural perspective, it may undermine key elements, including experiential, hands-on work, meaningful contact with specific materials, and trusting relationships between teacher and their students (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021; Laurillard, 2008; Starichenko, 2020). In this case, screens risk becoming another tool of external control rather than a resource for independent research. Taken together, these observations suggest that the main obstacles to Montessori's broader integration into Russian education lie less in conceptual contradictions than in the current patterns of system organisation, governance, and professional and public perceptions.

5.5. Implications for Learner-Centred Reforms in the Post-Soviet Period's Education

From this perspective, Montessori pedagogy can play two roles in the current reform trajectory. First, it acts as a mirror, highlighting how far everyday school practice still is from the humanistic ideals written into laws and Standards. Issues such as curriculum intensity, exam preparation demands, and concerns about how strongly school learning is connected with children's fundamental interests have been described in Russian debates for decades (Adamovich et al., 2019; Aydarova, 2014) and become particularly visible compared with Montessori environments.

Second, it can function as a catalyst, offering a well-developed, historically tested model of what learner-centred and humanistic education can look like in practice: how classrooms can be organised, how materials can be used and how teachers can redefine their own role. This catalytic potential is reinforced by international evidence: well-implemented Montessori programmes can produce moderate positive effects on both academic and non-academic outcomes (Randolph et al., 2023). However, for this potential to be realised at scale, reforms need to reach beyond rewriting Standards and curricula. They must also focus on the organisation of classes, approaches to assessment, teacher training and communication with parents.

Internal pedagogical conflicts should also be acknowledged in a realistic integration agenda. Specific Montessori environments, particularly those for young children, devote significant time to individual work, which may limit opportuni-

ties for organised group activities and long-term peer cooperation. Instead of being viewed as automatically aligned with policy expectations, this aspect may need to be purposefully adjusted in a reform context that increasingly emphasises collaboration and community-oriented outcomes. Without such changes, Montessori is likely to remain a relatively specialised option: formally compatible with policy rhetoric, yet shaped in practice by the everyday logic of mass, standardised schooling (Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion

Maria Montessori developed her method more than a century ago, but many of her core ideas—respect for the child, trust in children’s inner drive to learn, and the careful design of developmental environments—remain remarkably close to what Russian education policy now declares as its primary goals. In the language of the Standards, this is expressed as a focus on the “*whole child*”, personal development, autonomy and responsibility. In this sense, the humanistic essence of Montessori’s pedagogy clearly resonates with the declared direction of the Russian educational system.

At the same time, the analysis in this paper shows that this resonance is primarily confined to the level of concepts and documents. In everyday practice, Montessori approaches encounter several systemic obstacles: age-based classes, a unified, content-rich curriculum, an emphasis on exam preparation, and a digitalisation agenda that is still being aligned with pedagogical priorities. International policy analysis suggests that where digital transformation is driven primarily by infrastructure and accountability logics, there is a risk of weakening teacher agency and learner-centred practice, even when humanistic aims are declared (Boeskens & Meyer, 2025; OECD, 2023).

Against this background, it may be unrealistic to expect Montessori pedagogy to be fully incorporated into the existing system without further gradual adjustments in practice. The analysis points to at least three concrete conditions under which Montessori’s humanistic ideas could find a more secure place within Russian reforms:

- Regulatory and organisational flexibility at the school level. Within the framework of the Standards, schools need more room to experiment with flexible grouping (including elements of multi-age interaction), varied pacing and alternative lesson formats, without adverse consequences in inspection and accountability procedures.
- Systematic integration of humanistic and Montessori-inspired perspectives into teacher education. Pre-service and in-service programmes need to offer long-term, practice-oriented training in autonomy-supportive teaching, in creating developmental environments, and in using digital technologies to enhance children’s independence and agency, instead of focusing mainly on technical platform skills.
- Assessment and accountability are aligned with humanistic aims. If high-

stakes examinations remain the dominant indicator of success, schools will continue to prioritise coverage and test preparation. A gradual diversification of assessment—greater use of formative assessment, portfolios, and qualitative descriptions of personal development—would make it easier for schools to take seriously the growth aspects valued by both Montessori and the Standards, such as self-regulation, initiative, and cooperative skills.

Provided that at least some of these conditions are met, Montessori-oriented practices have the potential to move beyond their current niche status and become more firmly embedded in the broader transformation of Russian schooling. They would then function not simply as isolated cases of “alternative” education, but as practical embodiments of the humanistic aspirations articulated in Russian policy and other educational documents, realised in day-to-day teaching and learning.

Ethical Approval

This study is based solely on publicly available policy documents and scholarly literature. It does not involve access to private institutional data, animals, or human participants. Such studies do not need formal ethical approval in conformity with the author’s institutional and national research ethics norms.

Data Availability

No new empirical data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is therefore not applicable. All sources used are publicly available and fully cited in the reference list.

Conflicts of Interest

Regarding the research, authorship and publications of this paper, the authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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