

Montessori and Social Cohesion. Young Children's lived experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Introduction

This paper is offered as a contribution to inform both the research and educational practitioner communities of the contemporary place of Montessori education in the empowerment of young children and the foundations of social justice created by young children's lived experiences. The research is based upon practitioner observation of spontaneous expressions in a Montessori centre for children aged three years to six years in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: Montessori, Social Cohesion, Early Childhood Education

Montessori and Te Whaariki

The practitioner lens of contemporary Montessori practice in Aoteroa New Zealand is framed by both Montessori pedagogy and the national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki, He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum*. This paper explores the interconnecting paradigms of *Te Whāriki*, a woven mat of the principles and strands of early childhood curriculum that will assist all children to be “competent and confident learners and communicators; healthy in mind, body and spirit; secure in their sense of belonging and secure in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (p.9) and Montessori's comparison of the stages of social development to the stages and process of weaving of a cotton cloth (Montessori, 1967a). The Montessori activities of Practical life, including activities for care of the self, care of the environment and exercises in grace and courtesy are acknowledged as lived experiences contributing to the spinning weaving and darning of the cloth of social cohesion.

The paper further explores the connection between Montessori and Maori pedagogy in respect of three key principles in the weaving of curriculum or the lived experiences of young children in a Montessori environment for three to six year olds.

1. The principle of *Tino rangatiratanga* includes in this context the right to determine ones own destiny and connects with Montessori's view that the child has fundamental creative forces with which to fulfil their potential.
2. The principle of *ako* emphasises teaching and learning as one. All are empowered as both learners and teachers, which values a reciprocal relationship and establishes a community that believes in learning as a life long natural human activity.
3. The principle of *whanaungatanga* emphasises the connections of kin and the enhancement of extended family and the facilitation of *tuakana /teina* relationships

whereby it is the responsibility of the older sibling of the same gender to assist the learning of the younger sibling.

The author offers personal interpretive definitions for the context of this inquiry, derived from the principles outlined by Bishop & Glynn, (2000), Macfarlane (2000) and Montessori (1967a, 1967).

Children's Voices

As a research process, recording spontaneous expressions honours the child's voice. From both the Montessori and Maori pedagogical frameworks it allows the child to reveal themselves according to the natural laws of development. Impressions are absorbed, connections are made over both time and context, and expressions are revealed. The limitation of this approach is that by definition spontaneity means that the expressions follow a natural process, without external influence or artificial probe and therefore the practitioner researcher may not always be in the presence of the child when expressions occur. Spontaneous observations of children are further supported in Aotearoa New Zealand by the documentation of learning, evaluation and assessment through narrative in the form of learning stories (Carr, 2001). Learning stories may incorporate the voice of the adult observer, the child and the child's family. As each learning story captures elements of learning and development for a child or group of children, it contributes to an evolving narrative that celebrates the life story of the individual, extended family and the learning community. Children's spontaneous expressions through narrative and photographic representation are offered for reflective appreciation.

As it was

Maria Montessori opened the first *Casa dei bambini* in 1907 in the tenements of San Lorenzo, Rome. Montessori describes her impressions of entering this area:

It seemed to me that a recent sorrow weighed down upon the people who milled about the silent streets with a stupefied and almost fearful look. Their deep silence seemed to indicate that their lives had been broken and shattered. There were no carriages: there were not even the common, happy voices of the street vendors nor the sound of hand organs being pushed around by their owners in search of tips. Not even these sounds...broke the sad and heavy silence. (Montessori, 1967, p.333)

In this poverty stricken area of Rome she observed as young children revealed their capacity to develop their individual potential and establish a community of care. The Montessori Method aroused international interest.

Impressions and Connections

Following the careful observation of young children Montessori concluded that:

If teaching is to be effective with young children, it must assist them to advance on the way to independence. It must initiate them into those kinds of activities which they can perform themselves and which keep them from being a burden to others because of their inabilities. We must help them to walk without assistance, to run, to go up and down stairs, to pick up fallen objects, to dress and undress, to wash themselves, to express their needs in a way that

is clearly understood, and to attempt to satisfy their desires through their own efforts. All this is part of an education for independence. (Montessori, 1967, p57)

Montessori view of independence may be interpreted as interdependence. The ability to fulfil the individuals potential equally enhances their capacity to live in the world. The Montessori exercises of Practical Life emerged from the social and community responsibilities associated with caring for the new apartments of San Lorenzo in which the first *Casa dei Bambini* was established (Kahn, 2008).

The exercises in Practical life encompassing the care of the self, care of the environment and Grace and Courtesy are presented to the children by the Directress and on occasion by an older child as a lesson. Presentations are viewed as a gift, a *taonga*, a present that offers infinite opportunities and possibilities for learning and development as impressions are absorbed and connections explored. When Fisher (1914) wrote about her experience of visiting a *Casa* she was impressed by a child absorbed in the exercises of Practical Life.

One little boy about three and half years old had been intent on some operation ever since we had entered the room, and even now, as I drew near his little table and chair, he only glanced up for an instant's smile without stopping the action of his fingers. I leaned over him, hoping that the device which so held his attention was not too complicated for my inexperienced, unpedagogical mind to take in. He was holding a light wooden frame about eighteen inches square, on which were stretched two pieces of cotton cloth, meeting down the middle like the joining of a garment. On one of these edges was a row of button holes and on the other a row of large bone buttons. The child was absorbed in buttoning and unbuttoning those two pieces of cloth. (Fisher, 1914, p14)

The connection between caring for others and caring for the environment remains linked through the exercises of Practical Life in which care for the environment flows from the indoor environment to the children's garden.

Children are also attracted by plants. One children's house did not have any land that could be tilled, so flower pots were set out all around a large terrace. The children never forgot to water the plants with a little watering can. One morning I found them all seated in a circle on the floor around a magnificent red rose that had opened up during the night. They were silent and peaceful, completely absorbed in contemplation. (Montessori, 1967a, p.71)

Activities such as, learning to button and unbutton directly assists the child to dress or undress. Learning to pour water from a jug to a glass assists the child to pour a drink when they are thirsty. Learning to shake hands develops the child's interpersonal skills as a foundation for respectful interactions. Returning an activity to the shelf tidy and complete demonstrates a respectful regard for the learning and development of the next child who may wish to use that material. It further sows the seed for ecological responsibility, - we should leave the planet tidy and complete for the benefit of future generations.

The exercises in Practical life not only foster an individual sense of well being and belonging but also provide a foundation for social cohesion by fostering practical contribution to the well being and belonging of the group. Caring for ones self, caring for the environment and establishing the skills and empathy to engage in respectful responsive interactions supports the principle of *Tino rangatiratanga*. This principle includes in this context the right to determine ones own destiny and connects with Montessori's view that the child has fundamental creative forces with which to fulfil their potential. Further connections are interwoven with the concept of *mana* or "standing" in which the *mana* of the individual is also the *mana* of the community. The Maori term for caring for others is *manaaki*, which derives from *mana*.

Expressions

The author's curiosity about the ways in which young children express their developing understanding of connections was aroused by a boy aged four, who, over a period of several weeks, would repeatedly recite a monologue to every adult and child whom he encountered.

"Uncle Matt is the boss of Dad,
Dad is the boss of Mum,
Mum is the boss of Anna,
Anna is the boss of me,
I am the boss of Nadine,
Nadine is the boss of baby Cam,
Baby Cam is the boss of the cats,
The cats is the boss of the chickens,
And the chickens is the boss of nothing".

"Who is the boss" may be interpreted as an inquiry about responsive and reciprocal relationships. This spontaneous expression involves complex thinking. Thinking which explores an understanding of social relationships, connections between the social and the natural worlds, the Maori perspectives of *kinship* and *whanau* and curiosity about the concepts of *manaakitanga* in both the social and the natural worlds.

Learning to have friends and to be a friend is an important aspect of young children's participation in a Montessori community for which the exercises of Grace and Courtesy provide a foundation. Montessori described social development in the context of participation in social life, in which social problems are solved and acceptable behaviour is learned (Montessori, 1967a).

On one occasion a girl of four was observed talking to a friend.

"I feel so left out with only three friends, so...
I am going to have four friends!"

The child demonstrates a capacity to value friendship and connects friendship with a sense of emotional well being. In exploring an understanding of the social world connections are made with a growing awareness of mathematical concepts. Three friends is quantified as not enough but four friends is evaluated as good.

Another four-year old boy was observed exploring the concept of friendship on several occasions.

On the first occasion several children were working at a table when one of the children called across the table to another, “James” to which he replied with his full name, “James Simon Broughton”. Two of the children now called to James using his first name and again he replied by stating his name in full. Next Mia tried calling to him, “James Broughton”. Now James replied, “No you have to call me James Simon Broughton”. Mia replied, “But it is a bit hard to say that”. James repeated his name in full, “James Simon Broughton”. Mia asks, “Can I just call you James?” James says, “OK”.

Days later James and another boy were running outside. As they ran past he called, “Kelvin is my friend... he likes my name!” As Kelvin ran by he called, “James is my friend...he is the same big as me!”

Days later again, Peter and James were playing together when Peter asked James, “Does your Dad have friends? James replied, “No, I am his friend”. Peter queried, “Are you sure?” James answered assertively, “I am his friend”.

Some weeks after, James was showing Hamish how to build towers with connecting wooden blocks. When Hamish had constructed a tower, James told him, “You did it Hamish, you built a mummy one, you did it, you did it today”. Hamish smiled at this acknowledgement, to which James added “Next time you will be able to build a daddy one!”

James’ expressions evidence a journey through the development of the self-awareness and the developing consciousness of friends and family, *whanaungatanga*, into a weaving of *ako*, the reciprocal, responsive capacity to be both a learner and also promote the learning and development of others in the Montessori community. In turn this enhances the *mana* of both the individual and the *mana* of the community. Social cohesion is experienced as a lived and dynamic process.

Montessori advised, “There is only one specimen of each object, and if a piece is in use when another child wants it, the latter... will wait for it to be released. Important social qualities derive from this. The child comes to see that he must respect the work of others, not because someone has said he must, but because this is a reality that he meets in his daily experience” (Montessori, 1967a, p.221).

One morning a marble tower was set up on the covered deck near the garden. A young boy who had recently turned three years came and sat down with the group of children who were waiting turns to roll the marbles down the tower. He asked when it would be his turn and the Directress [the Montessori term for teacher] explained to him that children were taking turns in order around the table. After a couple more children had their turn he asked again and was offered the names of the children who were before him. He waited for the duration of another couple of turns and asked again when his turn would be. He was told the names of the children who were waiting ahead of him. Recognising that he was having difficulty waiting the Directress gently patted him on the shoulder as he waited. After a few minutes he turned to her and said “Your turn too!” as he gently placed his hand on her back and began patting her.

On another occasion a young girl of just two and half years who had only been attending for a few weeks was noticed one morning watching an older child using three of the Montessori cylinder blocks. Tia sat on a chair opposite the child for several minutes watching. Tia looked over to me and said, "I want a turn". Smiling to her I asked, "What do you need to do if you want a turn? Tia replied, "Wait for Wiremu", and so Tia waited and waited while the child completed the task of replacing 30 cylinders of various dimensions into the blocks, assessed his work and corrected the placement of some cylinders. When finished Tia grinned with delight as Wiremu passed the cylinder block.

Respecting the work of others provides the dual opportunity of developing the disposition of persisting with difficulty and sustaining an interest (Carr, 2001). The observation of a more experienced member of the community and respecting others work promotes *whanaungatanga* by developing a sense of contribution and belonging to the community of learning.

Montessori observed social cohesion was evident when accidents occurred in the Casa as the children assisted each other:

But what do our children do? They all run to help, saying with an encouraging tone in their little voices, "Never mind, we shall soon find another vase," and while some collect the pieces, others wipe up the spilled water. They have an instinct to help the weak, encouraging and comforting them and this is really an instinct for social progress. (Montessori, 1967a, p.227-228)

One morning there was a loud crash in the room. A girl of two and half years had dropped a tray containing two jugs, one full of water as she was returning it to the shelf. Two other children were already assisting, reassuring their friend, "It's Ok, we can clean it up". They picked up the materials off the floor. They got the cleaning cloths from a nearby shelf and began to mop. There was a lot of water and many cloths and a concerted effort was required to contain the spill. They showed the young girl where to get a cloth and although they did not ask her to help, after watching for a while she joined them. When the clean up was complete they simply placed the many wet cloths into the laundry basket and returned to their work.

Accidents and spills offer an opportunity to encourage, comfort, assist and connect the skills acquired in the exercises of Practical life into the daily life in the centre community.

The observations offer an insight into young children's responses and expressions. An aspect that is more difficult to convey is the depth of compassion and integrity that underpinned these expressions. This is the spiritual dimension woven into their evolving social cohesion.

Conclusions

The expressions observed were deeply rooted in the exercises of practical life. Impressions absorbed and acted upon in the practical life activities were connected to real life experiences, and expressed in the interpersonal interactions that are the life experience on a daily basis within the centre community.

The observations revealed that activities that facilitate the care of the self, the care of the environment and the exercises of grace and courtesy, develop concentration and independence through freedom of choice, and in so doing create the social cohesion of independence, interdependence in the deepest sense of the term. The concepts of a community that promotes belonging and well-being, participation by all in both teaching and learning, and the child's right to reveal themselves through natural laws is evident in the observations.

It may be more than one hundred years since Maria Montessori observed phenomenon in the first *Casa dei Bambini* established in Italy, yet spontaneous expressions in a contemporary Montessori context in Aoteroa New Zealand reveal similar expressions. This paper supports the view that unconscious social cohesion in the period of the absorbent mind and sensitive period for the social aspects of the world have remained constant over time and place in a Montessori prepared environment.

The observation of children through the lens of a practitioner remains a perpetual "work in progress".

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