



Connecting Leadership Development to Montessori Practice

By Janet Bagby, PhD, and Tracey N. Sulak, PhD

“The child is the spiritual builder of mankind” (Montessori, 1967, p. 221).

Maria Montessori was a transformational leader (Povell, 2010), a truth acknowledged by her followers, past and present. While her writings did not specifically focus on leadership development, we believe the Montessori philosophy and curriculum enhances students’ development of these skills.

Developing leaders requires an investment in human capital, or involves individual development through self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Since these are intrapersonal skills (as opposed to interpersonal skills), leadership development may be seen as a solitary process, where an individual builds self-knowledge and develops the behaviors related to trustworthiness.

The Montessori Method builds intrapersonal skills, promoting self-awareness through work and concentration. Montessori wrote, “The first glimmerings of discipline have their origins in work,” and this continues throughout each plane of development (Montessori, 1916/1965). As cognitive development advances through work, children also develop self-control through self-regulation. Newly developed self-regulation allows the introduction of community service, morality instruction, social justice, and the expansion of the classroom to the outside world. Montessori equated intrapersonal development with mental health, claiming as students “became more balanced and capable of orienting and valuing themselves, they are

characteristically calm and serene” (1963, p. 49). Students who have developed in this manner are capable of exploring their place in a larger society. This type of social development occurring on the individual level can also be called adaptation, or fit and flexibility to the environment. Without establishing this fit, a person is unable to complete the social development necessary for leadership development.

While developing leadership requires growth in intrapersonal skills, strong leadership also focuses on interpersonal skills. The social capital created during leadership development reflects networks between individuals, cooperation, and mutual respect (Day, 2000). The skills necessary for this type of development construct the concepts of social awareness and social skills. The Montessori curriculum develops both concepts through a sense of community, grace, and respect. In the first plane of development, children learn the natural order and work associated with Practical Life exercises, but in the second plane, these exercises become the practice and development of social customs and rules associated with community (Montessori, 1971). Montessori considered this a time when the child “becomes enabled to render service to civilization,” so it is often during the second plane of development that children become involved in community service projects beyond the classroom (Montessori, 1948). The leadership roles children assume in the community allow them to practice interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in new settings, which pro-

motes generalization and long-term acquisition of knowledge. The developmental continuum extends into adolescence as the child begins to understand interdependency, harmonious living, and the role of the individual within the cosmos.

Montessori’s development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills through work complements current research in leadership development. Practicing leadership inside and outside the classroom, students learn to be leaders (Posner, 2009). Many students in the Montessori classroom may be unaware of their ongoing leadership development because it is often a part of the hidden curriculum. For instance, students in a Montessori classroom will serve as class leaders and run class meetings without assistance from teachers. In addition, older students serve as leaders for younger students in multiage classrooms. Montessori students practice leadership within the classroom on a daily basis, often without realizing the benefits. Older students serving as role models and tutors for younger students develop social awareness and empathy while engaging in service roles (Day, 2000). The practice of adolescent Montessori students developing and managing businesses provides opportunities to enhance entrepreneurial and leadership skills—as evidenced by a recent study (Broome & Preston-Grimes, 2011). The development of social capital through these experiences often leads to greater civic engagement, more social integration, and enhanced educational achievement as adults (Van De Valk & Conostas, 2011).

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communications and public relations efforts

- Achieving greater diversity in our AMS Annual Conference programs and networking activities and being inclusive in welcoming all of our colleagues
- Working to support the growing number of Montessori public and charter schools addressing the needs of families and children in

underserved communities

- Reaching across geographic and cultural boundaries throughout the world to better understand how Montessori education can thrive
- Analyzing population shifts and how they may affect the Montessori education of today and tomorrow

Living according to values that respect diversity and uphold inclusiveness,

and holding ourselves to these highest ideals, will pose challenges for us, as well as new opportunities. Ultimately, these opportunities will benefit our children, our families, our communities, and our world.

RICHARD A. UNGERER is executive director of AMS. He welcomes your comments, questions, and ideas. Contact him at richard@amshq.org.

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