

“Autonomy is the Name of the Game:” Montessori Pedagogy [AND] Socioemotional Development

Jenna Jandrt (Student Investigator) | Nicole J. Schultz, PhD (Faculty Mentor)

The Power of **AND**

University of Wisconsin
Eau Claire

INTRODUCTION

Current literature regarding Montessori methods surrounds academic success in a variety of disciplines, but little suggests that students attending a Montessori school develop differently in regard to social and emotional development. The purpose of the current study was to investigate ways in which Montessori schools are designed in an intentional way to foster the socioemotional development of students and ways in which these practices are beneficial. Five components of socioemotional development (autonomy, conflict reconciliation, diversity, and empathy) were derived from a compilation of professional scales measuring socioemotional development: (a) Social Emotional Learning Scale (Coryn, Spybrooke, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009); (b) Early Childhood Ecology Scale (Flores & Riojas-Cortez, 2009); and (c) Social-Emotional Questionnaire for Children—Parent/Guardian Version (Wall, Williams, Morris, & Bramham, 2011). The results of this research are significant in that they address topics that have to be fully explored which is the effects a Montessori education has on social and emotional development in youth. The implications of this research are applicable to parents with young children, teachers, policy makers, and professionals working in academic settings because they may have strong potential to position them to better understand pedagogical methods and practices that best serve a child's socioemotional development. Findings and results are contextualized utilizing the Ecological Systems Theory modified by Urie Bronfenbrenner.

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ: In what ways are Montessori schools designed in an intentional way to foster socioemotional development of students and in what ways are these practices beneficial for youth?

MARIA MONTESSORI

After graduating medical school and becoming Italy's first female physician, Maria Montessori became interested in educational theory (American Montessori Society, n. d.). In the early 1900's, she opened a childcare center for inner-city youth in which she observed students showed most interest when they were able to interact with their environment. This set the stage for what became Montessori pedagogy.



Poster from a Midwestern Montessori School

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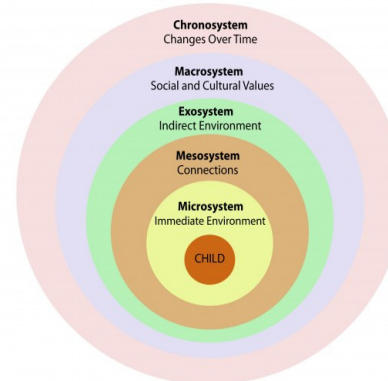
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ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Ecological Systems Theory states that in order to understand a child, we must be capable of understanding the environment in which the child functions (Burns, Warmbold-Brann, & Zaslofsky, 2015). We can do this by being knowledgeable about the five systems that impact individuals:

- (a) Microsystem – the physical environment closest to a person.
- (b) Mesosystem – the interactions among different aspects of the microsystem
- (c) Exosystem – An environment that does not involve a person directly, but still affects them
- (d) Macrosystem – The cultural environment in which a person lives
- (e) Chronosystem – The intersection of environmental changes and the relevance of the timing in which the change occurred

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

- Qualitative data was collected via convenience sampling of seven interviews with Montessori teachers. Five females and two males ranging from ages 23-45 were interviewed on ways in which the five tenets of socioemotional development (autonomy, conflict reconciliation, diversity, leadership, and empathy) are intentionally fostered in Montessori school classrooms. Data was collected via face-to-face interviews. Two Montessori teachers are employed at a homeschool Montessori program in a Southern urban city and five out of the seven are employed at a Midwestern Montessori school.

DATA ANALYSIS

- Ecological Systems Theory was utilized as a framework to analyze interview data because it addresses systems and the ways in which individuals function within them.
- Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and words that commonly emerged in participant interview data. Thematic analysis consists of a three-step process: (a) Primary Coding (i.e., finding the interviewee's purpose); (b) Secondary Coding (i.e., establishing coding frames to organize recurring themes, repetitive words, and instances in which the interviewee used forcefulness of tone); and (c) Extracting Higher-Order Themes (i.e., categorizing themes into meaningful units that represent answers to the proposed research question).

RESULTS

AUTONOMY: INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS

“Each student in a Montessori school is associated with an individualized education program. At the beginning of the year, Montessori guides have a checklist of things to go through with students to see where they are at with reading, writing, and math. If a kid is behind in a skill, guides take extra time out of class to help the student catch up with everyone else.”

CONFLICT RECONCILIATION: “NOTHING GETS LOOKED OVER”

“My morning is flexible enough that if I need to talk about a conflict with the entire class, I can dump a math lesson because something else came up that is an opportunity to learn. I can go with that and just come back to the lesson another day. Maybe later that day or week, but eventually. Nothing gets looked over.”

LEADERSHIP: LEADERS-IN-TRAINING

“When it starts up, my class works in the morning so at the beginning of the school day there are four or five kids in the room. Everyone is out doing something and I kind of walk the school to check things out. Students are in the gym helping the gym teacher set up for his class, sweeping the playground to make sure no backpacks got left out. Some do morning stuff to get the day started. That is the biggest, most direct way they show leadership. We spend a lot of time talking about how we are the oldest students so we need to set the best example for the youngins.”

DIVERSITY: VOLUNTEERISM TO TEACH DIVERSITY

“Connecting with the community and school with the training program is a big thing we do to teach diversity. We are close to the senior center so we will make cards for veterans or make blankets and bring them to the homeless shelter. We did do some career field trips to get the kids out in the community, to see what people are doing, and how we can give back. We are always talking about how we can do community service and what kind of community service trips we can do. Kids learn best when they see people living differently than they do.”

EMPATHY: RELIANCE ON ONE ANOTHER

“Because it's a community and all the kids have jobs, and the plants die if they aren't watered and the animals die if they aren't fed and taken care of because I won't step in to do that, they realize in a hurry that they have to take care of one another. We strive to create an atmosphere where empathy is important and where they rely on one another.”

IMPLICATIONS

PARENTS:

May better position parents to make informed decisions when enrolling their students in a school.

EDUCATORS:

To create a generation of leaders who are best-prepared to function as engaged citizens in increasingly diverse cultural contexts, it is imperative that educators prioritize intentionally implementing pedagogical practices surrounding socioemotional intelligence into curriculum to foster empowerment, responsibility, autonomy, and sensitivity.

ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALS AND EDUCATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS:

By creating a microsystem that acknowledges and respects differences among individuals, rather than assuming that the exosystem will instill self-esteem, academic professionals and policy makers who take an Ecological Systems Theory perspective have the ability to have such practices implemented into curriculum on behalf of educators.