Research article

"Autonomy is the Name of the Game:" Montessori Pedagogy and Socioemotional Development

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Abstract

In response to the recently momentous charter movement, the United States (U.S.) has seen more Montessori public schools than ever before (Sparks, 2016). The following research presents a framework for socioemotional development in students attending Montessori schools. Interviews conducted with seven Montessori guides are analyzed utilizing tenets of Ecological Systems Theory to reveal ways in which Montessori schools cater to micro and macro levels of individuals' environments by intentionally fostering socioemotional development through a variety of practices. The premise of Ecological Systems Theory is that in order to understand the individual, one must examine the environments in which the individual learner functions (Burns, Warmbold-Brann,

& Zaslofsky, 2015). Implications are significant to educators, policy makers, parents with young children, and professionals working in an academic setting in that the findings may have strong potential to position them to better understand pedagogical methods that best serve a child's socioemotional development.

Keywords: Montessori, Ecological Systems Theory, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, pedagogical methods

Introduction

Montessori School Pedagogy--Socio-Emotional Development and Socialization

In 1907, Maria Montessori created Casa dei Bambini in the slums of Rome in which classroom materials were designed specifically to promote each student's natural desire to learn (American Montessori Society, 2016). In her book,*To Educate the Human Potential,* she illustrated the interconnectivity of the student and the teacher "walking together" through the educational process to avoid the "aimless wandering" of the child that may inhibit them from progressing toward knowledge development (Montessori, 1948). This emphasis on the development and guidance of the child has been the basis for many contemporary Montessori programs.

One of the overarching purposes of the Montessori classroom is to create freedom beginning in the early stages of life rather than merely existing in a classroom in which a teacher behaves as a dictator and the child a follower (Montessori, 1948). A second pervasive purpose of the Montessori classroom is to assist students in adaptation to the physical environment that surrounds them (Rambusch, 2010). Ideas such as "exercises of practical life" are utilized to simultaneously foster responsibility and autonomy by making typically mundane activities such as mopping and sweeping part of daily practices of maintaining a learning environment by positioning youth to be active participants in that process. In her book, *From Childhood to Adolescence* (1974), Montessori described a child's reaction to exercises of practical life as a "burst of independence" from the ability to complete tasks separate from adults and display their own capabilities.

Materials and Method: Review of Literature

As the charter movement expands, the United States is likely to see an increase in the expansion of Montessori classrooms and research regarding such philosophies and practices. To lay a foundation for the current study, this article begins with a brief review of Ecological Systems Theory to familiarize readers with the theory in which data was collected and analyzed. The introduction of Ecological Systems Theory is then followed by an analysis of five key components of socioemotional development: (a) autonomy, (b) conflict reconciliation, (c) leadership, (d) diversity, and (e) empathy and how these components are fostered within a Montessori classroom.

Ecological Systems Theory

The premise of Ecological Systems Theory is that to understand a child, educators must be capable of understanding the environments in which they function. This theory, originated by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1977, is made up of the microsystem (i.e., the physical environment closest to a person), mesosystem (i.e., the interactions among different aspects of the microsystem), exosystem (i.e., an environment that does not involve a person directly, but still affects them), the macrosystem (i.e., the cultural environment in which a person lives), and the chronosystem (i.e., "person-context interrelatedness"), which is unique to Ecological Systems Theory. The addition of the chronosystem reflects the acknowledgement on behalf of researchers, educators, and policy makers of the environmental context and the role it has on each child's socioemotional development. Researchers taking an ecological perspective focus on ways in which the different levels a student functions interact and relate to one another to influence behaviors and thoughts of a student (McLinden, 2017). In response to the growing demand of Montessori schools and success of pedagogical philosophies possessing an ecological systems perspective, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: In what ways are Montessori schools intentionally designed and implemented to foster socioemotional development of students?

Socioemotional Development

The five components of socioemotional development (i.e., autonomy, conflict reconciliation, leadership, diversity, and empathy) that are explored in the current research have been derived from a compilation of professional scales measuring socioemotional development: Social Emotional Learning Scale (Coryn, Spybrooke, Evergreen, &Blinkiewicz, 2009), Early Childhood Ecology Scale (Flores & Riojas-Cortez, 2009), and Social-Emotional Questionnaire for Children--Parent/Guardian Version (Wall, Williams, Morris, & Bramham, 2011). The following paragraphs offer insight as to what those characteristics may look like in the context of a Montessori school.

Autonomy

The philosophy of Montessori classrooms is based on the belief that providing children freedom within reason fosters will and judgment surrounded by imagination and responsibility (Murray, 2011). Students have control over their workload and the ability to manipulate and customize curriculum depending on their own levels of abilities and interests. Teachers serve as supervisors and guides when scaffolding is appropriate. The term "teacher" is not used in a Montessori classroom. Instead, teachers are called "guides" as the child is at the center of the classroom (American Montessori Society, 2016). This environment is conducive to fostering autonomy in that it provides a framework for self-regulation and responsibility for each student's knowledge and abilities. The emphasis on autonomy is supplemented by the child-friendly materials one would find in a Montessori classroom (Kayili&Ari, 2011). In Montessori classrooms, materials are designed to be easily utilized by children based on physical characteristics and developmental needs (Chattin-McNichols, 2013). For instance, the furniture is designed

based on a child's height and body size, drawers and doors are easy to open and close, and hand-held utensils are made to fit the size of the child's hand.

Peace and Conflict Reconciliation

Education and Peace (Montessori, 1949) outlines a series of lectures and speeches that Maria Montessori gave as she attended peace conferences and spoke about peace education throughout Europe (Kramer, 1976). While war was waging around her and her students (Thayer-Bacon, 2011), Montessori strived to separate her classroom from what was going on in politics. A core component of integrating peace within curriculum included teaching students to live together in harmony by establishing a democratic environment within her classrooms. According to Montessori (1949), as children develop a love for all living things and a sense of self-regulation, they are "both a hope and a promise for mankind." Central to Montessori's peace education is group collaboration and cooperation to establish a democracy within the classroom (Williams & Keith, 2000). The Montessori classroom is an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competition. Thus, democratic processes and peaceful conflict reconciliation are core components of Montessori education in that content and processes surrounding democracy and conflict reconciliation are integrated into other, seemingly unrelated, subject areas. Students are engaged in democratic processes by creating classroom guidelines that serve as a model for bringing about compromise among differing opinions.Based on the premise that students learn best when actively engaged, students enrolled in a Montessori classroom collaborate in small groups to achieve a solution to a conflict (Hedeen, 2005). An environment conducive to conflict reconciliation is fostered such that students are organized in small groups that encourage group discussion and collaboration for reaching solutions to conflicts. Group work can initially be difficult for students. However, as students build relationships and become accustomed to elements of proximity relevant to effective groupwork, interpersonal communicationhas potential to become the norm.

Leadership

Grounded in the notion that children model behavior after observing others (Bandura, 1971), guides who embody characteristics such as discipline, self-regulation, composure, respect for others, and high self-efficacy offer students a positive role model (Bhatia, 2014). Guides with high self-efficacy are positively correlated with successful student outcomes. In other words, students of teachers who perceives themselves as having high efficacy observe the teacher's confidence and model it by increasing effort put toward a task and persistence one puts toward a task. For a student to reach full potential, according to Maria Montessori, the Montessori guide first must undergo a transformative process in which she spiritually prepares herself "to purify her heart and render it burning with charity towards the child" (Standing, 1957, p. 298).Once a student develops self-efficacy and self-awareness by modeling the guide, characteristics such as leadership are able to manifest.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills supplement leadership development both inside and outside the Montessori classroom (Bagby&Sulak, 2013).Montessori guides challenge students to lead by allowing them to facilitate discussions on a topic of choice and/or hold class meetings with minimal interference on behalf of the guide. Engaging in such activities often leads to higher academic achievement, higher levels of socioemotional development, and a higher likelihood that a student engages in service-learning projects after graduation.

Diversity

Maria Montessori believed, "education is the best weapon for peace" (Montessori, 1949),thus the Montessori classroom sets groundwork for employment in an increasingly diverse nation (Stevenson, 2016). With an increasing global economy and the current social climate surrounding race relations in the United States, diversity and inclusivity are especially valuable in a Montessori classroom because guides understand that homogenous classrooms can lead to a dull education. Ungerer (2013) reports a positive correlation between diversity of the classroom and innovative ideas in the Montessori classroom. Therefore, it is advantageous for students to be exposed to diversity starting at a young age as a means of developing an understanding of, and appreciation for, the many facets of diversity within society that influence leadership potential in youth. Students who have been educated in diversity are more likely to successfully function in diverse workforce environments compared to their counterparts who have not had such training (Stevenson, 2016).

While the success produced by students coming from an education rich in diversity has led to an increased demand from parents wanting children to attend Montessori schools, a racial and socioeconomic gap continues to exist among students (Debs, 2016). During the 2012-2013 academic year the percentage of students of color enrolled in whole-school public Montessori institutions (55%) was representative of the percentage of students of color enrolled in traditional public schools (54%). This appears optimistic until one considers the demographic breakdown of the whole-school public Montessori population. African American students enrolled in the300 public Montessori schools studied we reoverrepresented in comparison to all public schools in the United States. However, enrollment of Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander students were underrepresented in the sample compared to national average of those enrolled in traditional public schools.

Additionally, fewer economically disadvantaged students were enrolled in whole-school public Montessori schools at a rate of 11% lower than the national average. For economically disadvantaged students and students of color, there are pros and cons that come with attending a public Montessori school. While public Montessori schools tend to be more racially diverse than traditional public schools, many Montessori students of color attend racially isolated schools. In other words, there is still room for improving accessibility of enrollment for racially and economically diverse students across districts. Furthermore, because magnet schools are oftentimes established for desegregation, students enrolled in charter Montessori programs are Whiter and more economically advantaged than their counterparts enrolled in district/magnet Montessori programs. However, according to Lillard (2013), there is nothing inherent within Montessori methods that limit it to middle- to upper-class families.

Empathy

Guides serve as role models to students, which leads to the belief that they believe an effective way to establish empathy is to show prosocial behaviors toward fellow colleagues, students, and the parents of students (Honig, 1999). Additionally, bibliotherapy, or the use of books to foster specific characteristics, is potentially a fun and educational method employed by Montessori guides to establish empathy and prosocial behavior in students. Utilizing books featuring characters that young students may identify with or look up to is an effective way to manipulate the behavior of students (Krogh &Lamme, 1985; Pardek, &Pardek, 1997). For example, characters such

as Horton in Dr. Seuss's Horton Hears a Who portray to students how positively others act toward prosocial characters. This, in turn, has the potential to motivate students to exude behavior similar to those they read about in their books.

Materials and Methods: Methodology

The foundation for this research is rooted within the Montessori guide and their classroom. Thus, qualitative research methods were utilized to collect and analyze data. The following sections address data collection, demographics, and analysis.

Data Collection

Data was collected for the current study through seven semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews were utilized to collect data by allowing analysis of both verbal and non-verbal communication. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed utilizing a personal cell phone secured with a password resulting in thirty-seven single-spaced pages of transcription. Prior to conducting the interview, participants were given the opportunity to grant or deny permission for participation in the study through use of a consent form. Participants were asked to respond to an interview guide of seven questions regarding the five components of socio-emotional development this research explored: (a) autonomy, (b) conflict reconciliation, (c) leadership, (d) diversity, and (e) empathy (see Appendix A). Participants were chosen via a convenience sampling technique based on qualifications and location and were contacted via e-mail or telephone. Data collection equated a total of nine hours of recorded interviews.

The convenience sample consisted of five women ranging from twenty-six to forty-five years of age and two men ranging from twenty-eight to thirty-four years of age. The composition of Montessori guides are as follows: two served as guides at a homeschool Montessori charter school in the southeastern part of the United States educating ages 5-12 and five guides employed by a two separate Midwestern Montessori program served as guides educating ages 3-11. To protect the identity of participants, all names included are pseudonyms.

In the context of the two Midwestern public Montessori schools, one guide catered specifically to Children's House (ages 3-6), two catered to E1 (ages 6-9), and two Montessori guides catered to E2 (ages 9-11). All guidesemployed in the Midwest obtained licensure for teaching Montessori in Wisconsin public schools and were employed in public schools that fully embracedMontessori philosophy (i.e., mixed ages, autonomy-based practices, constructivism, collaborative group work, etc.).Similarly, the homeschool Montessori program embraced elements of Montessori such as autonomy-based practices, Montessori materials, and following the child to ensure they have the correct materials and proper amount of challenge to reach fullest potential. However, the age grouping of the homeschool program is unauthentic to standard Montessori programs such that the small enrollment allows for more flexibility in grouping by age. When asked how students are grouped, the two homeschool Montessori guides said, "As much as we can, we won't group by age because it is really cool to see the third graders and sixth graders in the same room learning the same content." The homeschool Montessori program consisted of first and second grade,

third and fourth grade, and fifth and sixth graders working together with one guide teaching first and second and the other catering to the remaining grades. An essential aspect to the home school program was allowing the two older grades to assist the younger grades when time allowed. Aligning with results found by Debs (2016), the racial and economic makeup of the Montessori classrooms observed were predominantly White and middle-class. When asked how students with disabilities are served, all seven guides claimed to have no students with physical or cognitive disabilities.

Data Analysis

Ecological Systems Theory was used as a framework to analyze interview data because it addresses systems and the ways in which individuals function within them. Burns (2013) discussed the importance of utilizing Ecological Systems Theory in an educational setting: (a) it positively affects the lives of more students at once, (b) it provides more depth to allow for intensive service for students, and (c) it considers the multiple aspects of a student's life. The application of ecological perspectives is implemented in hopes of improving the academic achievement of youth enrolled in such programs.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and words that commonly occurred in participant interview data in order to explore the process of socioemotional development in the context of a Montessori classroom. Thematic analysis consists of a three step process of primary coding, secondary coding, and extracting higher-order themes from interview data (Berg, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss, 1987). Primary coding is the preliminary stage in which data is analyzed with the goal of finding the author's purpose. Secondary coding consists of establishing coding frames to organize recurring themes, repetitive words, and instances in which Montessori guides used forcefulness of tone. Lastly, higher-order themes are categorized into meaningful units that represent answers to the proposed research question. Higher-order themes are the basis for the results. In this research specifically, higher-order themes are the content for each of the five tenets of socioemotional development explored.

Results and Discussion

The primary purpose of the research question was to investigate ways in which Montessori schools intentionally implement the five tenets of socioemotional development (i.e., autonomy, conflict reconciliation, leadership, diversity, empathy) into curriculum to foster socioemotional development. Montessori guide interview data allowed researchers to draw conclusions about the ways Montessori methods place socioemotional development at the forefront of their mission. Following an analysis of socioemotional development over that of academic achievement, the following sections seek to provide examples of ways in which Montessori guides intentionally foster socioemotional development through a series of practices. Autonomy and leadership are primary themes that emerged throughout Montessori guide interview data. Conflict reconciliation is analyzed in the context of autonomy because students are given the tools to reconcile conflict peacefully then given the freedom to practice those skills independently. Diversity and empathy are analyzed in the context of leadership in that volunteerism is an

important component of leadership, diversity, and empathy whereas leadership development is a component of both leadership and empathy.

"Teaching to the Whole Child:" Socioemotional Development over Academic Achievement

One overarching, provocative theme that continually emerged from Montessori guide interview data was prioritizing socioemotional development over academic achievement. Emotional intelligence has been defined by social scientists as stress management, empathy-exhibition, self-awareness, impulse control, and independence, whereas social intelligence is defined as the ability of identifying with and understanding the mental state of others (Khodadady&Hezareh, 2016). Montessori guide interview data illuminated the importance of teaching to the whole child to set students up for success in engaging in intra-personal and interpersonal communication beyond the Montessori classroom. The following quotation from interview data exemplifies Montessori attitudes toward fostering socioemotional intelligence over academic achievement:

> *I want to teach to the whole child. I am not concerned about creating a mathematician. Instead, I am concerned with creating a free, open creative mind that can believe in their dreams and believe they can do whatever they want to do.*

According to the same Montessori guide, if a student is not in the right emotional mindset, they are not ready to advance academically. The guide emphasized putting the child first and academics second by working individually with students who are not in the right emotional mindset by taking time to address the issue that is preventing the child from devoting the attention needed to navigate the classroom and curriculum successfully. Suzanne, a Montessori guide at the homeschool Montessori program, quoted an example of the power of placing socioemotional development above academic achievement leading to eventual success in academics:

> *One girl last year came from the public-school system who didn't meet [benchmarks] in any category. She came here and focus was shifted toward breaking the mindset of the public school and busting her loose of that label of special education through team building and creating a safe environment… All pressure was taken off and we were able to see her true capability. All we did was free her mind and she exceeded. How is a kid going to believe they're smart if they are constantly being told they can't do what the rest of the kids do?*

Austin, a Montessori guide teaching in the Midwest, explained the transformative value of prioritizing socioemotional development as "allowing them a safe space where they know it is okay to feel, grow, and just be. That is when they begin to succeed in all aspects of life."

"Autonomy is the Name of the Game:" Individualized Education Plans

When a student is offered autonomy, they become capable of developing naturally and independently from adults (Montessori, 1949). A defining characteristic of Montessori school pedagogy is its emphasis on autonomy in all aspects of the structure of the classroom, curriculum, and communication. However, with choice in the classroom comes risk (Flowerday, Schraw, & Stevens, 2004). In the Montessori classroom, students are encouraged to take initiative in deciding how and when they prefer to do homework, how to engage with peers, and when to take breaks. According to one guide, Austin,

> *Kids make choices all the time. They're not always great choices, but then you get lots of opportunities to come back and talk about them, model, and role play. How does this go down? What does it look like when you need to ask for help?*

In other words, Montessori guides strive to refrain from interfering in student choices, but when students make decisions that are not in their best interest or are harmful to others, guides work closely with students to prevent the same behavior from occurring in the future. For example, Montessori guides may take time in class to address what decision was chosen, the implications of said decision, and ways to remedy it.

One consistent theme that emerged from Montessori guide interview data was that of individualized education plans. While some Montessori guides mentioned allowing students to foster their own education, others mentioned the importance of understanding individual differences in education. This is where Ecological Systems Theory becomes important in emphasizing ways in which experiences in the smallest system (i.e., the microsystem) influences experiences in the largestsystem (i.e., the chronosystem) (Neal & Neal, 2013). The basis for individualized education plans is as follows:

> *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.*

Conversely, according to Montessori guide Katelyn, if a student is advanced in a particular skill, Montessori guides take time out of class to help them learn more if they desire. For example, if a student in fourth-grade reads at a sixth-grade level, Montessori guides work with that student to eventually reach a higher level of reading comprehension. "No two education plans are the same" in that Montessori guides meet students where they are at in terms of comprehension in different subjects. In regard to helping students reach a higher skill level, Suzanne said:

> *We definitely target their struggles, but we also target what they are exceeding in, too. Let's push what you excel in as well as targeting the things you aren't great at...Every single kid has an individualized education plan. It is individualized to where they are and no kid needs to feel different because they are doing something different than the rest.*

When asked how autonomy is fostered in the classroom, Austin, the Montessori guide who coined the heading phrase "autonomy is the name of the game," claimed:

> *The children can get their presentation and are free to work on other works if they choose. They can't choose not to do something, but they can choose what order they do their works in. When they receive a presentation, they can choose how to exemplify what they have learned. Am I going to write a story about this character? Am I going to create a panorama of a day in the life of this character?*

"Nothing Gets Looked Over:" Conflict as a Learning Opportunity

Conflict and disagreement were not discouraged in the Montessori classrooms observed. Rather than disciplining students for conflict, the Montessori guidesconsistently mentioned encouraging students to work the conflict out amongst one another without the help of an adult. In other words, autonomy wasintegrated into conflict

reconciliation such that students have a choice to make when conflict arises. If student-initiated efforts fail, the conflict worsens, and/or the situation is no longer safe, then a Montessori guide would interfere. However, the Montessori guidesemphasized bringing it to the attention of the entire classroom without revealing the identity of the student. By doing so, the conflict becomes a learning opportunity. Many Montessori classrooms have instructions within the classroom on how to manage conflict peacefully and respectfully. In Austin's classroom:

> *There are pink and blue pieces of paper. The pink pieces allow students to write something great about their fellow students. The blue ones are for when something could be better. The only rule for the blue pieces of paper is that we never name names. At the end of the week, we have a class meeting and go through the pieces of paper and we discuss all of it. It gives the kids a voice in the room and teaches them how they can change things.*

Situations in which conflicts arise are oftentimes deliberately created in the classroom to offer students the opportunity to practice working through conflict. For example, because supplies for exercises of practical life are limited, students are positioned to work together to decide who gets to use what supplies and when. "If there are only two spray bottles and four students want to wipe down the tables and shelves, we have an issue," said Austin, "There is supposed to be some conflict so they have to practice being good citizens of the classroom."

> Some conflicts need to be addressed more than others. Gregory, a Montessori guide in the Midwest, said:

> *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…Nothing gets looked over.*

Somewhat contradictory to allowing students full autonomy over conflict reconciliation, however, Suzanne articulated the effectiveness of bringing conflicts to the attention of the large group rather than allowing students to handle it alone. While students are equipped with the skill set necessary to handle conflicts amongst one another, they are strongly encouraged to inform guides of any conflict that arises allowing it to become a learning opportunity for the entire class:

> *Every single thing is worked through whether it's in math class or feeling things toward ourselves or other people, or comparing ourselves, or during recess when students become competitive…The more you talk about the issues and the conflict, it helps to realize it isn't bad. When conflict comes up, it makes them closer and they can work through it.*

> Although it may be inconvenient for discussion about conflicts to interfere with designated class time, the Montessori guides believed it to be important that students learn the skillset of conflict reconciliation for their emotional wellbeing along with that of their peers. By equipping students with the skills necessary to diffuse conflict, we equip them with the skills to live harmoniously with other individuals of differing belief systems and worldviews, achieve academically, and develop self-control (Jones, 2007).

"I'm Not Going to Tell Anyone They Can't Change the World:" Leadership Development

A common theme that appeared in Montessori guide interview data was leadership development via assignment of different jobs and responsibilities throughout the school. Commonly referred to as Leaders-In-

Training by Gregory and Austin, examples of assigned jobs offered by Montessori guide interview data are: (a) crossing guards, (b) classroom greeters, (c) mentors to younger students, and (d) story time leaders. Similar to exercises of practical life that foster a sense of personal role within a community, leadership is fostered in fourth or fifth grade students to build the community within the school. Starting from a young age, according to Katelyn, a Montessori guide in a Midwestern charter school, students are encouraged to ponder what a Montessori guide might call their "cosmic task," or their purpose in the world. The introduction of a cosmic task encourages students to contemplate human life separate from consumption to appeal to a lifestyle of selflessness and social change (Chattin-McNichols, 2002).

When older students begin to realize the importance of their individual role within the community, they become motivated to lead and initiate projects that are conducive to their own learning interests. For example, students in older grades may choose to serve as mentors to younger students. "This," according to Katelyn,"is easily accessible through the multi-age classrooms in that when the Montessori guide is occupied with giving a presentation, older students assist younger students when necessary." She continued to explain that because older students have been in the Montessori school system for a substantially longer amount of time, they are in a position to set the best example for the younger students. Mentoring a younger student can range from tutoring, spending time with, or simply assisting them in classroom or school wide navigation. Regarding leadership, Stacy, a Midwestern Montessori guide stated, "We ask the fourth and fifth graders to challenge themselves more and take ownership. When fourth graders take third graders under their wing, leadership is naturally fostered."

According to Stacy, people oftentimes forget about what children are capable of, even at the young age of five. Intentionally implementing curriculum that establishes a sense of responsibility and leadership at a young age allows students the ability to orchestrate their own interests, hobbies, and values. The autonomy that comes with a Montessori education, according to Laura, challenges students to take ownership more:

> They aren't just being asked to turn in a worksheet, but we are asking them to foster their own education. We're here, but what they do with it is totally up to them. If they something in and we know they can do better, we will give it back to them and tell them to try again.

> "We are More the Same than Different:" Volunteering to Teach Diversity

A common theme among leadership, diversity, and empathy as aspects of socioemotional development in Montessori pedagogy is volunteering within the community or in leadership development programs in which students are assigned jobs within the school community. Based on the current population growth in the United States and the increasing influx of immigrants and refugees, it has been projected that by 2050,Whites will be a minority among minorities (Roberts, 2009). Thus, cultural competence in the form of understanding different cultures, application of knowledge of different cultures, value of knowledge of different cultures, and awareness of one's own culture (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009) is becoming increasingly important as the country diversifies. A hands-on, interactive example of teaching diversity given by Suzanne is as follows:

We are teaching different languages and have done American Sign Language classes because it is so cool to have the ability to connect with people who get looked over in society a lot. We have talked about going to dinners that are completely silent and only use sign language

Because of the lack of cultural, ethnic, and racial identity within the Montessori classrooms observed, volunteerism was a major theme that had emerged as an effective way to teach diversity. Not only is volunteerism multi-purpose in that it works to establish leadership skills in young students, but it also exposes students to different cultures, lifestyles, ages, abilities, etc. (Khasanzyanaova, 2017). The intersection of leadership, civic engagement, and autonomy allows students the freedom to create their own community projects. For example, a Montessori student in Austin's classroom organized a schoolwide effort to fund local veterans to engage in Project Freedom in which the veterans were able to fly to Washington D.C. and tour the monuments. On the flight back from Washington D.C., they received letters from people in the community and statethanking them for their service in the military. In order to raise the funds, the young Montessori student organized a "kiss-the-pig" event. During a "kiss-the-pig" event, a real (live)pig came to the school and the leader of the event chooses faculty and staff members they believe students would like to see kiss the pig. Students, faculty, staff, and community members then voted on who they wanted to see kiss the pig by putting money in the designated jar. "When you start to believe a kid can do what everyone else can, they start to believe it too and that is when beautiful things happen," Austin said after overseeing the project, "No task is too big or too small."

Diversity incorporated into curriculum is a focal point in a Montessori school in that much of the theories and practices were developed when Maria Montessori traveled to India in 1940 (Association Montessori Internationale, 2016). She was confined there by the British colonial government as an Italian and forced to remain in India until 1946. Not only was she confined in India for six years, but she also spent a substantial amount of her lifetime traveling from lands such as Scotland, London, Bombay, and Pakistan to train others on Montessori methods. As a result, Montessori pedagogy was influenced greatly by cultures different from that in which she grew up.

"Striving to Create an Atmosphere Where Empathy is Important:" Reliance on One Another in the Pursuit of Empathy

Leadership development and exercises of practical life work together synergistically to establish leadership and a sense of empathy in students. According to Gregory, students rely on one another for the school day to go smoothly. Thus, students in leadership positions reported feeling a deeper sense of motivation to adhere to the standards of their assigned job. By holding students accountable for one another within the learning community, they come to understand that they rely on one another. As a result of relying on one another, students demonstrated understanding the emotions they experience when someone disappoints them, compliments them, respects them, and goes out of their way to assist them. The sense of community motivates them to treat fellow students how they know they would like to be treated.

Austin claimed that making empathy necessary by creating classroom jobsis the best way to get empathy out of students. For instance:

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.

Gregory said about the empathy in his classroom:

I think with students taking responsibility of keeping the classroom clean, they'll get frustrated with someone if they trash the library. A student knows that if the library is trashed and they clean it up, another student will return the favor – maybe in a different form, but a favor nonetheless.

Not only does volunteerism within the community assist in teaching students about diversity and leadership, but it is also a large part of establishing empathy within Montessori students. Examplesof volunteerism Montessori guides recommended to students is making care packages consisting of clean socks, blankets, and non-perishable food for the homeless or making blankets and bringing them to the pet shelter. When students are involved in their communities, they become more aware of the feelings of others and are incredibly cognizant so not to harm others.

A closing remark from Austin claimed, "You can tell kids what the definition of empathy is and how to practice it, but until you make it necessary in the classroom, it doesn't become important to them." In other words, students are required to teach one another with respect, dignity, and fairness. These skills, however, are not inherent within each student. It takes a process of offering students a role model of how to treat fellow community members, teaching conflict resolution, and holding students to standards that require they act in accordance with Montessori values.

Conclusion: Conclusions and Implications

The goal of the current study was to investigate in what unique ways Montessori pedagogical philosophical practicesare utilized to intentionally foster socioemotional intelligence through curriculum and socialization among fellow students. The aim of these practices is to better position educators to understand which pedagogical practices and philosophies benefit students. Because the five systems of the Ecological Systems Theory do not operate in isolation, but rather are interconnected, Montessori guides who take an Ecological Systems Theory approach by intentionally integrating students' social domains into their teaching practices produce a well-rounded student (Walls, 2016). Montessori guide interview data collected via this study demonstrated that by focusing on the individual rather than assuming that individuals function uniformly, students are given the opportunity to foster their own education by having a variety of ways in which they are allowed to satisfy benchmarks.

By creating a microsystem that acknowledges and respects differences among individuals, rather than assuming that the exosystem will instill self-esteem, the Montessori guide who takes an Ecological Systems Theory perspective understands that, while the different environments in which students' function may be separate each from one another, they do not operate in isolation. This may position guides to better understand ways in which environments outside of the classroom influence a student's experience within the classroom, to create connections among students' systems (e.g., community volunteerism intersects the microsystem and mesosystem, volunteering

in food pantries allows students to make connections between their own family and economic structure of the United States), and establish skills in students that reach beyond the classroom. Because Ecological Systems Theory focuses on interactions among the individual and other systemic factors (Kamenopoulou, 2016), it acknowledges the differences that exist in varying levels from student to student. An Ecological Systems Theory perspective enables students to choose curriculum autonomously that fits their current unique individual developmental and physical needs. In her interview, Montessori guide Laura mentioned that while there are materials available to students with disabilities, "we don't limit those to just students with disabilities…Why make a difference between materials?" She continued to describe that students who are excelling or have fallen behind in a unit are free to use whatever materials they believe fit their needs, whether they are categorized as having disabilities or not.

Montessori schools have been gaining momentum recently, thus multifaceted research is important to fully understand the implications of a Montessori education relative to an education received from a traditional school. During early childhood, children are most susceptible to observational learning, or modeling the behaviors of others (Bandura, 1971). If we are to create a next generation of leaders who are empowered, responsible, autonomous, sensitive to others, and creative, Montessori guides demonstrate that Montessori practices and philosophies take intentional efforts in fostering those characteristics.

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