

Making Connections: A Personal and Professional Journey

Christine Lux

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1048-8794>

Montana State University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes an early childhood teacher educator's path to embracing the importance of building relationships and making connections with children and families. An early field experience as an undergraduate inspired the author to pursue a career as a Montessori preschool teacher where important lessons about listening to children and parents were learned. Throughout the author's career, important events confirmed values and beliefs that are now applied in the author's role as a parent and an early childhood teacher educator.

INTRODUCTION

One of my first field placement experiences as an undergraduate teacher candidate in New England solidified my passion for teaching and learning, leading me to early childhood teacher education. I was placed in a Montessori program. Beyond the fact that Maria Montessori was a pioneer in the field of medicine, I knew little else about her approach to early childhood learning. At the turn of the twentieth century, she created high-interest materials for children, based on her careful observations (Montessori, 1964). Beginning her career focus to work with children with developmental delays, she then applied her understanding of early learning of children ages 3 – 6 who were living in a housing project in Rome. Hallmarks of Montessori education persist today: intentionality within the classroom environment, learning through movement and action, and the notion that adult interaction contributes to positive child outcomes (Lillard, 2005).

Dating back to the 1930s, the Montessori school I was placed at as an undergraduate student operated from a refurbished brownstone that retained the elegance and charm of its original character. Inside, the learning environment was welcoming, inviting, and unlike anything I had ever seen. Space was structured to support children's development and in alignment with Montessori's belief of "the prepared environ-

ment” (Huxel, 2013). In the preschool classrooms, various learning materials were carefully placed on low wooden shelves, usually on trays for easy transport to a table or carpet for a lesson. Individual fabric mats, in the form of white dining placemats, designated a child’s workspace. A tower of pink blocks and colored pencils in glass jars to be used with tracing metal insets targeted sequencing and fine motor skill development. In the center of each child-sized table were vases filled with flowers that parents provided. Pale yellow walls and large windows invited natural light and served as a spot for children to wave good-bye to parents. The children were not the only ones who benefited from the intentional arrangement of the space; teachers exuded a calm, gentle kindness that left me wanting to experience more.

Fortunately, my first exposure to Montessori would not be my last. After completing my degree, I began my career teaching preschool in and around the suburbs of Boston, moving into program leadership and management positions but always yearning to be back in the Montessori environment that had inspired me during my college days. Five years after that first field placement, and with a degree and experience to guide me, I was hired as an assistant preschool teacher at the same Montessori school where I had been placed all those years ago. I remember feeling important and purposeful in the classroom, ready to respond to children with warmth and compassion. This mindset helped me understand my own values and philosophy of early childhood education. Even though my undergraduate training had prepared me to be a K-8 teacher, my first year as a teaching professional at that Montessori school propelled me toward a deep understanding of the nuances of the early childhood teaching profession. In the chapter that follows, I share three stories from my early years of teaching that continue to impact me. The stories are grounded in practicing mindfulness, meeting children and families where they are, and establishing trusting relationships that are at the heart and soul of a teacher.

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS: AARON’S STORY

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) recognizes that children benefit from responsive relationships with caregivers within and outside the home. This means that the stable and caring relationships teachers form with children can and do make a difference. In an earlier report, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) explained,

The quality and stability of a child’s human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in non-violent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself. (p. 1)

The report notes that relationships are all the more important when children experience stress. I learned this lesson when I worked with Aaron.

With his spiked hair, mischievous grin, and unrestrained energy, three-year-old Aaron bounced from place to place. The Montessori environment might prove challenging, I thought. When calm and order were expected, Aaron caused commotion. Other teachers found it difficult to connect with Aaron because he wouldn’t sit long enough for a lesson, and his incessant talk about things other than the work in front of him was bothersome. However, Aaron and I found plenty to chat about as we waited at the end of the

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