Teachers’ lives and work in a cultural and historical context. Reflections based on the professional life histories of eight Montessori teachers in Sweden.

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Abstract: This paper discusses the implications of using life history methodology in teacher research. By examining teachers’ life stories within a cultural and historical context the researcher and teacher, in collaboration, construct a life history. Biographical material based on the personal and professional aspects of being a teacher were collected from eight Montessori teachers in Sweden. Empirical data included interviews, diaries, written narratives and discussions. Theoretical and philosophical issues raised in conjunction with the biographies included counter-concepts such as traditional educational theory/critical reflection and continuity/change within the profession. Specific issues were raised in regard to students, parents, the work situation, etc. Valuable insights were gained concerning the changing roles of teachers in contemporary educational contexts. The voices and visions of teachers should thus be able to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of the teacher and by so doing lead to improvements within the profession as a whole.

Introduction

Within a framework of goal-directed educational theory, teachers’ own personal reflections in relation to their (private) lives and (professional) work may help us gain valuable insight into what it means to be a teacher in a specific cultural, social and historical context. Assuming that there are connections between teachers’ basic values and beliefs and their teaching practice it follows that teachers’ personal interpretations of educational theory will influence the ways in which they work in the classroom. In the present study data was collected from a group of female Montessori primary-school teachers in Sweden. Of special interest was to examine:

1. The underlying philosophical values individual teachers identify with.
   • Specific aspects of the philosophy of Montessori education which primarily attract teachers to this profession.

2. Ways in which ideas that have been consciously and individually constructed harmonise or come into conflict with traditional Montessorian educational theory.
   • The extent to which teachers’ conceptions of their professional role is related to their own personal values, beliefs and convictions.

3. If and how teachers adapt to existing and changing conditions within the overall educational establishment (i.e. within the light of current pedagogical development and research).
   • Teachers’ views regarding the role of Montessori education today as well as in the future.
The Montessori method is based on a set of philosophical and educational directives laid down by Maria Montessori (1870-1952). Her educational theories are based on a holistic understanding and interpretation of the developmental patterns of children and two fundamental principles are freedom and respect for the individual. Of interest to the present study is to examine ways in which Montessori teachers’ individual values have determined their choice of profession and subsequently how personal beliefs and convictions influence ways of thinking and working in the classroom.

Due to the historical and traditional dimensions involved it is important to ascertain how Montessori teachers relate to aspects such as continuity and change. For example, what are the consequences of the idea that the identity of a “true” Montessori teacher rests on the fundamental assumption that the pedagogy should be accepted as it is and that nothing should be changed? Are there Montessori teachers who think and act in other ways - and if so how do these differences (between teachers within the same teacher “culture”) affect their teaching practice and the overall outlook in regard to future educational development within Montessori education?

Of interest is to examine possible contrasts within the movement between dogmatic and critical thought, between orthodox belief contra societal influence and change. To discover how Montessori teachers today cope with an educational ideology whose fundamental principles and modes of practice in certain instances have remained relatively unchanged since the original writings of Maria Montessori, although the educational context in which Montessori teachers today find themselves has changed considerably. Is it reasonable to assume that each individual teacher over the years gradually develops her/his own personal philosophy of education? If so, it is evidently the teacher’s life and personal values that have to be taken into consideration, examined and understood. On the road towards self-formation (or self-transformation), introspection, awareness, philosophical insight and critical reflection are all essential attributes.

Ways in which teachers in general relate to aspects such as continuity and change and how it subsequently influences their teaching practice should be of relevance and concern to all involved in teaching and educational processes. Tendencies towards continuity or change in education will thus greatly depend on the extent to which teachers are able to critically reflect about how they think and what they do. In the present context, Montessori educational theory is the common frame of reference. Similarities and differences should become more apparent when individual values, beliefs and convictions are examined and confronted within a context of commonly shared educational directives.

The first Montessori pre-schools were started in Sweden in the 1920’s. As they presented an alternative to regular education, Montessori pre-schools were for many years (even decades) privately administered. Recent years however, have seen an increased general interest and also integration of Montessori classes into regular schools. Montessori education has hereby become available to a greater number of students with varied backgrounds and life situations. Although still predominant on the primary level, Montessori classes on the elementary and secondary levels are also on the increase. The goals and normative guidelines of the current National Curriculum in many ways comply with Montessorian educational philosophy.

There are currently private as well as public Montessori schools in Sweden. The Montessori teachers at work in these classrooms have different Montessori teacher training backgrounds and all presumably work in accordance with traditional Montessori educational theory in an era that is marked by constant change. In order to cope with contrasts such as this, will (or do) Montessori teachers feel the need to succumb to strategies such as assimilation, collaboration, isolation or defence - both internally (i.e. within their own teacher culture) as well as externally (i.e. in
relation to the norms of regular education)? This, I believe, presents a potentially complex and interesting area of study for those to whom Montessori education is of particular relevance.

This study concentrates on the ways in which a group of Montessori teachers themselves experience and describe their life and work situations in Sweden today. Although describing something personal and specific, the study’s many personal and professional insights into teaching I believe will also be of relevance and interest to educators and education in general.

**Theoretical considerations and previous research**

In a study concerning the lives and work of teachers there are many different aspects to take into consideration, aspects that together constitute essential parts of a significant whole. In the present study these aspects are brought to light and examined through the application of life stories and life histories. This paper draws briefly on theories by Goodson (life stories and life histories), Hargreaves (teacher cultures), Huberman (career cycles), Barnes (teachers’ interpretive frames), Tripp (critical incidents in teaching) and Kelchtermans (the subjective educational theory). Questions of general relevance to the study are raised in conjunction with these.

Goodson (1993) contends that in relation to teachers’ life stories (which are personal conceptions and views of individual lives) it is also necessary to understand each individual in relation to a wider (historical, cultural) context. He suggests that history data can be collected at a number of levels: the teacher’s own personal account of his/her life experiences and background; teachers’ life styles, life cycles and career stages; critical incidents in the teachers’ lives and work, and being able to see the individual in relation to the history of his/her time. Based on Goodson’s basic distinctions, the ways in which life stories and life histories relate to each other in the present study can be illustrated by the following diagrams:

*Frame 1.* Diagram illustrating how the life story individualises and personalises.

In the present study empirical data collected at the personal and professional levels together constitute the teacher’s *life story* (i.e. material based on teacher diaries, in-depth interviews and reflective narratives). By interpreting the life story in relation to a relevant cultural and historical
context the researcher and teacher in collaboration (i.e. through discussion and dialogue) construct a life history.

Frame 2. Diagram illustrating how the life history contextualises and politicises.

Hargreaves (1992, 1996) identifies four broad forms of teacher cultures: individualism, balkanisation, collaboration and contrived collegiality. When teacher individualism is based more on habitual ways of working than on collegial sharing and collaboration it cannot be said to benefit educational change. Hargreaves points to the strengths and advantages of what he calls teachers’ elective (i.e. self-chosen, preferred) individualism, comprising components such as care, individuality and solitude. He suggests that “vibrant teacher cultures should be able to avoid the professional limitations of teacher individualism, while embracing the creative potentials of teacher individuality” (1996, p. 183). Balkanisation refers to a tendency among teachers to form separate and sometimes competing groups within a school, attaching loyalty and identifying with particular groups of colleagues. The existence of such groups in a school, writes Hargreaves, “reflects and reinforces very different group outlooks on learning, teaching styles, discipline and curriculum” (1992, p. 223). Collaborative culture is most evident in elementary and primary schools where teachers are already used to working together. Hargreaves maintains that the mandated curriculum puts a constraint on the development of collaborative teacher cultures. “External implementation is given priority over internal development” (Ibid. p. 228). Contrived collegiality includes formal and specific procedures leading to initiatives such as peer coaching, mentor teaching and training programmes. Of significance is the fact that contrived collegiality “is also meant to assist the successful implementation of new approaches and techniques from outside (…) It can act as an insurance against collective complacency” (Ibid. p. 230). Questions raised in the present study and related to the forms of teacher cultures described by Hargreaves are as follows: What kinds of teachers are attracted to Montessori and for what reasons? Is there scope for independence, innovation and new ideas within the profession? Do Montessori teachers collaborate with each other in regard to pedagogical issues?

Huberman (1992) asks the question: “Are there discernible ‘phases’ or ‘stages’ in the teaching career?” and defines a series of successive themes of the teachers’ career cycle, relating their
significance to the number of years within the teaching profession. These themes are: survival, discovery, stabilisation, experimentation/activism, self-doubts, serenity, conservatism and disengagement. One of the strongest assumptions reached by Huberman is that “the best scenario for satisfactory career development is through a ‘craft model’” (p. 136). “Somewhere in the cycle they [the teachers] may reach out to peers or even to professional trainers, but they will typically transform those inputs into a more private, personally congenial form” (Ibid.). In regard to the present study the following question is of interest: Is there a discernible pattern of professional development among Montessori teachers related to the number of years in the profession?

Barnes (1992) discusses the underlying assumptions involved in what he calls teachers’ interpretive frames. These frames encompass the underlying assumptions that influence teachers’ actions in the classroom and help them to understand and to organise the complex situations they are a part of. Barnes stresses the fact that teachers’ frames and their teaching strategies are not solely commitments to a personal philosophy or objective conditions at work. These commitments have most likely also been modified by the experience of teaching in particular schools (p. 18). The conclusion drawn by Barnes is that neither commitment nor experience can exist separately “and the two together create the frames that shape a teacher’s strategies. Frames are created ‘from inside outwards’ as much as ‘from outside inwards’” (Ibid.). In regard to the present study the following question becomes relevant: To what extent are the interpretive frames of Montessori teachers a combination of shared “institutional imperatives” and personal beliefs and ideas derived from experience?

Critical incidents are often turning points in people’s lives, “points at which people sought new directions, changed their jobs or opinions, changed their social, personal or material circumstances, and so on” (Tripp, 1993, p. 105). Tripp distinguishes between features that are uniquely singular (consciously and individually constructed) and features that have been taken from others (embedded in adopted ideas and practices). He concludes that “in examining our personal and professional histories for explanations of our teaching we must consider the way in which what we do and what we have become is at least partly determined by the social and material conditions of our professional practice” (Ibid. p. 107). This raises the following question of relevance to the present study: What can be regarded as “critical incidents” in the lives and work of Montessori teachers?

In coming to terms with the question: “Can one understand teachers’ professional development by reconstructing their career stories?” Kelchtermans (1993) found that “teachers ‘professional development’ understood as a learning process throughout their career experiences, culminates in a personal interpretative framework, encompassing two major fields: a conception about themselves as a teacher and a system of knowledge and beliefs concerning ‘teaching’ as a professional activity” (p. 447). Within a “personal interpretive framework” Kelchtermans introduces the concepts of “the personal self” (i.e. ways in which teachers conceive of themselves as teachers) and “the subjective educational theory” (i.e. the teacher’s ‘personal teaching style’). Their self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perceptions and future perspectives determine ways in which teachers develop a “personal meaning system” and a “personal teaching style”. Kelchtermans findings “support the idea that teachers are ‘craftsmen’ rather than ‘professionals’ … Teachers subjective educational theory is developed mainly by reflection on classroom practices” (p. 452). Of interest to the present study is the question: in what ways do Montessori teachers ground subjective educational theories (i.e. how does reflective practice relate to educational theory)?
In view of the theories discussed above it is important to be able to see each teacher’s life and work in a relevant (social, historical, cultural) context. That is, to understand the teaching profession as being constantly shaped and influenced by cultural as well as individual forces, by collaborative groups as well as by reflective individuals.

Description of the study

Eight female Montessori primary school teachers participated in the study. Their ages range from between thirty to sixty years old. Their professional experience ranges from beginner teachers to experienced teachers with twenty-five years teaching practice. Four of the participants teach in private schools and four in regular schools. Geographically the schools are located in the southern parts of Sweden and are situated in rural, suburban as well as urban areas.

At the outset the teachers were required to write a diary, based on one working week in school. A semi-structured interview was then conducted with each teacher. The interview questions were based on personal and professional aspects of being a teacher. The teachers were also asked follow-up questions related to their diaries. This data constituted the teacher’s “life story”. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and sent to the teachers for verification. Prior to our second (and final) meeting the teachers were given three questions to answer in writing, related to their teaching careers.

The final meeting took the form of an open discussion/dialogue aimed at a deeper interpretation and understanding of the data at hand. These discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. In view of the data already collected and the nature of the final discussion, each teacher’s life story could now be expanded upon and understood within a broader and relevant context, i.e. as a professional life history.

In addition to the large amount of written data collected from the teachers, a total average of between 5 to 6 hours per individual was used for the interviews and discussions.

Life history methodology in collaborative research

Collaborative contextual analysis, in the sense implied by Goodson, facilitates a shift from life stories to life histories, from simple narrative to interpretation. Due to the personal nature of collaborative research through life histories several problematical ethical issues can be raised. Within life history research the small number of participants involved as well as the personal nature of the narratives may pose problems in regard to anonymity. Based as they are on personal incidents and occurrences, life stories may allow for easy identification of individual teachers. In the present context data concerning the ethos of teaching as a whole has been presented in general terms alongside singular accounts of personal significance to individual teachers. The overall aim has been to present the “story” of each specific teacher as authentically as possible.

Cortazzi (1993) raises the following problematic issues to be considered in collaborative research: the critical relationship between the researcher and the teacher, the person the researcher is and the need for the researcher to know about the social norms in which narratives are formed. The fact that I, as researcher, am at the same time also a Montessori teacher, can ease as well as complicate the situation. It may be easier for me to collaborate with the teachers when discussing issues of common interest; however I have to be careful of not reading my own interpretations into what they are saying. Concepts like freedom, discipline and independence are frequently used to describe the Montessori method of education. It would be a mistake to assume that all teachers using these concepts mean the same by them. In an interview situation one could
imagine that it would be relatively easy to succumb to the error of taking such concepts for granted. Based on my teaching experience and our common frame of reference, I hope to be able to inspire the teachers to partake of open and serious discussion in regard to how situations in their lives and work have influenced as well as formed their current outlook on educational issues.

Lindblad & Gerner (1996) identify three central problems when using the life history approach as a research method. The first is that, concentrating only on the ‘teacher’s voice’, one is apt to exclude many other ‘voices’ that might have raised new questions or given other perspectives to the teacher’s world, for example the opinions of pupils, parents or school administrators. Another problem concerns overall ethical requirements. Should certain incidents be included or excluded in texts of this nature, due to the fact that others will read them? What is the role of the teacher when collaborative texts are presented? What should one do to prevent stored personal texts from falling into the wrong hands? What happens if the collaboration between the researcher and the teacher breaks down? The most serious problem (according to Arfwedson & Gerner) concerns the risk that failing to incorporate singular experiences and the attempt to “localise” (contextualise) them in a life story, one could end up simply confirming the status quo. The risk of confirming the status quo through research that can become too “one-sided” or limited in scope, stresses the importance of being able to constantly relate the individual’s personal experiences to general as well as specific societal influences. This might prove difficult to do, as one will never be able to take every relevant aspect into consideration. I believe however that personal statements from teachers who have presented authentic accounts of their personal and professional lives will, by so doing, have contributed something of value and interest to those concerned with the “voices” of teachers and subsequently with educational issues in general.

Each life history has significance in its own right: as a personal statement, and (as Goodson describes it) as a “story within a context”. Life histories are important because if we look only at life stories we miss the significance of context. Narratives reveal, as well as help, construct experiences. In this way collaborative research enhances subject and theory advancement due to the fact that the views of the participants are considered through critical comments, interpretations and in-depth analysis. The extent to which barriers may be crossed will depend to a great extent on specific life experiences and the personalities of the teachers as well as an intentional, creative and co-operative commitment between the researcher and the participant.

**Results and implications**

The three aims of the study were to examine:

- specific aspects of the philosophy of Montessori education which primarily attract teachers to this profession;
- the extent to which teachers’ conceptions of their professional role is related to their own personal values, beliefs and convictions;
- teachers’ views regarding the role of Montessori education today as well as in the future.

These aims have had to be examined and understood in relation to a wider context, that is, in relation to the life and work of the individual teacher. In the present context personal and professional aspects have been discussed in relation to teacher cultures, teachers’ career cycles, teachers’ interpretive frames, critical incidents and the subjective educational theory. These will
be presented here briefly within the framework of three main categories: personal, professional and future implications.

Personal implications

The question: “Why did you choose to become a Montessori teacher?” is of central importance to the study. In asking for specific aspects of the philosophy of Montessori education which primarily attract teachers to this profession the aim is to come closer to an understanding of the underlying philosophical values individual teacher’s identify with. Answers to this and other questions with philosophical implications should help make evident the ethical foundation of each individual teacher’s subjective educational theory, which allows an integration of creativity styles (based on personal attitudes, beliefs and convictions) with pedagogical practice.

In the present study two of the teachers were introduced to the Montessori method by their sisters (one was working in a Montessori pre-school, the other saw an ad in the paper for a Montessori teacher and encouraged her sister to apply). The others were introduced to Montessori philosophy through courses or teacher training, the philosophical values of which seemingly corresponded to personal ideals and beliefs. This is reflected in comments such as: “I was able to understand and identify with the intentions and expectations of the teacher”, “I knew which vision I wanted to see become reality”, “The children were treated in a way I also believed they should be treated”, “… there the feeling was right. This is the way I want to work - this is the way it should be”. All the teachers in this study had some prior knowledge of the Montessori method of education.

Ideas or theories within Montessori education which have had the greatest personal impact on these teachers include concepts such as “the global/holistic perspective”, “freedom”, “respect for each individual”, “life-long learning”, “responsibility”, “the environment which encourages independence” and “the enthusiasm of the teacher”. The teachers’ ways of expressing themselves in relation to the Montessori method sometimes had religious undertones, e.g. in statements such as ”spiritual development” and ”I believe in Montessori”.

Professional implications

The Montessori teachers in this study all worked in teams, comprising those who had Montessori teacher training, were studying to become a Montessori teacher or who didn’t have any Montessori teacher training at all. This resulted in different kinds of problems. There were often conflicts of interests and normative discrepancies in relation to working with the students. Differences most of these teachers related to the fact that they did not share the same basic understanding (educational philosophy). This naturally resulted in unsatisfactory working situations that seemed difficult to come to terms with or to solve adequately. Most of these conflicts occurred in the relationships between Montessori teachers and leisure pedagogues. On the whole, the Montessori teachers in this study had very little contact with Montessori teachers from other schools and areas, apart from sporadic study visits. The impression given is that Montessori teachers are isolated from one another even within the “teacher group” or culture (e.g. from the opportunity of partaking of and learning from each other’s experiences). Collegial sharing and collaboration between Montessori teachers (from different schools and in different areas) it seems are not common. Some of the teachers felt that there was competition between groups of Montessori teachers with different teacher training backgrounds. There was also a
feeling that different schools competed with one another in regard to student intake. In cases where Montessori classes have been incorporated into the ordinary school, some kind of “rejection” from the other teachers has often been experienced, at least in the beginning (a period that in some cases may last a few years), resulting in a negative form of balkanisation and strained working conditions.

Career cycles were discussed in relation to Huberman’s themes. All the teachers had passed through the ‘survival’ and ‘discovery’ stage, some were currently in the ‘stabilisation’ stage and all were positive to ‘experimentation’. Teachers who had worked for twenty years or more said they hoped that they were heading towards ‘serenity’ in later life. None adhered to ‘conservatism’ and ‘disengagement’, although they could understand and discuss it in relation to others. All of the teachers said that they at some point in their careers had had ‘self-doubts’. These however took different forms. Self-doubt in one sense resulted in a positive change of attitude, e.g. through experimentation or attending a competence-developing course. Self-doubt in another sense resulted in a change of workplace (school) in an attempt to improve one’s professional life situation. An example of this would be the teacher who, after working 20 years as an ordinary teacher, started working as a Montessori teacher. The last years of discontent and self-doubt led her to go a Montessori teacher-training course, which, she said, changed her life. She resigned from her old position, saying she felt relieved and “free as a bird”. The situations mentioned here in regard to career cycles can also be regarded as critical incidents as they inevitably lead to significant changes in one’s work situation and life.

Another interesting aspect related to career stages is how Montessori teachers over the years re/view their role in regard to Montessori educational theory. Six of the eight teachers in this study (when asked) mentioned aspects that they could disagree with, related to Montessori pedagogy. These however were few and related mainly to the religious aspect, fundamentalist teachers and teacher training and differing approaches to the child. One of the teachers said that she found nothing she could disagree with, although she had worked as a Montessori teacher for 25 years. She stated that she “will absolutely not change” her own Montessorian attitude to the child and to teaching. The second teacher could find nothing to disagree with “the way I interpret it”. Many of the teachers related Montessori education to the present, past and future, speaking in terms of fundamental concepts that would always be valid, regardless of time or era.

There was some confusion as to the interpretation of some of Montessori’s original ideas. One teacher refers to “the idea of not being encouraged to touch the children. This I don’t take to be an absolute requirement. When Montessori was alive I can imagine how things were, but today the situation is different. When I read about it I thought: no, I don’t believe it. Perhaps clapping a child on the head can be a humiliating experience. Was this perhaps what she meant? I don’t know”. Another teacher is clearer on this point. She says that strictly speaking she doesn’t believe in consoling children, “but I do it because it’s the accepted discourse. I believe one can give the child attention in other ways. If one consoles, one consoles a victim”. When asked to explain her own understanding of some central concepts in Montessori education one of the teacher’s replied: “What a difficult question! I haven’t read Montessori’s books for a long time!” This stresses the implication of there being “right” answers (i.e. expected ways of thinking and acting) in relation to Montessori theory and practice.

Critical incidents in the lives and work of these teachers include situations such as how they first came into contact with Montessori education and what it was that made them decide to become “Montessori” teachers. Often critical friends and family members are involved in the changes that occur in life. Critical situations, e.g. personal crises, are also often turning points related to change. Critical choices (in this case, choosing to be a Montessori teacher) seem to
have been influenced by significant circumstances in life, coupled with individual normative values and convictions. Of current critical significance to the majority of the teachers in this study is an on-going problematic relationship with parents. Only two of the teachers speak positively of parental influence. In negative terms, the parents are described as being a "hindrance", one doesn’t “feel like getting involved with them”. Many of these teachers thus experience a constant strain on their professional roles due to time-consuming and problematic parents. This can have serious consequences, as the national curriculum advocates a considerable amount of increased influence for parents in today’s schools. The majority of these teachers however believe that parents choose Montessori education for their children due to an evident awareness and acceptance of specific pedagogical principles.¹

These teachers’ interpretive frames can be described as constituting institutional imperatives as well as ideas derived from experience, all of which has helped form their personal and professional identities through time. Although teachers may share the same institutional imperatives (e.g. Montessori educational theory) their interpretations of current working conditions differ, as do their individual life experiences.

A good teacher was characterised as being “encouraging, patient, calm”, “prepared but still flexible”. “One has to like people, like children. One has to be very clear in one’s professional role and be on good terms with oneself. The important thing is to be able to maintain a good working climate so that the children feel comfortable and at ease”.

Satisfaction with their working conditions was dependent on many things, although it mainly had to do with their relations to the children. All the teachers conveyed genuine and emotional feelings when speaking of the children. One teacher said: “I get on well with my colleagues, we have the same intentions… but the love one gets from the children is probably the best of all. This I think one can determine intuitively. It’s a feeling of trust and love”. Leadership and being able to take initiative was also an important factor. “At our school we are given a lot of freedom. There is a feeling of confidence between us and the head-teacher”. Satisfaction was also connected to feelings of self-esteem. “It feels good when I feel that I am given appreciation for something, from the children or the parents”.

Negative reactions from parents were described as being one aspect leading to dissatisfaction with the working situation. “Parents often don’t have the same expectations regarding their children as we have, sometimes the difference is very big, at other times small”. One teacher admits that she is dissatisfied with her ability to handle parents, “I don’t feel like getting involved with them, I keep on hoping for the best, but I’ll probably keep a low profile”. There were also thoughts concerning lack of time and the increasing workload for teachers. “Sometimes one wonders how many years one can hold out before one runs out of energy”. One of the teachers mentions the transition from lower primary (Montessori) to upper primary (regular) education as something she is dissatisfied with. She says: “There’s a big difference. Now there are younger teachers with other ways of working. But prior to this there were older, more traditional, teachers. So it was a shock for the children to come to these classrooms”. Another teacher describes her transition from the public to the private sector: “In the beginning when I worked for municipalities and parent associations I felt that everything was going well. When I became independent I knew that I was better than ever. But it is impossible to ‘stick your chin out’ in our country! One becomes the centre of suspicion. Others think that perhaps our motive for starting a school is to be able to make a profit? Impossible in Sweden today! We are a normal foundation,

¹ This coincides to a great extent with the results of a previous study (Malm, 1994).
not a company. This feeling of ‘suspicion’ has limited my work at school. It is difficult to work in such a climate”. When asked what the consequences have been she replied: “It has influenced me a lot. It has influenced me so much that I decided to give up being principal of the school. Now I work behind the lines; I don’t have that much contact anymore, with parents or the press. I did not like the scepticism that was shown me. Why are you principal at your own school? That is why I now work as a teacher instead. (This criticism) was mostly scepticism shown me from parents with problematic children”. Another aspect, also from a teacher at a private school, was the feeling of constant restriction related to a limited economy. She felt that, being a private school, “one is always considered with scepticism”.

A good day at school was described as being one where “the atmosphere is right. When I feel that I’ve contributed something towards their development”. “When the children are happy; and when one of the children are sad, that the other children are supportive”. “When the children are all occupied and there are few conflicts. A day without meetings and problematic parents. When I can go home feeling that all the children have had a good, positive and instructive day”.

Attitudes to the Montessori materials were, in principle, that they were a fantastic aid to learning. Comparisons were often made to the teachers’ own schooling: “Imagine if I had been able to work with the mathematical materials when I went to school. Then I would have been better at constructing abstract thought. To be able to work concretely in order to understand the connections. This fascinates me now, as an adult”. One teacher said that her appreciation of the materials had increased with experience. One teacher admitted that she didn’t use the materials very much - “to some extent but not completely”. In her case the materials were used as a complement to books and other material chosen or produced by the teacher. “A room full of materials but where there is no freedom or respect is not worth anything”. On the whole, the teachers in this study did not seem to use the materials as extensively as one would imagine; the material was used mostly in conjunction with mathematics.

Two common criticisms against the Montessori method of education are that play is restricted (due to a concentration mainly on “cognitive” pursuits) and that children in Montessori classes do not learn to think critically (due to the “rigid” structure of the materials and the “passive” role of the teacher). None of the teachers in the study agreed with these assertions.

The most significant differences between Montessori and compulsory education were said to be in regard to the concepts of individuality and freedom, the prepared environment and the role of the teacher. One teacher comments on the fact that “there are many differences, but I never say that to ordinary teachers who adhere to the national curriculum. Then we’re equal. Then one has to emphasise our similarities. But even today Montessori goes a step further, because we are committed to the generations who come after us”. Another teacher describes the biggest difference being that, as a Montessori teacher, she is given the opportunity of “taking a step back and being able to observe the children in learning situations. I can learn so much by observing how a child learns and thinks”.

Teachers’ professional roles are intimately connected to their own personal values, beliefs and convictions. Conceptions of oneself as a teacher coupled by the concept of teaching as a professional activity results in "the subjective educational theory"(i.e. the teacher’s personal teaching style). This is determined by all the aspects already discussed and forms an integral part of the teacher’s personality.

An interesting “deviation” related to the concept of professional identity came from one of the teachers who stated: “We have spoken about going into the traditional school and working there for a while and not calling it ‘Montessori’ even though it would be. I think the municipality and
the head-teachers have been commissioned to change ways of working in high school, towards a more liberal way like that within Montessori. And if this change happens for the better it makes no difference to me whether it’s called ‘Montessori’ or something else. It’ll benefit the children anyway. It makes no difference if they call it ‘Montessori’ or anything else. I don’t care if the name ‘Montessori’ disappears. It’s for the children, it’s for their sake”. For the remainder of the teachers in the study, being able to call oneself a “Montessori” teacher and to represent “Montessori” education seemed to be an essential factor related to their professional identity.

Future implications

When asked what their thoughts were in regard to Montessori education in the future, the teachers were all very positive. In different ways they were also optimistic in relation to their own teaching careers. Diverse concerns however were also expressed, related to teacher training and fundamentalist teachers. I have chosen here to present the teachers’ answers to the question about the future in their entirety:

Frame 3. What are your thoughts on the future development of Montessori education and your own role in it?

<p>| Angela | That depends. It has to do with teacher training. I will absolutely not change my own Montessorian attitude to the child or to teaching. I won’t. I feel that traditional teachers tend to do so if the imperatives come from teacher education or from teacher training colleges. I believe that the traditional school will become more “Montessorian” in the future. I am happier today than I was some years ago. I think I have gained a lot of experience. I have become better. More skilled. |
| Beatrice | I think it is immense, there are no boundaries. Don’t follow me - follow the child. Every period in time has it’s own specific Montessori education. Montessori schools differ depending on the period in which they exist, although fundamental principles remain the same. I think there are groups of Montessori teachers who believe that they represent ‘true’ Montessori education; it is almost like a dogma. They believe that what they do is right. Holding on to the past, whatever it may be, must imply that it is one’s own beliefs and convictions one is holding on to. Then things aren’t half as exciting as it was when Montessori discovered the child! The child forms his/her own future. The process doesn’t start before the child is ready for it. So I believe in Montessori. For all times. |
| Connie | When I worked as a trainee no one knew what Montessori education was. I am certain that Montessori education will keep on developing. I also think that there will be more Montessori High Schools. We’re thinking about it, at our school. (In the future) I might consider working with music in some other form. This is where I have a lot to contribute, where I experience joy. But I don’t think I’d be able to work where there was no Montessori. That would feel like a burden. There are so many other things that are part of one’s job, so many problems to solve. Knowing what one wants and going in the same direction makes it easier. |</p>
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<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>I really believe in the future development of Montessori education. Since I started it hasn’t stopped developing. Teacher training is a vital part, and how teacher training is formed. I’m very positive to the further development of Montessori education. I’ll work a few more years, but perhaps not till I’m 65. In any case not in a school, perhaps something else that has to do with Montessori. Or parent education of some kind. Sharing thoughts on how to treat children from the time they are small and having co-operative parents I believe is very important. Everyone knows how important the early years are. Right now I hope to be able to follow the development of the children at our school some years more.</td>
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<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>I believe that it has a future. Absolutely. It is very important to notice what is happening in the world, that people become aware and understand that you have to be complete as a person and adult in order to shape this kind of world. You have to see to the whole person. (In the future) I think that Montessori’s pedagogical base will remain. The holistic viewpoint. One has to create an understanding, help the child to become a whole person. Personally I feel that I am not yet finished with Montessori. Even though I feel that I am headed in another direction in the future I feel that I am not finished. I have just started developing my role as a Montessori teacher. I need to develop much further. I have developed as a person, in my attitude to life. It is a philosophy one partakes of, which to me has become clearer.</td>
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<td>Fiona</td>
<td>It is certainly progressing. More now than ever before. When you read the national curriculum you almost think that it is Montessori education they want. It is becoming more and more similar, but I think Montessori education will persist. It has been around so long, it can be around a while longer. As long as there are Montessori teachers who believe in it. Many are studying to become Montessori teachers. Now things have changed, but before the attitude was that Montessori was out of date, not worth having. Although Montessori is ‘old’ it is very fundamental and should be able to hold through time. Now one has started to acknowledge it more and more, that it is a good pedagogy. I get irritated sometimes by catalogues advocating ‘new’ methods and ‘new’ learning materials, when the ideas have been taken directly from Montessori. It makes me angry. They should instead acknowledge Montessori education. I live for the present and have no direct plans for change. I’ll probably still be at the same school in 20 years time! I don’t know. I’m satisfied with the way things are now. But I’m that kind of person. I don’t like change. I prefer things the way they are.</td>
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<td>Gwen</td>
<td>We have spoken about going into the traditional school and working there for a while. And not calling it Montessori even though it would be. Because I believe in the way we work. I think the municipality and the head teachers have been commissioned to change ways of working in high school. And even at the primary and elementary levels, towards a more liberal way of working like that within Montessori. And if this change happens for the better, it makes no difference to me whether it’s called Montessori or something else. It’ll benefit the children anyway. It makes no difference if they call it Montessori or anything else. I don’t care if the name ‘Montessori’ disappears. It’s the children…it’s for their sake. One has to give them a good education.</td>
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<td>Harriet</td>
<td>I believe Montessori education has a positive future. Most of all because of the holistic viewpoint which Maria Montessori expressed both intellectually and practically. I have experienced many national curricula. The pedagogical winds can change. But Montessori has always had a holistic view and I feel certain that it will survive and that we will still have it in the future. But I’m not sure that the national curriculum will still be the same in 10 years time. By then it can have changed, Montessori will have to develop, depending on those who work with it. Will we work only to maintain – or will we be creative enough to see the apparent possibilities that exist for development? Personally I hope to have more time for competence development. I also think it will become more important to function as a ‘counsellor’ to children in regard to ethical and moral questions related to information and the internet. It will be crucial to be able to take a stand point and be critical.</td>
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**Concluding comments**

The value of using life histories in teacher research lies in the fact that each teacher can be presented in the light of his/her own personal attributes and unique qualities. These in turn can be coupled to goal-directed educational theory (in this instance Montessori educational theory) and,
in order to be understood in contemporary terms, be examined within relevant historical and cultural contexts.

In this study, choosing to become a Montessori teacher has been influenced by significant circumstances in life, aligned with individual normative values and convictions. Aspects of Montessori educational philosophy that seem to have attracted these teachers to the profession have to do with the approach to the child, the learning environment and the role of the teacher. These values and ideas have, over the years, been integrated into a personal teaching style, a subjective educational theory. Although the frame of reference is the same (i.e. Montessori educational theory) interpretations and subsequently practice differs. The Montessori teachers in this study represent a teacher culture that does not seem prone towards collegial collaboration. Relational problems are experienced in regard to other colleagues in work teams (especially with those who do not have Montessori education) although there are also problems of co-operation among the Montessori teachers themselves and even competition between different schools. Problems are also evident between Montessori classes and compulsory school classes when these co-exist within the same school building. The teachers find it difficult to think of things they disagree with, within Montessori education, although the majority speak out against fundamentalist teachers who ‘abide by the book’ and are also critical of the various forms of teacher training for Montessori teachers. They all seem to have a genuine interest for children; a good day and work satisfaction seems intricately bound to the positive relationships the teacher’s experience together with the students. Dissatisfaction is often bound to external causes and factors, such as a limited economy, problematic relations with parents, negative attitudes from municipalities, difficulties in relationships between teachers and students in compulsory schools. Internally, difficulties can result from conflicts of meaning (even competition) between Montessori teachers with different teacher training. Lack of collaboration within the profession can also be considered a drawback to discussion and development. There is a tendency among some teachers to believe that there are “right” and “wrong” ways of doing things, in regard to the imperatives laid down in Montessori educational theory. This may result in a reluctance to experiment and subsequently change the existing order of things. Although a few of the teachers in this study seemed uncertain and at times even contradicted themselves, the majority displayed a tendency towards reflective and constructive critique. They were able to position Montessori educational philosophy in a modern context, while still holding onto the fundamental values that the method represents. All of these teachers predict a bright future for Montessori education, a future they are a part of and are thus helping to create.

The Montessori teachers in this study have, in different and individual ways, illustrated the tensions and complexities that exist between following traditional educational theory on the one hand and critically reflecting over their practice on the other.

Collaborating with the teachers in this study has been an inspiring and fulfilling experience and has convinced me of the fact that teachers want and need to tell their “stories”. Taking seriously what teachers have to say is in fact essential for us to more fully understand the forces that, among other things, govern and sway teachers’ inner as well as outer motivations towards change or continuity in teaching and education.

Teachers’ voices from within are reflections of (and reactions to) societal influences from without. I believe that teachers’ stories need to be heard, understood and acknowledged for us to be able to work towards improving conditions within the teaching profession in the future.
References


