Proving Montessori:

Identity and dilemmas in a Montessori teacher’s lived experience

Abstract

This phenomenological study was conducted to better understand the experience of a Montessori teacher in a leadership role. A veteran Montessori teacher newly hired by an established Montessori preschool was interviewed over the course of her first year in the position. A critical discourse analysis revealed multiple Discourses and social identities that contributed to her desire, and ability, to be what she felt was an authentic Montessori educator. While some of these Discourses and social identities aligned, some did not; creating ideational dilemmas that affected her work, her relationships, and her personal identity. The findings suggest that current Montessori teacher Discourse leaves out important characteristics of the real teacher experience. Acknowledging and discussing the social challenges Montessori teachers face is a necessary addition to teacher training, teacher support systems, and Montessori leadership decisions.

*Keywords:* Montessori, teacher training, early childhood, critical discourse analysis, phenomenology

Dr. Montessori prescribed a form of mental, emotional, and even spiritual teacher preparation. This preparation develops skills that are essential to fostering a quality Montessori environment. However, a teacher’s duties and responsibilities have evolved over the years and expanded beyond the classroom walls. Teachers, including Montessori early childhood teachers, are frequently expected to develop and maintain harmonious parent-teacher relationships, conduct parent and even community-wide education events, and promote the school philosophy. While they work to truly embody what it means to be a Montessori teacher *in* the classroom, they may be confronted with differing and even contradictory social beliefs, rules, and identities from the greater social community. These experiences can be challenging and discouraging for both novice and veteran Montessori educators.

Because of these added responsibilities, better understanding the trials and tribulations of a Montessori teacher experiencing this role is invaluable information for Montessori teachers and Montessori teacher training programs. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges with pre-service teachers will help to prepare them for their future work, fostering well-informed and confident teacher leaders. Additionally, insight as to what challenges and successes may arise between a school community and Montessori pedagogy is not only necessary to help classroom teachers but also to inform Montessori leaders on how to improve and strengthen the Montessori method of education as its use in schools continues to grow.

As a former Montessori preschool teacher, I experienced the difficulty of effectively sharing Montessori theory with others and the stress of feeling the pressure to consistently represent the “true Montessorian”. Because I had incorporated Montessori so tightly into my personal identity, these challenges were not only frustrating but also often became emotional on a personal level and affected my attitude toward my day-to-day work. As a doctoral student studying teacher education, I pursued the opportunity to better understand the experience of being a lead Montessori teacher, ultimately hoping to generate discussion on the evolving requirements and pressures of this role. To do this, I conducted several interviews with a veteran Montessori teacher. My research leading question was: how does a teacher experience guiding the transformation of a classroom/school community following Montessori pedagogy and philosophy? This analysis is focused on a section of one interview session and is led by a more specific research question: how does a teacher characterize her experience of *proving* Montessori philosophy to a small preschool community? The following analysis sheds light on the push and pull between multiple identities and Discourses that are part of this experience.

**Literature Review**

To be a true Montessori educator, the adult must embark on not only a unique form of educational training, but also what Montessori (1967b) referred to as “spiritual preparation”. She wrote, “the educator must not imagine that he can prepare himself for his office merely by study, by becoming a man of culture. He must before all else cultivate in himself certain aptitude of a moral order” (p.107). She continued, describing the steps for inward preparation, which include critical self-reflection, objective observations, and a new understanding of child psychology. The emphasis on personal preparation in teacher education and teacher practice is unique to the Montessori method (Lillard, 2005) and is often referred to as an experience of personal transformation (Cosssentino, 2009; Lillard, 2005). This process has evolved into a belief in the “essential Montessori teacher”, a commitment to a certain way of *being*, a feeling of responsibility, and ability, to fulfill revered philosophical principles (Malm, 2004). This lived experience creates an identity of not simply a teacher, but more specifically, a *Montessori* teacher (Malm, 2004), or even further, a *Montessorian.* While the transformation focuses on inward reflection and change, generating a new or additional self-identity (i.e., self-conception and emotional identification with self-descriptions), a Montessori teacher (a.k.a., a Montessorian) also takes up a new *social* identity equipped with specific characteristics and expectations to be fulfilled and maintained (Barker, 2012).

The vast majority, if not all, of Montessori’s suggestions and directions on teacher spiritual preparation focus on the teacher’s presence and identity within the classroom, working with the children. Today, the duties of any teacher, including an early childhood Montessori teacher, span beyond the classroom walls. Creating and sustaining parent-teacher relationships, practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, navigating through early childhood and school rules and regulations, and representing Montessori for school promotion and marketing purposes are just some of the additional demands placed on Montessori educators. Research has suggested that while these duties are crucial for effective early education (Bartik, 2014; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Graue, 2001), their corresponding values and belief systems harbor the potential to create instances of ideational conflicts (Cuban, 1992; Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, Mac Kay, & Marshall, 2014; Helsing, 2007; Sumsion, 2002), pitting one social identity against another. These conflicts can be referred to as “dilemmas”, meaning “conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing, highly prized values cannot be satisfied” (Cuban, 1992, p.6). Dilemmas occur frequently in teaching because of the varied developmental expectations, educational policies, teacher beliefs, and social values among others, existent in the world of education (Helsing, 2007). Dilemmas are particularly challenging because they often require moral choices to be made frequently leading to “good-enough compromises” (Cuban, 1992, p.7), achieved through sacrificing some amount of one belief to satisfy the needs of another. Not only can this be unsettling, but it can also be only a momentary fix leaving the dilemma to be “renegotiated again and again because [it is] so deeply embedded in *who we are* and the practice of teaching” (Cuban, 1992, p.7, emphasis added).

Because of the personal nature of dilemmas, they can cause what Helsing (2012) referred to as “uncertainty” in a teacher’s practice. Uncertainty in teaching can arise due to the variety of educational beliefs and expectations as well as because of the complex social and emotional requirements of the position. This uncertainty can affect one’s teaching practice and even self-identity. While a Montessori teacher may have been trained to create and sustain a specific teacher/teaching narrative (Barker, 2012), dilemmas create constant moments for critical examination, and possible uncertainty, regarding the ability to fulfill such an identity and be a true Montessori teacher. Certainly, Montessori teacher training acknowledges the need for self-examination and the willingness to meet the needs of the children and their environment in creative ways. However, along with the added job responsibilities mentioned above come more opportunities for dilemmas and uncertainty on a greater social and philosophical level.

The current, and constant, change existent in the early childhood educational system has the potential to pose many dilemmas and instances of uncertainty in a Montessori teacher’s practice. Teachers must learn to “cope” and successfully address and navigate the evolving system (Kilgallon, Maolney, & Lock, 2008). While uncertainty can create opportunities to identify, address, and improve teaching practice, it is also a frequent cause of stress, frustration and burn-out (Floden & Buchmann, 1993; Helsing, 2007). Teaching is naturally an emotional profession, perhaps particularly as a Montessori teacher when so much internal self-preparation is an inherent part of the work. Research (Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, Mac Kay, & Marshall, 2014; Sumsion, 2002) has suggested a need for a closer look at the ways in which early childhood teachers need support to move through dilemmas and overcome uncertainty. Therefore, identifying the types of dilemmas that may take shape in a Montessori early childhood teacher’s experience along with their potential effects on her identity is valuable research.

**Theoretical Orientation**

This paper follows the belief that identity is a social experience and construct (Barker, 2012; Gee, 2014). To better understand such an experience, this study followed a phenomenological approach, with the broad intention of seeking to better understand ways in which social actors “find [themselves] being in relation to the world through [their] day-to-day living” (Vagle, 2014, p. 20). Research began by pursuing the question of not just what a teacher does, but rather the lived experience of *being* a teacher leader. Because phenomenology is the study of how things are being and becoming, the phenomenon, or unit of analysis, reveals itself throughout the research process (Vagle, 2014, p.23). This discovery, or revelation, must be treated delicately as the minute a phenomenon becomes named it in effect is removed from the multilayered and expansive experience in which it was a part (van Manen, 2014, p.52). Using an analytical approach that created opportunities to take into consideration those multiple layers was helpful in directing attention toward “the regions where meanings and understandings originate” (van Manen, 2014, p.26). In this analysis the discovered phenomenon was the experience of having to prove identity and Montessori (system of knowledge and beliefs) to a school community. Proving the value or worth of one’s identity and system of knowledge and beliefs is a social action with personal and broad social implications. Thus, taking up a theory of discourse analysis that used both a micro and macro lens to better understand the personal and social qualities of the phenomenon was necessary.

As a means to answer the research question of how a teacher characterizes the experience of proving Montessori philosophy to a small preschool community, I used Fairclough’s (1992) theory of discourse analysis, specifically the three dimensions of analysis: 1. Discursive practice (the resources used to produce the actor’s discourse[s]) 2. Text (the micro analysis of how this is done) 3. Social practice (why the discursive practice is the way it is and its relation to broader social practice[s]). Gee’s (2014) definition of identity and Discourse helped to further understand the ways in which an actor represents herself in and navigates through a social context. Finally, van Leeuwen’s (2008) legitimization offered further insight regarding positionality within a community. The combination of these three approaches to critical discourse analysis proved effective to better understanding the researched phenomenon.

Fairclough (1992) suggested that “discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (p. 64). A critical discourse analysis following this theory helped to illuminate not merely how the phenomenon was represented, but how and what identities constituted the construction of that representation, and what effects the social worlds it was a part of had on its creation. Gee (2014) defined identity as a performance and that “like all performances, it will not work unless at least some people recognize what you are and what you are doing in your performance” (p.24). In this way, understanding a social actor’s identity is important to better understand how she views, reacts, and relates to her experience in the world, and of course how others in the world view, react and relate to her. These interactions are what Gee described as “recognizing socially significant identities” and create his theory of “big ‘D’ Discourse” (p. 25). In this analysis, the term “Discourse” is used to highlight the socially meaningful identities interacting within and through the phenomenon. Looking critically at the ways in which multiple identities contributed to the process of constructing a world in meaning further defined the phenomenon as one of *being a representation of* Montessori in the greater world.

Following Fairclough’s instructions on critical discourse analysis by exploring the messages created through discursive practice, texts, and social practices revealed when and how Montessori identity and its system of knowledge and beliefs were reproduced, but also when they were challenged and even contradicted, creating a dilemma and the potential for uncertainty. Analyzing these moments, or times of uncertainty, what Fairclough refers to as “cruces” or “moments of crisis” (p. 230), aided in understanding “the actual ways in which people deal with the problematization of practices” (p. 230); specifically how an actor problematizes and works through the experienced phenomenon.

Finally, van Leeuwen’s (2007) categories of legitimization helped to better understand positionality within a community and the ways in which identity is taken up and used in the experience. van Leeuwen’s (2007) theory of legitimation in discourse and communication states that legitimation is an element of discourse used to answer the question ‘why?’ (p. 93) Legitimation is an explanation, explicit or implicit, of why things are, or should be, done a certain way. In this analysis, the categories of legitimization used to better understand why the subject acted in particular ways were: authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization. Analyzing how and why these three forms of legitimization occurred helped to not only understand why certain choices were made, but also what Discourses, identities and knowledge systems were most influential in the decisions and experience.

Because all of these elements of discursive practice relate to the social world, they contribute to the reproduction of societal structures. However, they can also create opportunities for transformation (Fairclough, 1992). These moments of crisis require decisions that are perhaps not as expected and normed as they are during moments of calm and regularity. Understanding all that contributed to the development of such moments and the choices made at those times is important information to better understating the experience of a Montessori teacher in a leadership role.

**Method**

**Participant**

Over the course of a school year I interviewed Claire[[1]](#footnote-1), a Montessori teacher newly hired by a well-established, small Montessori preschool. She came to the job with significant teaching experience and a firm grasp on Montessori theory and curriculum. These characteristics were specifically looked for during the hiring process as the board was hoping to revitalize the school’s use of Montessori practices. Therefore, Claire was hired to not only work with the children, but also to help guide the school community, one which included many long-time staff, children, and parents, toward what would be considered a more authentic use of the Montessori method.

**Data Collection**

Claire and I met for four interviews, participated in several parent education events together, and communicated via e-mail. Additionally, I spent one morning observing her at work in her classroom and was asked to share my notes and opinions on the classroom environment with her, the head of school, and board president. While the first interview took place at a coffee shop on a weekday evening, the subsequent meetings quickly turned into dinner and a glass (or two) of wine. Most sessions generated roughly an hour of recorded interview, but often included additional social time together. Typically our conversations began with questions such as “what has your experience been like at school recently?” and probing questions that searched for experiential descriptions such as “what was it like when…?” and “in what ways was…like for you?” Interviews were unstructured, however there was no challenge to staying on or close to the topic of Claire’s experience in the school community. Though greater contextual information contributes to the overall findings and interpretations, the specific critical discourse analysis of this report is of one section of the second interview conducted in mid December.

**Post-Reflexing**

Acknowledging one’s “pre-understandings” of the researched phenomenon is an important part of the phenomenological research method. Phenomenologists such as Giorgi have in the past prescribed a need to “bracket”, meaning acknowledge and then set aside the researcher’s pre-understandings, assumptions, and beliefs during the analysis process (i.e., phenomenological reduction). However, others (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014) have suggested that these elements play an important role in the research process and should be included in the analysis; Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström (2008) pointed out that “researchers are also part of the same world as the one they are investigating. It is not possible for researchers to investigate a reality ‘outside the window’” (p. 131). Instead of bracketing, Vagle (2014) described a process of post-reflexing in which the researcher continuously reflects on her own experience while researching and analyzing the phenomenon. It is a process of constantly interrogating pre-understandings that exist before, during, and even after the research process. For this reason, my own positionality within the school community and the studied phenomenon, as well as observed contextual interpretations, are an important part of the research process and analysis and included in this report.

**Researcher Positionality**

I became aware and interested in this particular situation from my position as a new board member. In an addition to the school board’s effort at hiring a skilled Montessori teacher, they also sent out a call for a trained and experienced Montessorian to join the board of directors. This was a position I was excited to take on and about a month before Claire was hired, I was appointed as the board’s Montessori Advisory Chair. This provided me with first hand insight on the board’s intent in hiring Claire based on her experience and knowledge. I was asked multiple times for my “expert” opinion during the hiring process, which included conducting a casual phone interview between Claire and myself. My feelings during that interview, and the message I relayed to the board, was that Claire was a passionate, highly knowledgeable, and dedicated Montessori teacher. I fully recommended they hire her, in fact may have even used the phrase “You’d be fools to pass her up!” As the school year began I was asked to support Claire personally and professionally, as well as be available to field any parent questions regarding authentic Montessori practices and changes made to the schools’ routine. I happily agreed to this role, was excited to be a part of the transition, and to support such a qualified teacher. Our interviews not only offered insight into the experience of a Montessori teacher in a leadership role, but also became an outlet for Claire to share her frustrations and seek advice and for me to be reconnected with my Montessori roots.

**Contextual Background**

Claire described challenges with the staff and parents of the school far more than any challenges she faced with her teaching or the children. This could perhaps be because her many years as an educator gave her the knowledge and confidence she needed to understand, accept and manage the busyness of a preschool classroom. However, Claire referred to a need to prove herself to the school community multiple times during our conversations. This was a theme that came up repeatedly over the course of our year working together, but was given some extra attention during our second interview conducted in the middle of December. At this meeting Claire expressed frustration regarding the timing, and demands, of the holiday performance held by the school. At the same time, she was using this end-of-the-year event to promote, and prove, the importance of keeping children in the program for kindergarten. Montessori developmental theory places significant importance on kindergarten, or what is referred to as “the third year”. During this time children are not only supported in academic growth, but also given invaluable opportunities to develop socially as the older children and leaders in the community. Additionally, the mixed age community creates ample opportunities for peer teaching and modeling, a quality that fosters the greatly valued child-independence (Lillard, 2005; Montessori 1967a). These, along with other elements of a prepared Montessori classroom, are necessary for the development and sustainment of a normalized environment, or one in which children naturally display concentration and cooperation on meaningful and purposeful activities (Montessori, 1967a). This was a very new idea to almost all of the parents at the school; many had not even realized that there was an option to keep their children in the program for kindergarten. In an effort to relay this message to parents, Claire and I had both participated in a parent education event focused on kindergarten and she had incorporated additional forms of parent communication on this subject. This was an issue Claire felt very passionate about, not only in terms of fostering optimal child development but also saw the older children as a huge, and very needed, asset to her classroom. Promoting, marketing and representing a Montessori education had become a substantial part of her job.

**Analysis and Findings**

van Manen (2014) wrote that “phenomenology does not only describe what something is, it also explores what this phenomenon can mean by offering possible interpretations” (p.390). Going further, Vagle (2014) posited that analysis and findings regarding the researched phenomenon can be more fully explored when worked through together. For this reason, both my analysis and findings are discussed jointly. Because I used Fairclough’s three dimensions of analysis (discursive practice, text, and social practice) as my guiding analytical theory, the results are divided into three corresponding sections.

**Discursive Practices**

***The Discourses at Play***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Montessori  Discourse | Day-to-Day Teaching  Discourse | Social Reform  Discourse | Personal Worth  Discourse |
| *the environment, um, that is serving their needs* | *I had to really get on those kids who weren't finishing things* | *It brings people together* | *I have to prove myself* |
| *it’s like the end of the cycle* | *we are moving up, it’s just all the other stuff kind of makes it hard to see that so much* | *that space in the classroom, um, that will ripple outward into the parents’ lives and the lives of their children at home and then in the community* | *I feel like I have to blow them away with my knowledge of child development* |
| *I believe in the method* | *we just were wrapping up all of their books and things that they’ve made to give a present to their family* | *it’s a huge investment of your time* | *I have to sometimes make up for certain parts of my personality* |

Claire represented her work through the use of four different Discourses: Montessori, Day-to-Day Teaching, Personal Worth, and Social Reform. Montessori Discourse was identified either by direct reference to the method or the use of language specific to Montessori teaching. The Day-to-Day Teaching Discourse consisted of descriptions of more traditional teaching activities and daily teacher duties. Social Reform Discourse focused primarily on social change made possible through a Montessori education. Finally, Personal Worth Discourse was the ways that Claire identified and described the need to prove herself. Specific examples of how these Discourses were portrayed are listed in Table 1.

Table 1.

These are the Discourses Claire embodied to work against a greater social and political Discourse that she and the school faced – School Marketization. Claire was working tirelessly to convince parents to keep their children in her classroom for their kindergarten year. It was assumed that finances were not the greatest issue in this particular community; instead, the competition created through the public school lottery system generated significant stress and anxiety for many families. The preschool, located in a relatively affluent area of a large city, existed alongside many highly sought after public, magnet, and charter elementary schools. The general belief was that if children did not enroll in their neighborhood school or participate in the kindergarten lottery for others, their places for first grade in these high quality public programs would be lost. While concrete and fact-based information on this system varied, the rumors created enough concern that many families were resistant to the idea of keeping their child in Claire’s classroom for kindergarten. Therefore, Claire had to promote and market her program as the best, and even transformative, school choice.

Claire’s position as the Montessori leader in the school tasked with the job of creating a quality Montessori program for the children and educating the parents on the philosophy, was greatly challenged by the existence and pressures of the School-Marketization Discourse. This challenge was further charged by Montessori’s own discursive practice. For example:

To segregate by age is one of the cruelest and most inhuman things one can do, and this is equally true for children. It breaks the bonds of social life, deprives it of nourishment. In most schools the sexes are first of all separated, then the ages each, more or less, in a different room. This is a fundamental mistake, which breeds a host of evils. It is an artificial isolation and impedes the development of the social sense. (Montessori, 1967a, p. 226)

Here, Montessori’s commentary, the foremost influence on Montessori Discourse, is not lacking in opinion and represents a very clear belief system. Thus, Claire faced a dilemma created by the intersection of the School Marketization Discourse and her own embodied Montessori Discourse made up of an impassioned knowledge (mixed ages benefit development) and belief system (mixed ages are socially correct). While Claire wanted to create and provide a truly authentic Montessori experience, she felt she could not without older children apart of the environment. Therefore, she felt the developmental and social possibilities fostered through the quality Montessori education she wanted to expose the parents to were stifled. The stress and uncertainty she felt because of this is exemplified through this moment of crisis between multiple Discourses.

*I want…I've, I believe in the method because I've seen it, what it can do for a little community of children and parents. It brings people together when it’s done well and it helps people see their child as somebody who's really capable of doing things and it helps people to look at their communication and how they're communicating. Um. And I believe at the heart of that that that is like a huge, a huge solution to all kinds of things going on in our world to make it a better place to be. So, I want to, um, I wanna, I wanna create that, I want to create that space in the classroom, um, that will ripple outward into the parents’ lives and the lives of their children at home and then in the community. So .. to, to make that happen they have to be there for three years!*

Here, Claire’s words create an interdiscursive chain (Fairclough, 1992) by most obviously using Montessori and Social Reform Discourses to support her beliefs. The Montessori method could positively affect not just her students, but “*all kinds of things going on in our world*”. However, Claire believed that this could *only* happen when children were a part of the program for all three years, a reference to the School-Marketization Discourse. More subtly she incorporated Personal Worth Discourse by referring to her past experiences and hopes for the future. While she did not take direct claim for creating such an awe-inspiring environment, she stated her beliefs based on what she had seen and experienced personally when “*it’s done well*”. This was the type of environment, and community, she wanted to create in her new position, yet her ability to do so was uncertain as it was dependent on parent participation exhibited through continued enrollment of their child.

**Text**

***Who is Responsible?***

Fairclough (1992) suggested that the ways in which producers produce texts signify their social identities, social relationships, and knowledge and belief (p.76). Therefor, a more textual micro analysis on the interview transcription helps to understand how Claire characterized her experience, and herself, in her job.

The Discourse of Montessori is the most interwoven throughout the excerpt by either referring to Montessori directly (*“I have to prove Montessori to the people”*) or using language specific to the method (*“it’s like the end of the cycle”*). However, there are some particular instances, specifically with word choice, where other Discourses override the Montessori Discourse. Word choices made by the producer of a text frequently have connections to wider social and cultural processes (Fairclough, 1992). By looking closely at how, when, and why Claire used certain keywords, competing Discourses within Claire herself were revealed.

In the first half of the interview, Claire used the noun “kids” three times. This is significant because many Montessori trainings avoid or even discourage the use of the word “kid” (kids are baby goats!) and promote the use of “child” and “children” instead. In the second half of this segment, when asked to expand on the idea of having to prove herself, Claire refined her Discourse to primarily an authentic Montessori one and only used “child” and “children” when referring to her young students. Furthermore, the times when she did use “kids”, her words before and after expressed a more down and dirty idea of the demands of her job:

*I had to really get on those kids who weren’t finishing things, and encourage and entice them.*

In comparison, in the second half of the except, Claire described how she wanted parents to see the children as:

*happy and engaged and motivated and independent and confident and sophisticated that their children can become in the environment.*

These excerpts reflect two different views on not only how preschool aged children should be referred to, but also on what their behavior looks like and demands from their teacher. The dichotomy, or dilemma, between the Discourses of authentic Montessori and Day-to-Day Teaching exemplified how Claire struggled with maintaining her ideal representation as a highly knowledgeable and skilled Montessori teacher, one which legitimized the worth of paying for kindergarten, and her handle on the day-to-day challenges she faced in her job - challenges which tested her adherence to the image of the perfect Montessorian.

Claire’s style, or ways of identifying herself, (Fairclough, 1992) was most frequently as a member of the group of preschoolers through the use of the pronoun “we” (*“We need practice”, “we are moving up”*). She distanced herself from the parents through the use of “I” and “they” statements such as, *“I have to blow them away with my knowledge of child development”* and *“to get them to wanna pay for kindergarten”*. The following statement is an excellent example of how Claire positioned herself within the school community:

*I know that when we* (the community of preschoolers) *come back they’ll* (the parents) *have had this time to simmer in that* (the level of work the children have produced).

Claire saw herself with the children, favoring their place and role within the school community. By doing so, she also gave the children the responsibility of helping to prove Montessori to their parents, effectively sharing the weight of this job with her preschool class.

*I have to prove Montessori to the people. I have to prove it to the kids that um, ‘the reason we’re not taking home work everyday is because it’s gonna feel awesome when you put all this stuff together that you've collected’. And then today we just were wrapping up all of their books and things that they’ve made to give a present to their family…*

She continued, ending with the previous quote suggesting that parents will “*have had time to simmer”* in the children’s work and that *“the parents will have had the time to process, 'wow, look what those kids can do when they’re motivated’!”* Thus, the ability to prove Montessori to the parent community not only depended on kindergarten enrollment, but also on the children’s willingness and ability to adequately share their school endeavors with their parents. This brings up the question of which one of these elements is more important. Without the older children, Claire felt that she could not create the optimal Montessori learning environment for all the students. However, if the children did not share their work and development with their parents, the families would not see the possibilities and value worth considering in the first place. Though Claire repeatedly referred directly to the task of proving Montessori *she* was challenged with, significant responsibility, if not equal to her own, was placed on the children’s ability to do this as well.

Claire politely defended her pedagogical decisions with reflective statements such as “*I feel*”, “*in my experience*”, and “*I’ve seen*”. These phrases used multiple forms of authority to legitimize her beliefs and practices. For example, in the following quote, Claire used the phrase “*in my experience*” to invoke personal, expert, and role model authority (van Leeuwen, 2007).

*now it’s like the end of the cycle where they can see how, it it takes a while for them to see the richness that then now my, in my experience when we do it this way, uh, they're just like, it creates a boost to their work,*

The parents, “*them*”, were unaware and unknowing of the rich and advanced work children in a Montessori environment are capable of. Claire used her past experiences to point out her learned, expert authority on this topic. She also positioned herself as a role model, or a wise and experienced teacher using gained knowledge to guide her decisions. Finally, knowing that she was hired to lead the community in the development and refinement of best Montessori practices, Claire took up her personal authority as a leader by using her experiences and knowledge to guide the decisions of the greater community, “*when we do it this way*”.

However, these authoritative legitimizing statements are contrasted with other “I” statements such as “*I have to*” and “*I wanna create that*”. Despite her authority, Claire felt a need to justify the decisions she was tasked with making and carrying out *on her own*, a position that can be a lonely, emotional, and uncertain one to be in. Just as Claire struggled between representing the ideal and the reality of her work, she juggled between seeing herself as a member of a group working to impress the parents together, or in charge of creating a highly authentic Montessori learning environment all by herself.

**Social Practice**

***Resisting and Embodying Ideology***

*I have to prove myself, I have to prove Montessori to the people, I have to prove it to the kids…*

Claire was hired to teach the children in an authentic Montessori way - she was given a job to do in the classroom with children. Yet what this excerpt shows is that her work expanded beyond the classroom walls and into another belief and relationship based social system. Important to note in this quote is that Claire brought up the need to prove herself first and foremost. As a newcomer to the school, Claire needed to not only promote Montessori philosophy, but she also had to promote herself as an important member of the school community and build relationships to garner support. Claire came head on with the challenges of doing this; however, without those connections, proving the value of a Montessori education was difficult.

When asked to expand on what she meant by needing to prove herself, another moment of crisis between the ideal (Montessori and Social Reform Discourse) and the reality (Day-to-Day Teaching and Personal Worth Discourse) was revealed, this time through a highly personal lens. Claire’s demands on herself were challenged between her desire to “*blow [the parents] away with my knowledge of child development*” and her resistance to a feeling that she must ultimately change herself.

*[Montessori is] a life long investment for your child. So, to do that I just feel like I have to be a head and shoulders above the standard daycare model. And so that’s why I set a high standard of myself and, um, I hope that, you know, that comes across, I hope that the children feel that, and that the parents do. However there are certain things I’m not willing to do, you know, like I've, um, you know, there’s certain cultural things that, you know, like I'm not gonna be nice, I mean I'll be, I'll be kind and professional, but I'm not gonna be fake and that, that's just like a personal choice, and so, um I have to sometimes make up for <laughs>. I feel like I have to sometimes make up for certain parts of my personality of just who I am that maybe to some people might seem abrasive or, you know, whatever. So, um. I wanna be able to be myself completely and sometimes I have to make up for that <laughs> a little bit too!*

Here the tension created between Claire’s desire to impress parents and her resistance to changing herself, or succumbing to the ideal image of a preschool teacher, is incredibly apparent. Ideology is a social construct possessing great power (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu referred to ideology as a form of “symbolic violence” which creates required adaptations to the social world influenced by economic and political power yet disguised as every-day ways and actions (Swartz, 1997, p. 89). Similarly, Fairclough (1997) wrote that “the discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures” (p. 66). Social constitution and reproduction are based in ideology that has become rooted in very real, tangible social structures. In this case, the ideal preschool teacher is one who embodied an age-old image of a soft, passive, and compliant individual (arguably, a woman). Claire viewed herself as quite different, if not the opposite, of this ideal image. She would not be “fake”, or shallow and simple. She felt her personality had the potential to come off as abrasive, instead of gentle and serene. Even being kind and professional was incompatible with the preferred “nice”, more casual and laid back preschool teacher identity.

Taking up an analysis on the broader Discourse of what a preschool teacher should look and act like could be highly enlightening. However, for the purpose of containing this paper, I will attempt to maintain focus on Claire’s specific experience and social relations. Claire resisted this preschool teacher ideology but also felt she had to satisfy it by making up for what she lacked in other ways (a “good enough compromise”). She hoped to do this is by positively affecting the children and, once again, depending on them to exhibit her worth to their families.

*Claire: So I feel like I have to prove in other ways that, like, my reasons for doing these other, doing it this way is*

*Olivia: and prove by the children really showing, exhibiting*

*Claire: yeah*

*Olivia: the greatness of*

*Claire: yeah! Loving school. Just loving to be there. Yeah.*

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this final excerpt, which was in fact the end of the interview. Though Claire opposed fulfilling the image of the ideal preschool teacher, she *was* working to embody that of the ideal Montessori teacher (Malm, 2004). To do this, she had to “talk the right talk, walk the right walk, [and] behave as if [she] believe[d] the right things” (Gee, 2014, 24). Claire had “*reasons*”, the knowledge and beliefs, necessary for “*doing it this way*”, or teaching following Montessori pedagogy. She wanted to “*blow [the parents] away with my knowledge of child development”,* or talk the right talk. She intended to walk the right walk by “*[creating]* *that space in the classroom that will ripple outward into the parents’ lives and the lives of their children at home and then in the community*”. Having to prove herself was coupled with having to prove Montessori because the Montessori was deeply a part of her personal identity.

Finally, by using the evaluative word “love” Claire referenced the value system of love versus hate, and morally legitimized her decisions, including that to not change her personality (van Leeuwen, 2007). Additionally, this desire, or belief, that children experiencing the Montessori method will love school, is one backed with significant Montessori authority. Children loving school was an observation made by Montessori herself when she began to develop her method of education, and one she wrote extensively about. For example:

Our children are notably different from those in ordinary schools. They have the calm look of happy individuals and the ease of those who are masters of their own actions…They give the impression of being remarkable little men and women…This is what makes us call our little ones happy and wonderful children. (Montessori, 1967b, p. 321)

Furthermore, Montessori also used these child characteristics to prove her method to the world, describing experiences such as “The Children’s House seems to have a spiritual influence on everyone” and “[The children] represent a childhood that is more advanced then was our own” (Montessori, 1967b, p. 321). While Claire wanted the children to love school, her further hope was that they actively displayed that love to their parents, just as was done in the past. Love of school would have legitimized her value, and the value of a Montessori education.

Fairclough (1992) defined hegemony in discourse analysis as “constructing of alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes, through concessions or through ideological means, to win their consent” (p.92). In this study, hegemony is addressed with Montessori Discourse legitimized ideology. Claire’s strategy is hegemonic in that she sought to rally support by creating and displaying the effects of an ideal Montessori education. She wanted to transform the parents’ educational knowledge and belief systems - win their consent and construct an alliance - by replacing one ideology with another. Children showing that they loved school, or even more specifically, showing that they simply loved *to be there* was the way to do this.

**Discussion and Implications**

Prominent Montessori organizations’ depictions of a Montessori teacher are primarily focused on duties related to child development, classroom atmosphere, and bettering the world (Association Montessori International [AMI]; American Montessori Society [AMS]; North American Montessori Teachers’ Association [NAMTA]). A Montessori educator respects children, assists their development through engaging activities, and creates a calm environment (AMI). A Montessori teacher will find a rewarding career in fostering collaboration and being a creative resource for children to learn from (AMS). Finally, a Montessori teacher is one who not only wants to work with children, but also make a difference in the world, is emotionally independent, and possesses a “zest for life” (NAMTA). Of course these descriptions exist on websites with the intent to market the career and entice perspective teachers. However, “through repeated use and circulation, some D/discourses become so established that they become ‘natural’ and conceal the existence of competing, alternative discourses” (Ngo, 2012, p.47). Perhaps that has happened regarding Montessori Teacher Discourse. This analysis showed that Claire characterized her experience of proving Montessori philosophy through multiple Discursive relationships, identities and self-representations, and social practices. Yet such Discourses are not acknowledged in Montessori spaces such as websites and literature. Was Claire emotionally independent? She verbalized her job as one given to her and her alone. However, what this analysis discovered was that she was dependent in many ways on the children and the parents to at least feel and believe that she was truly embodying the Montessori teacher social identity. Was it Claire’s responsibility to create an environment that met all of the children’s developmental needs? Claire was hired to do this, however she faced situations that were out of her control and challenged her creation of the ideal, normalized Montessori environment. Was the collaboration she was in charge of fostering focused only within the preschool environment? Finally, what this analysis revealed was that Claire depended on collaboration, acceptance, and alliances formed between herself, the children, and the parents. Without them, she could not prove her value and she could not prove the value of a Montessori education.

Montessori Discourse prescribes a social identity that can be challenged by many elements of today’s educational social world. Because being an authentic Montessori teacher requires a commitment to a system of knowledge and beliefs that contribute to the development of one’s social and personal identity, the dilemmas that arise from these conflicts can have a deeply personal effect. Claire’s words depicted a level of uncertainty made up of passion and frustration toward her ability to fulfill the expectations of a Montessori teacher social identity. It is important to recognize and discuss the additional demands a teacher faces in regard to parent education and promoting the Montessori method. However, it is equally as important to generate an awareness of the inner conflicts these requirements may produce and offer the support teachers need to work with and through the uncertainty of this position. Montessori (1991) wrote, “The task of the new teacher is a hard one, and I try to remember every principle that can help her” (p. 108). By better understanding today’s Montessori teacher experience, we can develop the principles needed to train, guide and help such an educator as she faces both personal and social challenges in her role. Supporting teachers in this holistic way may have a valuable effect on the greater social world’s understanding, recognition, and value of an authentic Montessori education.

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1. Pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)