Introduction

Although she was a leader of significance herself, Maria Montessori did not set out to write about leadership. Her works are sprinkled with examples of the influence of leaders in scientific, political, literary and other domains. Her perspective on the teacher as a community leader who is guided by children, has been extensively published. Montessori’s observations of the human being at different stages of development sometimes touched on aspects of leading. Yet she remains classified as a pedagogue, not a leadership theorist or practitioner.

Contemporary expectations have brought leadership into the spotlight and within Australia, it is now considered a central component of delivering quality education. In each state, early childhood education and care is assessed and rated by regulatory authorities against the National Quality Standard (NQS). The NQS sets a high benchmark across seven Quality Areas, of which one is Leadership and Governance (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018).
The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has a focus on helping school leaders become highly-effective by giving them the tools, resources, policies and practices needed to succeed in their roles. The AITSL Principal Standard incorporates three Leadership Requirements – Vision and values; Knowledge and understanding; and Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2016).

Critics argue that leadership has now become an industry and that enormous sums of money and time have been poured into trying to teach people how to lead. In spite of this, it has been claimed, that the industry has not in any major meaningful, measurable way, improved the human condition (Kellerman, 2012). Yet good leadership is a complex and influential phenomenon that relates to the social nature of human beings and remains broadly valued. It is a factor in the success of any community, whether within a school, a business or a family.

Leadership in the Montessori context has been addressed by different authors and speakers in different countries and from different vantage points over the years. Some Montessori organisations have begun to offer professional development opportunities specifically around aspects of leadership, or courses in Montessori school administration. Leadership is increasingly expected of Montessori professionals at all levels from the classroom to the boardroom. Montessori parents can also develop their leadership to assist them in supporting the life of the home. In this article I share some of the results of my research into a Montessori perspective on leadership, a perspective that I argue is relevant not only to professional educators, but all adults.

**Studying Leadership**

Quite a few years ago, I unexpectedly found myself stepping into the role of a Montessori school principal, with very little preparation other than my teacher training and a small amount of teaching experience. At the time, I considered myself to be a follower rather than a leader; an extreme introvert who liked working with children and who knew nothing about how to lead a community of adults. I read my husband’s business books on leadership and these gave me the first clues about what approaches might be helpful. Yet, I felt something was missing from these books and soon found myself returning to Montessori’s published works for more information about how to best serve my school community. I began to wonder about how a specifically Montessori perspective on leadership could be developed. What did Montessori say about leading? Did she see leadership as something rare or an inherent potential within all of us? What help could her legacy offer to school leaders, teachers, parents or any other people who found themselves in a formal or informal position that seemed to demand leadership? In 2010, I approached Monash University, with the idea of investigating these questions as part of a doctorate.

Over the next seven years, my research took me to many places. I went back to study Montessori’s publications more thoroughly, through the lens of leadership, scouring the chapters to try to understand more deeply the messages within. I also read hundreds of texts that related to general or educational leadership, including research books and papers, biographies of leaders, and government regulatory documents. I read different cultural and philosophical texts on leadership that helped me understand the diversity of perspectives on leadership already in the global melting pot. There were many different models of leadership in existence that seemed to have much in common with the Montessori approach, including Servant Leadership, Spiritual Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Leadership. And I continued to build up my experience of leading through governance, management, teaching and parenting.

In 2012, I was fortunate enough to visit the United States where I interviewed fourteen contemporary Montessori school leaders who were trained and experienced in formal leadership roles. These interviews offered lots of rich data for analysis. I found I brought my own biases into the interpretation of the data. But as a trained Montessorian, I also benefited from having an insider’s understanding of Montessori principles, practices, concepts and language. I spent a lot of time reflecting on my own work as a school leader, teacher and as a mother with family leadership responsibilities. I observed other leaders inside and outside the Montessori community, who inspired me. Finally, I went back to complete another Montessori diploma, working closely alongside a trainer who kindly answered my many questions on topics broader than the course content.

Emerging from my study, is the idea that Montessori’s principles and practices offer a distinct perspective on leadership that can be arrived at through analysis and reflection. This perspective is based on Montessori’s notion of staged human development and incorporates an understanding of universal human tendencies such as the tendency to order, to explore and to communicate. It is not a perspective confined to the education sector, though it is oriented towards education. It is a perspective that honours the innate potential within everyone and consequently has general applicability. The Montessori approach could be adopted by any adult leader guiding a community, including parents, who guide a family.

**A Montessori Perspective on Leadership**

At the heart of a Montessori perspective is a distinct, if not simply articulated, model of leadership, that is exemplified by the Montessori classroom teacher. Being prepared to work as a teacher using Montessori principles and practices, is being prepared to lead a community. Any teacher’s authority to lead the classroom emerges from conventional teaching credentials, and is acknowledged by the formal appointment to the school. Montessori training can offer an additional preparation for leading that incorporates detailed study of the characteristics and development of the human being; thorough technical know-how in presenting the right opportunities at the right time and in the right way; and a review of the self that can be rigorous and confronting.
Montessori said that the classroom leader must begin with the right disposition:

It is responsibility that a leader should feel, not the authority of his position (Montessori, 1989, p. 65).

She does not have the need of words, or energy, or severity; but she must be able to make prudent observations, to assist a child by going up to, or withdrawing from him, and by speaking or keeping silence in accordance with his needs. She must acquire a moral alertness which has not hitherto been demanded by any other system and this is revealed in her tranquility, patience, charity, and humility. Not words, but virtues are her main qualification (Montessori 1967, p. 151).

For Montessori, these requirements connected the leader to the spiritual realm. The Montessori adult must transform herself into a servant, one who serves the human spirit. How can we imagine what this must look like? Montessori said:

Although the relationship between child and teacher is in the spiritual field, the teacher can find a very good model for her behaviour in the way a good valet looks after his master (Montessori, 2007a, p. 256).

To serve in this way, the adult must learn to be ‘not a passive force, but a silent presence’ (Montessori, 1964, p. 371). Such service must support the progressive independence of the servant. For Montessori, independence was ‘the basis of normal development’ (Montessori, 2007a, p. 117) and therefore must be considered a foundation for the development of good leadership in oneself and others.

Another beginning responsibility for a Montessori leader guiding a community is the preparation of the environment. The Montessori adult becomes the keeper and custodian, attending to the environment above other considerations. Montessori referred specifically to the way in which parents make the home as attractive as possible, ‘to make surroundings in which a normal and constructive life can flourish’ and ‘to make the home a place of comfort and peace, with full and varied interests’. She argued that the ‘essential charm of a house is its cleanliness and order, with everything in its place, dusted bright and cheerful’ (Montessori, 2007a, p. 252). She felt the classroom teacher worked in exactly the same way to prepare the classroom each day. The setup and maintenance of the environment in a Montessori context is not arbitrary, but carefully considered as a support for the developing community who lives and works within.

This is leadership via indirect influence. It is an honoring of the reciprocal relationship between the human being and the environment. Montessori claimed that human potentiality could be encouraged or discouraged, perhaps even annihilated, by elements within the environment. She therefore advocated using freedom and observation as key tools of the trade. Observation of the characteristics of free human beings reveals information that guides decisions on direction and strategy within the environment:

I must repeat that it is not that I first posed these principles and then shaped my educational method around them. On the contrary, only the immediate observation of children whose freedom was respected revealed some of the laws of the inner being that I understand to be of universal value (Montessori, 1975, p. 40).

Montessori invited adults to:

…shed omnipotence and to become a joyous observer. If the teacher can really enter into the joy of seeing things being born and growing under his own eyes, and can clothe himself in the garment of humility, many delights are reserved for him that are denied to those who assume infallibility and authority in front of a class (TEHP, p. 83).

Humility is a key feature of leadership in the Montessori context, not in the sense of being sacrificial, but in the sense of peaceful and spiritual contentment. Montessori argued:

The teacher quite apart from the authority to whom she is responsible, feels the value of her work, and of what she has accomplished, in the form of a satisfied spiritual life… Many think it is due to a virtue of self-sacrifice, and say ‘how humble these teachers are, not to be interested even in their own authority over the children’, and many say: ‘How can your method succeed if you ask your teachers to renounce all their most natural and spontaneous desires?’ But what no one understands is that not sacrifice, but satisfaction, is in question; not renunciation, but a new life in which the values are different, where real life values, hitherto unknown, have come to exist (Montessori 2007a, p. 259). Not all Montessori leaders work directly with children in a classroom. Yet in the Montessori context, all adults strongly connect their leadership to the child. A Montessori perspective places the child in an elevated and central (but not over-indulged) position within the community, as both a hope and a promise. This is a distinct aspect of a Montessori perspective that challenges existing leadership theory. By demonstrating a perspective that germinates in early childhood, adult Montessori leaders accept responsibilities for human potential that frequently go beyond defined position descriptions. Understanding that the origins of leadership begin in the early years is possible if leadership includes a view of childhood. Montessori claimed she obtained this view by being invisible:

When I am in the midst of children I do not think of myself as a scientist, a theoretician. When I am with children I am a nobody, and the greatest privilege I have when I approach them is being able to forget that I even exist, for this has enabled me to see things that one would miss if one were somebody – little things, simple but very precious truths. It is not always imperative to see big things, but it is of paramount importance to see the beginnings of things. At their origins there are little glimmers that can be recognized as soon as something new is developing (Montessori 2007b, p. 85).

Here Montessori is again underscoring the value of observation, and within quiet, more concealed leadership. However she
never remained invisible and developed a working style that made the most of her charisma to champion the cause of children. Montessori modelled the use of charisma to entice connection with purposeful work, for the value of that work to the development of the person or the social group. This is a different emphasis from the use of charisma in some heroic models of leadership where the cult of a single personality brings diverse people to obey a leader without critical consideration.

Montessori blended her philosophical and scientific ideas with the practical and the aesthetic. Her concept of Grace and Courtesy is a thorough augmentation of civility that fits well with the modesty and restraint of leadership. Grace and Courtesy offers the possibility of developing high standards of social conventions that are valuable in teamwork, negotiations, conflict resolutions and other interactions commonly within the leader’s experience. In a Montessori perspective, social practice is a prerequisite for leadership.

The social experience begun earlier must be continued, because the person who has never worked, who has never tried to make his own living, who has never mingled with people of different ages and of different social classes, will with difficulty become worthy of becoming the leader of anything (Montessori, 1994, p. 91).

In this quote Montessori weaves social experiences together as an indirect preparation for leadership. She perceives the whole life of a leader as contributing to the leader’s work and her perspective seems incongruent with models that disregard the life of the leader outside of appointed work.

Approaching leadership through a single holistic philosophy stands in contrast to our usual approaches that incorporate an eclectic mix of perspectives, each addressing an aspect of the leader’s work. Under this latter scenario, the leader is burdened with having to find the links between theoretical models, and having to address gaps not covered by theory or practice. This in turn adds to the eclecticism. The benefits of offering (as Montessori does) broad but detailed psychological cohesion, do not appear well articulated or understood in many existing leadership models. A fragmented approach to leadership preparation remains predominant in the field. Even those leadership models that are developmental in character, lack the complexity and unity of Montessori’s concept of the human being.

Previous theories have also not always taken the view that leadership is an innate potential of the social human being that develops under its own energies and that can be revealed in a developmental environment. Most leadership study findings have been generated from investigating the adult, but Montessori indicated the importance of considering the child. A Montessori perspective on leadership seems paradoxical – leadership is best achieved by following the child. The leadership of the adult is hence not the only leadership in the environment, though it is a conscious acceptance of responsibility.

Serving the human spirit by drawing from a Montessori perspective on leadership ultimately becomes its own spiritual reward. In the closing remarks at the end of her seminal work, Montessori referred to the power of the child to provide spiritual comfort for adult leaders, even those not working directly with children on a daily basis:

‘The Children’s House’ seems to exert a spiritual influence upon everyone. I have seen here, men of affairs, great politicians preoccupied with problems of trade and of state, cast off like an uncomfortable garment the burden of the world, and fall into a simple forgetfulness of self (MM, p. 376).

Montessori offers a virtuous model of leadership that casts the child in a significant and central position. The potential for leadership is viewed as an innate and universal characteristic of the individual in the social world. As this natural potential is realised, leadership reveals itself in a manner associated with the person’s environment and stage of development.

Further Research

Emerging from my investigation of a Montessori perspective on leadership are many potential areas for further research. My study did not address how leadership might be revealed in the early stages of life, nor how it develops at each stage. Montessori argued that the 6-12 child becomes more social naturally and tends toward interest in forming groups and choosing a leader. Studying leadership among adolescents holds promise as Montessori saw this stage as particularly constructive. Leadership in young adults, like that for adolescents, is an area already being explored in the wider leadership field.

Further exploration of how leadership is connected with hallmark Montessori themes could also prove fruitful. Studying the connection between leadership and Montessori concepts such as: work, independence, freedom, limits, morality, humility, movement, interest, consciousness, isolation of the difficulty and peace has yet to be undertaken by researchers. One of the most interesting themes for parents may be the connection between leadership and love, which remains underexplored in the research literature, but which is highly relevant in the Montessori context.

Place and time are ingredients within a Montessori leadership perspective that hold promise for further exploration: Which parts of our local or global community environments might need further preparation? To what extent does a Montessori perspective on leadership address short-termism? How can a Montessori perspective on leadership support harried and exhausted principals, teachers or parents? How long do we wait in an environment for leadership to be revealed? What can Montessori leadership contribute to special events in a family’s life, such as the arrival of a newborn or supporting a family through a crisis? How does a Montessori leader know ‘the where’ and ‘the when’? The literature includes publications that elaborate leadership cases where things have gone wrong. The question of leadership mistakes holds intrigue in view of Montessori’s concept of friendliness with error.
So many questions remain about a Montessori perspective on leadership, but we can be clear about the significance of the child. At the end of her address to the World Fellowships of Faith in London in 1939, Montessori pointed to the child as our leader:

We see the figure of the child who stands before us with his arms held open, beckoning humanity to follow (Montessori 2007b, p. 119).

Conclusion

Montessori’s success as an educator has overshadowed the contributions her legacy can make to other disciplines. Researchers, administrators and practitioners are beginning to highlight the potential for a Montessori perspective in expanded fields of study. Leadership is one of these fields and it spans every sector of society, including the family. Parenting is leading in support of the life of the home.

Further investigation promises to elucidate leadership in a Montessori context and contribute to the delivery of quality education as an aid to life. This promise has a spiritual character and is led by a sacred vision of the child as a regenerative force for society. In order to lead human beings, it is best if we have insight into who they are and who they might become. A century on, from her initial discoveries in the Children’s House in Rome, Montessori’s legacy can begin to be re-read by a new generation through the lens of leadership.

References:


