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Hawaiian Indigenous Education and the Montessori Approach: Overlapping Pedagogy, Values, and Worldview

by Nanette S. Schonleber

Nanette Schonleber makes a remarkable correlation as to why Hawaiian indigenous educators thrive with Montessori pedagogy. Compatible educators share values and goals, such as developmental learning, respect for parenthood, freedom of movement and independence, choice in learning, and specific individualized potential. Hawaiian language and culture-based educators view their work as a way of learning embedded in a way of life that integrates a cultural worldview and belief system, such as the child as a spiritual being, earth as living, and creation as interconnected. The author also finds congruency in land-based learning as being fundamental to indigenous learning and similar to the Erdkinder emphasis for the adolescent where interconnectedness and community roles arise out of farming.

Sixteen years ago, in 1998, a small exchange in a Hawaiian language immersion preschool sparked a quest to investigate why some Hawaiian language and culture-based (HLC) educators felt that the Montessori approach was compatible with their goals and values as indigenous educators. As one student put it, "It is a bridge

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from the past to the future." (J. Palakiko, Personal Communication, April, 2003). The purpose of this article is to share the outcomes of a study conducted to discover the possible connections for this seemingly incongruous fit and to share findings related to the possible benefits of Montessori for indigenous[1] educators, children, and communities.

The 15 key participants in this study were deeply committed HLC educators who took Montessori training, because for a window of time between 1994 and 2001 it was their only option for an advanced degree in early childhood education in the state of Hawai´i. It was not an approach they had deliberately set out to learn about but as they learned of the underlying values related to Montessori philosophy and the teaching strategies related to the approach (hands-on learning, freedom of choice, modeling, real life activities) they became first curious and then enthusiastic.

In conducting exploratory research to try and better understand the possible connection between the two approaches I learned of other indigenous educators who stated that the Montessori approach was a good fit for their immersion or culture-based programs (Johnson, 2005; Pease-Pretty on Top, 2002), but I could not find any studies that documented specifically *why* this approach was seen as a good fit, or specifically which elements of the approach were particularly appealing. I decided to formally investigate the reasons some indigenous educators have viewed the Montessori approach as congruent with their values and goals as educators and to clarify the differences in the two approaches.

A Montessori Perspective

Maria Montessori (1972) envisioned an educational approach that would serve as a transformative agent for peaceful and positive change in the world. She laid out the approach and its underlying values during a career that spanned fifty years and many countries. By the end of her career, her ideas and observations had coalesced into two overarching and related frameworks. The first was a theory

[1]In this article, "Indigenous educators" refers to those who utilize the goals and values of the first peoples to settle in a particular geographical region. Examples include but are not limited to Native Americans, the Aboriginal People of Australia, and the Native Hawaiian people of the islands of Hawaii.

www.montessoricentenary.org

of development suggesting a fundamental unity to the human mind and personality (Montessori, 1967). The second was a cosmology suggesting a fundamental unity to creation (Montessori, 1948).

From the beginning, Montessori stated that studies of education should be made for the entire world, not for individual countries or groups (1964). In addition, she believed that some pedagogical principles were universal for all ages. One of these universal principles was a deep respect for the personhood of the individual child. Another was the need, no matter what the age, for the child to have freedom of movement and independence in choosing what to learn. Finally, she believed that while all children go through

the same developmental sequence, children had within them a *particular* potential and set of unrealized gifts and talents that would only be manifested if supported by the right kind of environment. That environment was based on both the age and developmental stage of the child. It was also based on the culture of the child. For Montessori, as for others who subscribe to this view of reality, the child's own center and the center of the universe are the same. As she put it, "We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity" (Montessori, 1948, p. 9).

These ways of viewing children and the world are shared in common with many indigenous peoples, including many Native Hawaiians. For example, according to Hawaiian psychologist, Rezentes (1996), the traditional Hawaiian perception of life and the world includes a holistic perspective with a timeless past, present, and future. In common with many indigenous peoples, there is a spiritual essence to all aspects of time, and all actions and things are considered to be relevant. Children are "full of mana that must not be toned down but rather must be placed in an environment to expend it" (p. 98).

A Short History and Hawaiian Perspective

What Cole (2010) has called "bureaucratized" (p. 463) systems of schooling often include behaviouristic and mechanistic views of teaching and learning. Based on student achievement outcomes, bureaucratized schooling models have not generally been a good fit for either Native Hawaiian children or their communities (Kana'iaupuni, Malone & Ishibashi, 2005). Many researchers believe that this is because of what has been called a "home/school mismatch" (Goffin, 2010, p.1) where the goals, values, and teaching strategies of typical schooling practices do not match the goals, values, and teaching strategies of children from more diverse homes. For example, in homes where the Hawaiian culture is practiced, children are often expected to listen and observe without asking questions in order to thoroughly learn what is being taught, rather than answering or asking questions, as is expected in mainstream schools (Chun, 2006; Meyer, 2003).

The Hawaiian people did not always struggle with this cultural mismatch between home and school. According to Chun (2006),

Hawaiians in precontact Hawai'i had a well-organized system for both informal and formal learning and within 20 years of being exposed to the technology of the written word in the mid 1820s over 80% of the Hawaiian population was literate. It was one of the highest literacy rates in the world (Wilson & Kamanā, 2006). Disease and loss of political power from the 1820s to the 1870s within that time however, resulted in the Hawaiian people becoming a minority in their own land (Osorio, 2002) and as the power base changed, the culture of the schools changed too. Assimilationist policies, similar to those imposed on other indigenous peoples (Bielenberg, 2000) downplayed and even punished the use and practice of Hawaiian ways and the Hawaiian language in school. Policies such as the "English only" language policy and other changes in the way school was structured are considered to be instrumental in the change from Hawaiians being one of the most literate people in the world to a people struggling to keep up academically (Benham & Heck, 1998).

The most commonly mentioned shared value or belief was valuing nature and the things of the natural world. Lehua stated that for Hawaiians, caring for the land and nature was also related to connecting with the community, the second most often mentioned value seen as similar in the two approaches.

In the 1970s a movement began to revitalize the Hawaiian language and culture. One result of this renaissance was the creation of Hawaiian language immersion, and culture-based schools that have as their goals the maintenance of the Hawaiian language, epistemology, and cultural values (see for example, Kana`iaupuni & Kawai'ae'a, 2008; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). Another is for their students to achieve high academic outcomes (Kana`iaupuni, 2007; Kelling & Schonleber, 2011). As described by one of the founders, the movement began out of "… a need, an urgent need, to help to revitalize the language and the culture for all of Hawai'i's people. Especially for the Hawaiian people, but not just for the Hawaiian people" (Schonleber, 2006, p. 17). Like schools in other parts of the world that emphasize the culture and language of indigenous people (e.g., Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), they have become places where the language and culture of the Hawaiian people is being revitalized.

The success of HLC programs has come with challenges, however. One challenge that is shared by other indigenous educators is the perceived lack of a well-defined and easily replicated pedagogy and curriculum that successfully incorporates traditional and holistic ways of teaching and learning with high academic standards in a school setting. The lack of an easily replicated, culturally congruent, and academically rigorous pedagogy and curriculum is not a trivial problem. Research (e.g., Bielenberg, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Yamauchi, 2005) indicates that it is not enough to simply incorporate culturally relevant content. It is equally as necessary to incorporate teaching strategies and learning models that are a good match for indigenous values and beliefs. Knowledge of culturally congruent pedagogical methods, strategies, and approaches that are easily adapted, with proven curriculum and materials in place, could possibly help HLC and other indigenous educators to achieve their goals (Phillips, 1983).

The Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to formally investigate the reasons some HLC educators have viewed the Montessori approach as congruent with their values and goals as educators and to clarify the differences in the two approaches. I hoped that the knowledge gained from the study could provide deeper insights into the core teaching practices and values that set both approaches apart from more mainstream educational models and could possibly be of support to indigenous educators, children, and communities in other areas of the world. It was also to discover where the two approaches differed.

The notion of culture as integral to learning provided an overarching point of reference throughout the investigation. This perspective with its roots in the cultural-historical theory of Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that individual development and learning processes can only be understood in the context of the child's social world and that qualitative methods and descriptive data are necessary to more fully understand the research situation.

Participants and Settings

There were 40 participants, all of whom were either currently working, or had recently worked, in HLC programs. Fifteen of the 40 were key informants who were chosen because they had experience as both Montessori and HLC educators. The 15 key informants were asked to participate specifically because, in addition to being HLC educators, they also had a minimum of at least 225 hours of formal training in the Montessori approach to education. Three of the key informants were "insiders" in both systems, having worked in both Montessori and HLC schools.

Twenty five others were focus group participants who were chosen because they did not have prior Montessori training. They were shown a commercial video of the Montessori approach and provided a standard workshop on the Montessori Approach that I had given many times in the past at local conferences and workshops.

The work settings of the participants, which included private, public, and charter schools and programs, ranged in size from as few as 6 to as many as 200 students. They were located in urban, rural, and suburban areas on three islands. On O'ahu they were in urban, suburban, and rural areas; on Maui and Hawai'i they were located in rural areas. The majority of participants (57%) taught in Hawaiian language immersion programs. The rest taught in culture-based English-medium (27%) or Dual English-Hawaiian language immersion programs (16%).

Method

Grounded theory methodology guided the overall design strategy of the study. This is an analytic approach using a case perspective, whereby theory is derived from both inductive reasoning and deductive analysis, and the categories, themes, and patterns are drawn from the participants themselves. This approach utilizes emergent methods of analysis to create theory from the data rather than testing a hypothesis. The data were gathered through a series of 15 hour-long semi-structured interviews with the key informants, twelve 1- to-3-hour classroom observations, five approximately 2-hour focus group semi-structured interviews, school tours, and document analysis.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed six themes and two links connecting the various themes and their elements. Four emergent themes provided insight into the research questions, "Why has the Montessori approach been perceived as congruent with at least some of the values and goals of the HLC educators who are exposed to it?" Two additional themes highlighted distinctions and challenges. Unless noted otherwise, all participant's names are pseudonyms.

It's More Than a Job

The first theme was an often deep identification with the goals and values of their programs. Like many Montessori educators (Trudeau, 1984), the HLC educators I interviewed had a stated sense that their lives have changed as a result of their chosen profession. The goals and values of their profession had become a way of life. Koa's description of the role of the Hawaiian language in his life was typical of other responses to my question regarding the role of the Hawaiian culture and language.

> It's a part of my life, so if it's not for work, then it's in my home with my kids or just my everyday life, when I am thinking about things . . . I think [about] things through a Hawaiian perspective or use. I like to create songs and stuff, too, [and] I can't really do it in English but in Hawaiian, somehow when I share things with people it makes sense. If I try it in English, it's just corny, but when I think about it in Hawaiian, it just comes out. (Koa)

A Way of Teaching

The second was a set of 11 pedagogical practices and strategies valued by educators of both approaches. These practices are tied to beliefs about how children learn and develop. Figure 1 shows the 11 teaching practices shared in common. The approaches are ordered from the ones most frequently mentioned to the ones less frequently mentioned. They are called A Way of Teaching.

The pedagogical practice most frequently mentioned by the participants was that of encouraging children to be self-directed learners who are responsible for the consequences of their actions. Several comments made by the participants were striking in their

similarity to Montessori's own writings in this area. Keomailani noted that the pedagogical practice of expecting students to be independent in their choices was related to allowing children to find their strengths and interests and then mentoring them to achieve their potential in those choices. Her comments resonate with Montessori's writings on the topic (Montessori, 1964).

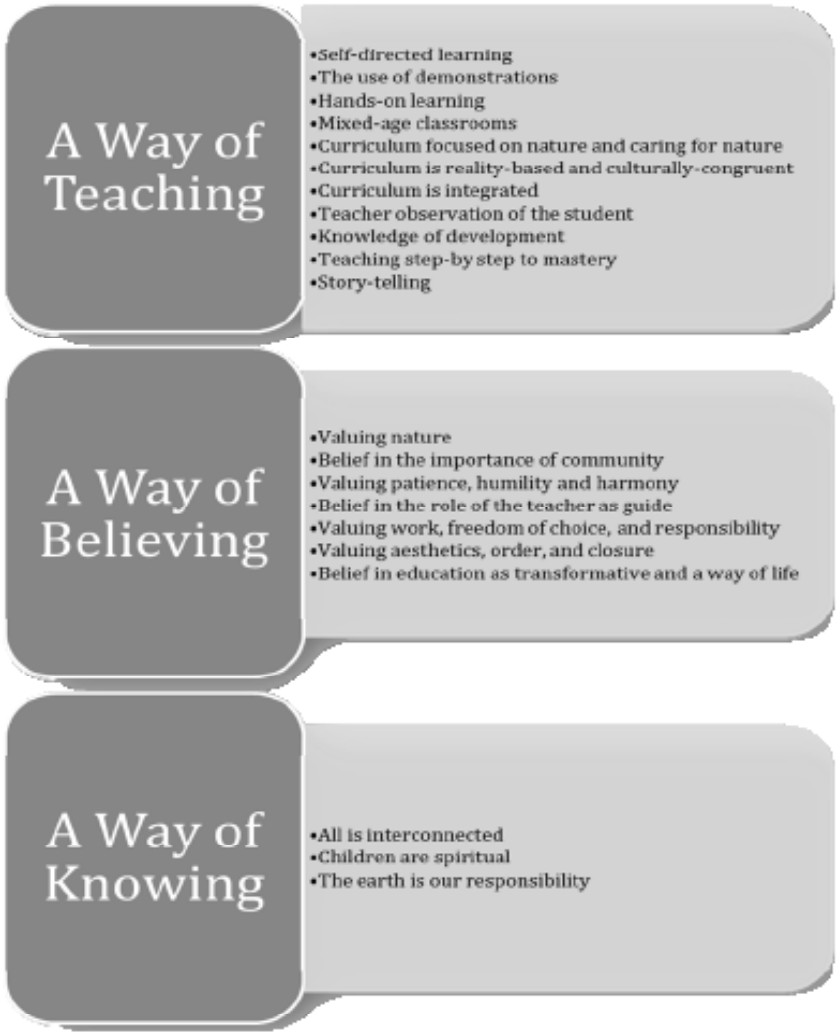

Figure 1. Similarities in the Two Approaches. Originally published in the Journal of American Indian Education 50.3 (2011): 11. Reprinted by permission.

> [My colleague's work] was to show Hawaiian children learning together with a cultural base and learning through projects and . . . making their own discoveries on the way. Not so much a sit down and being taught to, but learning through what is inside of your *na'au* [intestines, guts; mind, heart, affections of the heart or mind (Pukui & Elbert, 1986)]. You know, if you want to be a taro farmer, then that's what you should be learning in high school. (Keomailani)

A Way of Believing

The two approaches also share a common set of seven beliefs and values about the role of education. They are called A Way of Believing. Each of these values and beliefs is directly connected to at least one of the shared teaching practices listed above. For example, the teaching practice of utilizing a curriculum focused around the natural world corresponds to valuing nature. The beliefs and values connect the ways of teaching and the ways of knowing. They are shown in Figure 1.

The most commonly mentioned shared value or belief was valuing nature and the things of the natural world. Lehua stated that for Hawaiians, caring for the land and nature was also related to connecting with the community, the second most often mentioned value seen as similar in the two approaches. This was a focus shared by many who employ the Montessori approach, and was a topic that Montessori focused on in her later years. The second most commonly mentioned value was in the role of the adult. Puanani was one who saw a similarity here. She noted Montessori's notion of "following the child" as she described her role as *hapaiing* children. The Hawaiian word *hāpai* means to carry (Pukui & Elbert, 1986).

> My role as a teacher is, I'm not even teaching. I am just *hāpaiing* them- carrying them-to do what they need to do . . . I give them the tools, but it's really up to them how they're going to use it; how they're going to come to completion in whatever they're going to do. Once they do it, they're like, "I did it and this is my work." And they're so proud of it. So, I'm just following them–following the child, helping. Just, you know, "Come on, you guys can do it." (Puanani)

A third commonality involved the notion of schooling as a vehicle of transformation and healing at both a personal and a community

level. One group of middle-school teachers stated that they were very proud of their students' progress as they witnessed personal change and transformation in the demeanor and attitude of many students. When I mentioned this conversation to another focus group and asked if they think this seemed true to them, Pele, one of the participants, responded, "You're right. In our school it is a healing. It's going back to what our families were a long time ago" (Pele).

A Way of Knowing

Finally, there is an overlap in three elements of a worldview or way of knowing that ties together the teaching strategies, values and view of one's job as a calling. These three are called A Way of Knowing and include the notion that all of life is interconnected, that the earth is a living entity, and that all children have a spiritual essence. Kapuanani first explained that what she called Montessori's "universal principles," were common to many indigenous people and said Montessori's focus on these universal principles, more than any particular pedagogical practice, was what she felt drew in the HLC educators who first took the Montessori training.

> I think what got [them] was that concept [of the interconnectedness of all creation—the cosmic plan]. It has Montessori's name to it, but the concepts are universal . . . . The beliefs and concepts that Montessori wrote down . . . are what indigenous people [like] our *kūpuna* [grandparents], (Pukui & Elbert, 1986)] believe. This is what we felt was a match. (Kapuanani)

She concluded by mentioning the *Kumulipo*, the Hawaiian creation chant, (Beckwith, 1951) as an example of how many Native Hawaiians, like Montessori, view the universe and the earth as an interconnected whole. As she put it, "We all have a place in the world. The *Kumulipo* shows that we're all related. We're related to the plants, we're related to the animals on the ground. We're related to it all" (Kapuanani).

The notion of the child as a spiritual being acknowledged that aspects of the child's nature are unseen. A Hawaiian worldview includes the notion that there are aspects to life that are unseen and spiritual, including the unseen power or *mana* (supernatural or divine power; Pukui & Elbert, 1986) of each child (Pukui, Haertig,

& Lee, 1972) of each person. Puanani related it to the notion that teachers can only be guides to children.

> It's a divine self, a self-identity that the kids need to connect with. They all have that in them and if they can somehow find that in them, then they'll know that where the peace is within themselves. We try to follow the child, you know, we all do. And it's not easy for them, not even for [the ones who go to] our school, so we just have to help them get there. (Puanani)

Finally, the belief that the earth is living and people should nurture and care for it is a deep belief for the indigenous educators I interviewed. As Kona put it when he explained why he agreed with what Montessori called her cosmic curriculum. "Because the whole world is part of who we are as people. It is like our elder sibling, the heavens and all the plants and animals, because they came before you" (Kona).

Nuanced Distinctions

In addition to the four themes of similarity described above, a fifth theme included what participants viewed as distinctions between the two approaches. In spite of the majority of HLC teachers stating that there were no discernible differences in the two approaches, classroom observations revealed that compared to the typical Montessori environment, the HLC classrooms had: (a) fewer specialized didactic materials and activities; (b) less sequencing of activities; (c) fewer silent demonstrations; (d) more whole group lecture/teaching; and (e) smaller class sizes with only one teacher in the classroom. There was also relatively more emphasis on the importance of the family by the HLC participants than is found in Montessori's writings.

When asked about the reasons for the classroom differences, many of the participants pointed to a lack of money for purchasing Montessori materials and resources, a lack of ability to use premade Montessori materials that were written in English, and in many cases, a lack of specific training in how to incorporate the Montessori methods they liked. Most of Montessori trained teachers for example, were not teaching at the level for which they had been originally trained. Some, who were trained as early childhood

Montessori teachers were now teaching as elementary teachers and two who had been trained as Montessori elementary teachers were now teaching at the middle-school level.

Several of the non-Montessori trained teachers stated that although they agreed with many of the practices they saw in the videos and viewed them as culturally congruent, they did not have the specialized training to incorporate those strategies into their daily practice. As one teacher put it, "Even though I want to do the multi-age thing, I was trained in that old school way and . . . I don't know how to do it." (Koa) The majority of the participants did not see the differences as fundamental but as nuanced distinctions occurring due to a lack of resources and specialized training.

Challenges to the Dream

This theme included six obstacles to achieving the dream of a restored language and culture through the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies and content that honored the past while it prepared young students for the future. One HLC administrator summed the situation when he said that for him the challenge was to design a system that worked for "us as indigenous people." As he ended the conversation, he added, "There's not necessarily somebody I can look up in the phone book to go come and do this training for us. Because we are in uncharted territory" (John).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate and formally document through the voice of HLC educators, the reasons for a perceived congruency between the educational approach favored by educators in HLC programs in Hawai'i today, and the Montessori approach. The findings described in the article provide an understanding of the reasons for this perceived congruency.

At the roots of both approaches there is an overlap in worldview that leads to values, beliefs, and preferred teaching strategies not shared in common with mainstream educational practice and values. The findings revealed an overlap in worldview in three areas: a view of the child as a spiritual being, a view of the earth as living, and a view of all creation as interconnected. These overlaps in worldview

lead to related overlaps in values and goals, and these in turn lead to preferred teaching practices and strategies. They also lead to similar challenges, as well as differences that were viewed by the majority of the participants as distinctions along a continuum, rather than differences of substance.

Because of this overlap in worldview, indigenous and Montessori educators may have more in common with one another and less in common with mainstream educational methods and organizational structures. Both types of educators express that in the face of the dominant educational landscape and discourse it is challenging to implement the strategies they feel are a good fit for their goals and values (Schapiro, 2005). In this last section I describe some possible implications for other indigenous educators working with children and communities. I also describe some possible ways for these two types of educators to collaborate.

Use of Culturally Congruent Pedagogical Practices

Pedagogical practices congruent with the worldview of indigenous students and their families should be consciously incorporated into the structure of the school day. While important, it is not enough to have culturally relevant content. The *teaching methods* and *organizational structure* of the classroom must be congruent as well (Yamauchi, 2003). Culturally congruent teaching practices are important in terms of good fit; indeed, they are integral to the continued maintenance of that worldview and the healing of which several of the participants spoke.

Supporting Language, Culture, and Ways of Being

Like other indigenous educators around the world (Rioux & Rioux, 2007; Romano-Little, 2010) the HLC educators in this study were deeply interested in using teaching strategies and methods that were a good fit for their goals, values, and traditional culture. Both the HLC educators who had received exposure to this approach through formal training, and those who were only exposed via a video and half-hour workshop, often stated spontaneously that one reason they liked the model is that it allowed for their language, their culture, and their beliefs to remain intact. They could teach in their own language, teach their own values and beliefs, and use an

educational approach that is congruent with some of their deepest beliefs. And, just as important to them, because of the unique nature of the Montessori approach, they also felt that its use would allow their children to be prepared to fully participate in the modern world. An example of this is something as seemingly simple as the use of multi-age grouping. This was described by Kanani who grew up in Hawai'i, but moved to California to go to college. While there, she worked at a Montessori elementary school and saw what seemed to be a culturally congruent teaching practice for Hawaiian children.

At the roots of both approaches there is an overlap in worldview that leads to values, beliefs, and preferred teaching strategies not shared in common with mainstream educational practice and values. The findings revealed an overlap in worldview in three areas: a view of the child as a spiritual being, a view of the earth as living, and a view of all creation as interconnected.

> When I was in California . . . we had first, second, and third, and then, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes. I just thought, "This is wonderful; this is wonderful, because this is the way the Hawaiian family is structured. I saw it right away. Right away. And the older ones would, when needed, take care of the younger ones . . . it just reflected the Hawaiian family . . . . I think that's when I said, "I need to take this class to Hawai'i."

Reform Based on Worldview

Second, as researchers such as Datnow, Stringfield, and Castellano (2005) have pointed out, curriculum reform should come from within the community's deepest beliefs and values, not as a system imposed from without. Indigenous educators must have the ability to use teaching strategies and to create organizational structures based on deeply held cultural goals and values. This means creating teaching models and pedagogy based on local preferences and perspectives rather than pedagogical practices found in the texts ordered from major textbook companies or one-size-fits all methods espoused by large educational companies (Cole, 2010; Rioux & Rioux, 2007; Romano-Little, 2010). Because Montessori designed her approach using what she called universal principals, it could

possibly provide a structure for indigenous educators to create their culturally congruent models.

An Emerging Indigenous Pedagogy

Like other indigenous educators around the world, the HLC educators in this study were deeply interested and engaged in the creation of their own teaching strategies and methods that are a good fit for their goals, values, and cultural content. While all the participants in this study were appreciative of the Montessori approach, they were also interested in creating their own models and methods, unique to their own history and values. The indigenous educators in this study who had received Montessori training were able to use it to provide the initial structural support for their culturally congruent and preferred pedagogical methods and strategies. It also provided the starting point for ongoing staff development.

Place-Based Education

Finally, as stated earlier in this paper, one of the challenges to indigenous children is what has been called a home-school mismatch (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Smith (2002) suggests that a curriculum that incorporates a sense of place can adapt to the unique characteristics of that place, thus helping to overcome the mismatch between home and school.

While Montessori did not fully develop a place-based curriculum, she recognized the importance of promoting a connection with the land for children and adolescents. In many of her schools, Montessori developed what Chawla (2002) called "schools with permeable margins" (p. 138), that is, schools that extended beyond the schoolroom doors. Evidence suggests that this approach works. Adolescents in some *Erdkinder* schools, for example, have articulated that feeling connected to a particular piece of land is often tied to a deepening understanding of both the interconnectedness of all things and their role in the community as they work on the land. A sense of place roots adolescents in a community to which they both belong and contribute. Being on and working the land allows adolescents to engage with the community, the mind, and the body (Kahn & Ewert-Krocker, 2000). A collaboration among indigenous

and Montessori educators in further developing this place-based model could be mutually beneficial.

In conclusion, indigenous education as expressed by the HLC educators in this study shared many commonalities with the Montessori approach. Areas of overlap include teaching strategies, values, and a worldview valued in common by both types of educators. Using the Montessori approach could possibly provide indigenous educators a way to maintain their own language, culture, and values while preparing their young to take their place in modern society. And this could be one way to help bring to life Montessori's vision of an educational approach that would serve as a transformative agent for peaceful and positive change in the world.

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