

CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND LITERACY

Daily Thanksgiving for the Montessori Classroom Teacher: Using the Spiritual Exercises as a Basis for Self Reflection and Self Awareness.

Julie Kugler Ackley, M.Ed.

Mentor: Doug Olberding, Ed.D (Sports Studies).

Introduction

The mission of Xavier University is applicable to each and every Xavier student, no matter in what program that student is enrolled. The University's mission reflects its Jesuit educational traditions and Ignatian pedagogy. It calls all of us to recall that Xavier University is a "community of inquiry grounded in the Jesuit, Catholic tradition dedicated to engaging and forming students intellectually, morally and spiritually, with rigor and compassion, towards lives of solidarity, service and success" (retrieved from jesuitresource.org)

When I reflect upon this statement, I realize the connection that this has to the philosophical foundations of Maria Montessori and how students in Xavier's Montessori teacher education are enriched by this connection.

Over a century ago, Dr. Maria Montessori began her unique and transformational method of education in the poorest areas of Rome. Trained a medical doctor, she brought the eyes and soul of a scientist to her work and combined this with a strong Catholic faith.

Dr. Montessori wrote prolifically on the topic of spirituality of the child and the spiritual preparation of the Montessori teacher. She wrote in The Secret of Childhood that a teacher "must prepare...interiorly by systematically studying himself" (p.149) and "see ourselves as other see us" (p.149). It is grand undertaking to examine one's own true self and how this will affect one's relationship with children.

She writes that those training to be Montessori teachers must endeavor to discover their inner self and recognize their own areas for growth and guidance. In the book, Nurturing the Spirit in the non-sectarian classroom, Aline Wolf considers this spiritual preparation of the teacher. She reminds us that we, as Montessori teachers, need to recognize our deeply rooted "values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, habits and omissions" (Wolf, p.34).

Considering the words of Montessori and Aline Wolf, I was struck how these thoughts and premises echo tenets as written in the Xavier mission statement, and reflect the ideas of Jesuit education and Ignatian pedagogy, specifically the Spiritual Exercises.

Xavier calls us to engage and form student intellectually, morally and spiritually. Montessori asks the same of Montessori teachers in training. Both provide challenging curriculum and academic rigor; however, ultimately, it is the examined life and the values of service established that students leave with that are a lasting legacy.

This path of self discovery is a daunting one for today's frenzied lifestyle. Montessori teachers have become extreme multitaskers, working to integrate the classical foundations of the Montessori with the demands of state academic standards and indicators.

When reading about The Spiritual Exercises in Heroic Leadership by Chris Lowney, I was again struck by how this ties in so closely with Montessori's writings of the spiritual preparation of the teacher. Lowney writes that "one achieves self awareness not by reading how someone else achieved it but through focused reflection of one's own experience" (p.114). The author references Loyola that any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections. Montessori wrote that teachers "must begin by studying his own defects..." (p.149).

The dynamic similarities continue as one considers the role of mentors for new Montessori teachers and the role of an impartial director or guide during the process of the Spiritual Exercises.

Montessori encourages teachers to “be willing to accept guidance” (Montessori, p.149) and received and reflect upon a special kind of instruction (Wolf, p. 34). Lowney describes the importance of an impartial guide to support one’s own interpretation of one’s own experiences.

Course information

Considering these profound similarities between the elements of the Spiritual exercises and Montessori’s call for the spiritual preparation of the teacher. I provided students in my course EDME 356/556 Montessori Integration of the Curriculum during the Spring 2009 semester a copied chapter from Heroic Leadership titled The Spiritual Exercises-a lifelong development tool. During an in-class discussion on February 21, I shared specific sections from the text and asked them to consider the importance of deeds over just words to encourage the best in those children that these Montessori interns serve.

During this class, we also discussed the resource Cura What? A Graduate Student's Guide to Understanding & Living the Jesuit Mission. Each graduate student was given their own copy of this resource. (There were only 2 undergraduate students enrolled in this course.) Many of them were surprised to learn that Xavier’s traditions ran so deep and were not specifically Catholic, but much more universal. One of the students commented that she never realized that there were so many Jesuit universities and thought that this explained why Xavier felt so special.

During the Spring 2009 semester, the students in this class were in the process of completing a second semester of Montessori practicum, student teaching experience. Out of the 10 students enrolled, 9 of them were working in public school environments. 7 out of these 10 were traditionally trained teachers, coming into Montessori as experienced educators being asked to transform their teaching and shed old habits and procedures. It was for these 7 that I specifically designed a reflective writing activity that involved self reflection and self awareness.

I examined two resources from the Division of Mission and Identity-Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises and Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy-A Desktop Primer. I also used two quotes from Heroic Leadership to create this writing assignment. (see below).

I asked them to consider two activities. One involved discussing specific questions with their students and the other activity asked to consider their own self reflection in the classroom. I provided them each with the assignment, Daily thanksgiving for the Montessori classroom teacher. Spring 2009, Using the Spiritual Exercises as a basis for self reflection and self awareness.

For the activity to be completed over a series of days, I created questions that the teachers were to ask their students during class discussions. The basis for these questions was taken from Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises.

These questions were as follows:

There are 5 points for daily spiritual thanksgiving, grace, and introspection. For our discussions, we will use 4 of the 5. (taken from booklet, Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises)

*what am I most thankful for today? (Optional: how have I been blessed?)

*what have I learned about myself today? Am I pleased with this insight?

*who do I want to BE tomorrow? How can I BE that person?

*what do I look forward to in my day tomorrow?

I used specific elements about Ignatian pedagogy, as contained in the desktop primer to construct the questions for the teacher's self reflection. These questions were based on points described in [Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy-A Desktop Primer](#).

These questions were as follows:

- *do I embrace the unique qualities in each student
- *do I facilitate students' understanding of information in a personally relevant and appropriate manner
- *do I employ a systematic, sequential, and purposeful teaching plan
- *do I encourage students to decide what is truly good for themselves and society through a process of discernment
- *is my teaching style/classroom expectations challenging and rigorous
- *is my teaching style interdisciplinary
- *do I make use of novel teaching methods and technologies as they arise
- *do I encourage student responsibility and independence
- *do I utilize clear and specific evaluation methods
- *do I emphasize speaking and written excellence
- *do I view teaching as a vocation and service to others
- *Is there evidence of (in my teaching and my school); what can I do to provide:
 - *context(understanding of student life and culture)
 - *experience(providing intellectual and affective learning opportunities)
 - *reflection of meaning for self and others (the external expression of learned content)
 - *evaluation of student growth

The students completed the assignment and submitted their responses on April 4, 2009.

Summary and Conclusions

In reading through the student responses, it was interesting to reflect on what they choose to answer and how they each interpreted this work.

I was surprised to see that only 3 of them answered the question about teaching as a vocation. The students that chose to answer this question wrote with a genuine tone and sense of advocacy. One student eloquently answered that through teaching, "I am growing into the best version of myself". I was struck how similar this was to the notion inherent in Ignatian pedagogy that teaching is a "reflection of meaning for self and others" ([Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy-A Desktop Primer](#)). Another student answered that "my need to give back to the community is strong and helps (to keep) me going". Both of these responses came from graduate students.

Only 7 out of the 10 students enrolled in the class submitted their written responses. Of those remaining 3, 2 were traditionally trained teachers working towards their Montessori credential. When asked for the reason for not completing the form, time and demands of testing were their responses.

Although these discussions and written activity were specifically designed and included in this class for the Ignatian mentoring project, I realized that it should be included in this course each year. The goals of self awareness and reflection are vital for new teachers, especially those going forth with a new pedagogical philosophy. The ideas of Ignatian pedagogy and Jesuit education so closely intertwine with those of Montessori. Encouraging our graduates to practice these ideals reflects the universality of this University's mission.

The students in this course are teachers in Montessori schools. The ideas of Montessori philosophy exist for adults in these schools on a daily basis. A lingering question remains-would teachers not in Montessori schools answer the questions in the same way that teachers with such a profound spiritual foundation?

Resources

From the Division of Mission and Identity, Xavier University:

[Cura What? A Graduate Student's Guide to Understanding & Living the Jesuit Mission](#).

Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises.

Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy-A Desktop Primer).

The Secret of Childhood, Maria Montessori

Heroic Leadership, Chris Lowney

Nurturing the Spirit in non-sectarian classrooms by Aline Wolf