Servant-Leadership and the Montessori Philosophy

A Principal's View

—Christine M. A. Lapierre and Bonnie Caldwell

Servant-leadership is a philosophy of leadership that has stirred the hearts of many leaders across the world over the last few decades. They can be found in organizations such as businesses, education and non-profits. Taking into consideration Robert Greenleaf's (1991) assertion, they believe that "the servant-leader is servant first…It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p. 7). According to Greenleaf, a true natural servant-leader responds by listening first and has developed the ability to do so. The followers then see this person as a servant.

Though there has been some attention in servant-leadership in schools (Crippen & Willows, 2019), a search indicates that there are no articles that examine how a Montessori public elementary school principal can be a servant-leader with the staff, children, and parents in their school. The purpose of this article, then, is to delve into various key practices of servant-leadership and how one principal, Bonnie, integrated them in her Montessori school. Bonnie and I (Christine) discussed her servant-leadership interests and how she implemented them in her work as principal. Before examining these key practices, we will present, in brief, the Montessori philosophy.

THE HISTORY OF THE MONTESSORI PHILOSOPHY

Maria Montessori is considered one of the greatest educators of the twentieth century. Nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1949, 1950, and 1951 for her contributions to education, peace and the advocacy of the child, she left a lasting legacy on education and on the world as a whole. Montessori (1995) established her educational approach on love for the child. She commented, "Whatever be our political or religious affiliations, we are all near to the child and we all love him. It is from this love that comes the child's power for unity" (p. 288). Furthermore, Montessori (1972a) remarked that her mission in life was to defend the child, and therefore, to educate the adult, whether it be parent or teacher, to understand the special relationship that exists between them:

> In going about his dedicated labors on behalf of the child, the adult must realize above all else that his task concerns a revelation of the child's soul. If he does so, the steps he subsequently takes and the aid he offers the child will be of great importance; if he does not do so, all his work will go for nothing. This work must have a twofold objective: constructing a suitable environment and bringing about a new attitude toward children on the part of adults. (p. 91)

Born in Chiaravalle, Italy in 1870, Montessori overcame a significant amount of prejudice against what a girl could study at that time. With persistence, she eventually became the first female physician in Italy, in 1896. For many years, she worked with children with developmental disorders, as part of her duties at the University of Rome. Basing her approach on the education of the senses that Froebel, Itard and Seguin (Standing, 1984) worked with, Montessori developed unique materials for the children to use. She

believed that with a special educational program that she developed, the children would be capable of learning various new things, and they did, much to the surprise of other people.

For many years after her graduation, Montessori had her own private practice, worked with various hospitals, lectured at women colleges, and was active in her Professorship in Anthropology (Standing, 1984). Her biographer, Standing, noted how Montessori built the foundation for her eventual work with children, during the first part of her career. Here is how her story unfolded.

One day a building society in San Lorenzo, in the slums of Rome, approached Montessori, asking her to open a school for children, ages three to six years old. They had no place to go during the day when their illiterate parents were at work and were disorderly and undisciplined. Montessori (1972b) described the fifty children as, "tearful, frightened children, so timid that I could not get them to speak. Their faces were expressionless, their eyes bewildered as if they had never seen anything before in their lives" (p. 115). Nevertheless, she was eager to try out with "normal" children the method that she had developed for children with developmental disorders.

The first "Children's House," or "Casa dei bambini" in Italian, opened on January 6, 1907 (Montessori, 1972b). Montessori only had the "objects" that she had used with the other children, and yet, within a few months, great changes occurred in the children. She and her teacher were amazed at what they observed. The children's negative behaviors disappeared, and, in their stead, Montessori perceived "the true spirit within the child" (Wolf, 1996, p. 28).

These were some of the surprising changes they noticed. The children worked with the material Montessori had developed and when they did, the children had "a remarkable state of concentration"

(Montessori, 1972b, p. 114). After finishing, they appeared to be "satisfied, rested, and happy," with "eyes gleaming," and "mentally stronger and healthier than before" (p. 114). Montessori claimed that it was the children who had shown her their true selves. When questioned about the reason behind these startlingly transformations, Montessori stated that the environment had removed the obstacles to their spiritual development. Before the opportunity of being in Montessori's classroom, these children could not express their true nature of spirituality (Wolf, 1996). Additionally, another part of the explanation was that the children were given material to work with that taught them more than what verbal instruction could have. Furthermore, since Montessori did not have a budget to purchase furniture, they made child-sized furniture that allowed the children to work with the material whenever they desired.

Montessori's (1972b) observations of the children's behavior and the choices they made in the classroom led her to deeply reflect on what she was seeing. The children taught her many things about "the unexplored depths of the child's mind" (p. 119). They could concentrate for long periods of time on the material. They would repeat an exercise many times without interruption and wanted to independently put away the material. Moreover, the children developed self-discipline that came from within, and demonstrated kindness and joy.

Then there were several surprises that occurred. The children spontaneously began to write. Montessori (1972b) affirmed that "This was the greatest event to take place in the first Children's Home" (p. 131). Soon after, they began to read. Hearing about all the marvellous changes that were taking place in the children, visitors of all kinds began to come to the school. The children were gracious and outgoing with them. Montessori then made a great decision: she

gave up her other occupations to devote all her time to “follow the child” (Wolf, 1996, p. 27).

She began to lecture, train teachers from around the world, and write about her work. Articles about the Children’s Houses appeared in well-known magazines around the world. In 1914, McClure himself, of *McClure’s Magazine* in the States, invited Montessori to give a course in America. Thomas Edison invited her to stay with his family while she was there. Soon after, Alexander Graham Bell founded the American Montessori Society and opened a school in Canada where his family spent the summers. Today there are Montessori schools all over the States, and on every continent.

Montessori (1989a) received many invitations to lecture and train teachers around the world. She traveled to France, Holland, Germany, Spain, England, Austria, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the United States, Argentina, Norway and Sweden. When these students opened their own schools, they witnessed the same kind of transformations that Montessori did in her own schools. Wolf (1996) indicated that Montessori’s writings about the spiritual nature of the child were key to her work. Though she did not define it in any detail (Formankova, 2007), Montessori could have understood that it was related to having a sense of belongingness, feeling safe, as well as feeling loved and respected (Wolf, 1996). In turn, the child would find meaning and purpose in life, as well as knowing what way to act in a situation. Montessori was clear that her educational approach drew out of the child the spiritual principles that were already there. Montessori (1972b) commented on the Montessori schools around the world:

> The extraordinary rapidity with which this system of education has been adopted for children of every race and every social condition has provided us with an abundance of experimental

> data and enabled us to identify common features and universal tendencies and thus to determine the natural laws upon which the education of children should be based. (p. 140)

One concept that Montessori (1989b, 1989c) highlighted was what she referred to as the inner teacher. She believed that every child was born with an inner teacher that directed the child's development. This inner teacher guided the child to do many things that were taken for granted, such as when to walk, when to talk, when to be more independent with activities such as putting on a coat and when to write. The following assertion illuminates Montessori's (1989c) profound thinking about the inner teacher:

> Hence a prejudice has found its way into the adult-the notion that the life of the child can be changed or improved only through teaching. This prejudice impedes the understanding of the fact that the child constructs himself, that he has a *teacher* within himself and that this inner teacher also follows a programme and a technique of education, and that we adults by acknowledging this unknown teacher may enjoy the privilege and good fortune of becoming its assistants and faithful servants by helping it with our co-operation. (p. 46)

The inner teacher remains within the adult as they age. It is sometimes known as the voice of conscience or the higher self. Montessori claimed that, for the child to attain their true potential, the adult must undergo change on how to truly see the child. Connection with the inner teacher would facilitate this process.

Finally, during her stay in India for seven years, from 1939 to 1946, Montessori was inspired to develop most of her cosmic plan curriculum for Montessori elementary students, that she had started earlier. When she wrote a book about it, Montessori (1989d)

declared that this curriculum would assist the child to understand more fully the universe, and to have a sense of wonder and awe. It would also lead the child to see that all life is interconnected. Hence, the child would begin to ask certain spiritual questions such as "What am I? What is the task of man in this wonderful universe? Do we merely live here for ourselves, or is there more for us to do?" (Montessori, 1989d, p. 6).

Wolf (1996) stated that, in her point of view, the cosmic curriculum provided a spiritual benefit for both the child and the adult: "a sense of purpose in their lives" (p. 95), where they could also see their place in the universe. Some scholars maintained that Montessori's worldview was highly influenced by her stay in India. Others, such as Miller (2002) believed that "Montessori's spirituality was universalist throughout most of her career" (p. 231). Maria Montessori's educational philosophy was grounded in the belief of the development of the child rather than educating the child. She understood that children have an innate desire to learn and if provided experiences at the appropriate times, learning would occur in a natural, authentic manner. As part of the Montessori curriculum for different ages, serving the children allowed them to grow skills, confidence, and empathy, in a meaningful context (Montessori, 1995).

Montessori passed away in 1952, as she was planning a lecture tour in Africa, leaving behind her numerous books and writings, a reputation as scholar, researcher, educator and advocate of children and women (Miller, 2002). She had trained four to five thousand teachers from around the world. Montessori schools all over the world celebrated 150 years of Montessori's legacy, in 2020.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE MONTESSORI PHILOSOPHY AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

There are many aspects of servant-leadership that are in common with the Montessori philosophy. In this section, we will bring out how Greenleaf's servant-leadership principles helped develop holistic relationships among people who worked together in the same organization. Moreover, he encouraged the development of the whole self in servant-leaders and followers and cultivated the spiritual aspect of followers at the same time of his own. Additionally, Greenleaf believed in the importance of love, humility, and patience. He did all of this by letting the employees have freedom to develop their potential.

In exploring the Montessori philosophy, we will examine those same elements for the child, as well as the teacher. Like many contemporary writers in the field of education, Montessori (1972b), believed in a holistic approach to the relationship with the child. Furthermore, she claimed that the teacher is responsible for assisting the child to develop the whole self. Montessori affirmed that the spiritual aspect is what creates the approach towards wholeness, with freedom. Emphasizing the importance of love, she asserted that teachers could cultivate the spiritual aspect of themselves. Additionally, she spoke about the importance of developing humility and patience.

Greenleaf chose to take a different stance in AT&T (Frick, 2004) where he worked, compared to other leaders. He made contact with the employees in a holistic manner. In other words, he maintained that every person had a spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical self. When one of these aspects was neglected, the employee was not happy at work, and Greenleaf comprehended why. He tried to involve employees in activities that drew out of them the

development of these aspects. He would listen deeply to everyone that he came in contact with so that he would know and understand them better and learn what positive ideas they could bring to the company. He brought experts in to talk to his colleagues, always willing to facilitate the holistic development of their selves.

Montessori also talked about approaching the child holistically. This implied the spiritual, the mental, the emotional and the physical aspects of the child, just like Greenleaf did with adults. As mentioned in the earlier section, Montessori also taught thousands of student teachers that the environment is key to the development of the child, so that the child will be at peace. Then the quality of the teaching made an important impact (Montessori, 1972b). The teacher needed to be mindful that they brought their holistic self to the classroom, and children would follow their example in everything that they did.

To know Greenleaf was to know that he was a spiritual person who approached people with a sense of wholeness (Keith, 2016). He also considered the whole person in his work. In fact, wholeness is what is shared between the servant-leader and the led (Greenleaf, 2002). Learning from E. B. White, he began to "see things whole" (Frick, 2004, p. 100) and embraced the concept in his work. Greenleaf commented that one must have direction in which to move, having confidence that the goal will reveal itself to them, in due time. He followed this principle himself, when he began to prepare for retirement at an earlier age, while he was still at AT&T. Putting cycles into motion, he invited people of all walks of life to come to the company to advance the wholeness of the employees, and he ventured outward to teach and contribute to leadership training.

For Montessori, wholeness is a concept that applied to the child as well as to the teacher. Wholeness referred to a harmonious unity.

The idea that the child learns how to see things whole is a crucial one for the Montessori philosophy. The teachers' presentations with the children are aimed at fulfilling this goal. When materials are laid out, piece by piece, the child constructs a mental picture of the whole. This develops their abilities to think in different ways. It would be congruent to say that the teacher also brings their whole self into the classroom and with their colleagues. Montessori would agree with Greenleaf about following a direction that would eventually lead to a goal. Later in her life, she stated that her whole life was an example of her principle that "the preparations of life are indirect" (Standing, 1984, p. 26). Speaking from her own experiences, she ascertained that one must be "obedient to events" (p. 31).

Like Montessori, Greenleaf believed in relying on "*spirit"* (Frick, 2004, p. 130), particularly as part of his favorite strategies to making decisions. It was clear to the hundreds of friends that Greenleaf had and corresponded with that spirit was a key facet of Greenleaf's work and thinking. Frick (2004), Greenleaf's biographer, stated that Greenleaf's favorite way of addressing people was "In the spirit" (p. 202). As he progressed through life, Greenleaf began to devote more time to thinking about spirituality, or spirit as he preferred to say. Greenleaf considered spirit as central to his life and work, as well as for others: "Spirit can be said to be the driving force behind the motive to serve" (Frick, 2004, p. 316). He learned early in his career that it was important that people could learn to cultivate spirit, and that spirit needed to be linked to what is practical and based on experience. Greenleaf contended that there are adults who can be called "spirit carriers":

> Servants who nurture the human spirit are spirit carriers. They serve to connect those who do the work of the world, or are being prepared for that role, with vision from both past and

> contemporary prophets. Those servants find the resources and make the intensive effort to be an effective influence. (Frick, 2004, p. 11)

Montessori (1995) held that the teacher needs to "serve the spirit of the child" (p. 281). She likened the teacher to a servant who takes care of the needs of their employer. When teachers implement her philosophy, they come to serve the children, each other, the parents, and the community. This points directly to the Montessori teachers developing a servant-leader heart. When a teacher is conscious of the spiritual aspect of the child, they change their behavior towards the child and relates to them differently, with honor and respect. They also know that the development of the spiritual self of the child is very important, as it influences all other aspects of the child. When teachers accept their spiritual nature, they too change their behavior towards their colleagues, becoming gentler, kinder and more compassionate.

Greenleaf (2002) also emphasized love when he talked about his philosophy. Indicating that "love is an undefinable term" (p. 52), he stated:

> But any human service where the one who is served should be loved in the process requires community, a face-to-face group in which the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited, or as close to it as it is possible to get. (p. 52)

Greenleaf declared that in businesses, one loves the people who are there to serve others, as part of the mission of the company. In turn, this love would spread towards the customers and the community. It appears that Greenleaf considered love to be universal.

Another way in which the Montessori philosophy is analogous to

the servant-leadership philosophy is about love. Love is an important quality that Montessori believed was essential for a positive relationship with the child. She even wrote a chapter called “Love and its Source—The Child” (Montessori, 1995). It also relates to adults, she maintained: “Love, like that which we feel for the child, must exist potentially between man and man, because human unity does exist and there is not unity without love” (p. 289). Therefore, as teachers develop this capacity to love, it overflows into the relationships that they have with other adults. Montessori offered this statement that is very thought-provoking, “In order to become great, the grownup must become humble and learn from the child” (p. 293). She meant that the adult must learn about love in the way that the child gives love.

Greenleaf (2008) also underscored the necessity of being patient with others, since there are no perfect employees or supervisors, including oneself. Expressing irritation, a lesser form of anger, is not a weakness that the servant-leader would indulge in either, since the employees would feel alienated. That situation would be counterproductive to establishing a servant-leader atmosphere. However, there would be times when the servant-leader would express disapproval with the behavior of an employee and at the same time show acceptance of them (Greenleaf, 2008). It would be different from the former example.

Montessori (1972b) emphasized that teachers need to work on their greatest weaknesses- anger and pride. While her advice was related to the teacher child relationship, these two weaknesses also become very important in relationships between adults. She pointed out that adults usually do not express anger between themselves, because they are concerned about what the other will think about them. Yet, the opposite of anger, patience, is an essential quality for

a fruitful relationship with adults. Patience indicates that one is willing to accept the other's opportunity to better themselves, without others around them criticizing them for their imperfections. Montessori (1972b) declared that the teachers with the same weaknesses would eventually support each other by "finding strength in their union" (p. 150).

The opposite of pride is humility and both Montessori (1972b) and Greenleaf (Sipe & Frick, 2015) talked about this quality. Montessori saw it as an openness to learn from the child and colleagues on how to better meet the needs of the child. Greenleaf perceived it as an aspect of the servant-leader who realizes they do not know all the answers and tell their employees that. In each instance, humility leads to more creativity and accomplishments.

Additionally, Montessori (1995) education is set up as a triangle, with the child, the environment and the teacher. The focus is on the child. The teacher follows the child to meet their needs and to help them reach their fullest potential. Montessori (1972b) was emphatic that the teachers need to prepare themselves "interiorly" (p. 149) to truly observe and understand the child's true nature. In like manner, the servant-leader listens to their followers to meet their needs and to make sure that they benefit, before the servant-leader acts (Greenleaf, 2002). Therefore, it can be said that the teacher becomes a servant-leader. When the teacher embodies the qualities set out by Montessori for the child, they are more apt to interact with their team members in the same way. Therefore, the teacher also expects the principal of the school to behave in like manner. Though Montessori did not speak about the principal of the school, what she did state about the teachers can be transferred to the principal.

In terms of the principal of the school, she could take Greenleaf's (1991) example who spoke about the servant-leader

knowing about where their staff needed the highest support. This would imply that the Montessori principal would trust their teachers to know what is best for each child in the classroom. The principal of the Montessori school can also be a servant-leader. They co-create a peaceful school environment with the teachers.

As Greenleaf (1991) mentioned, the servant-leader is intentional about how to serve best. He distinguishes two kinds of leaders, “the leader-first” and the “servant-first” (p. 7). The biggest difference between the two is that the servant-leader, as principal for example, like the teacher, makes sure that other people’s most important needs are being met. They practice empathy, by understanding where the teachers are in their progress with the children and other teachers. Moreover, the principal provides all the resources that the teachers need to best serve the children. Like the teacher with the child, the principal approaches the teachers holistically.

It seemed that for Montessori (1989d) every child, and in fact, every human being, seeks to fulfil a unique “mission” from birth (p. 31). Greenleaf held a similar belief. With the influences from childhood on, particularly from his father (Frick, 2004), Greenleaf was looking for an opportunity to realize his most important goal, which was to work in the biggest company that he could. That is how he found AT&T. He put himself in the place of the employees and began to serve them.

For Greenleaf (1991) freedom is implied in the way the servant-leader works. They give their employees freedom to do what they can to bring up problems to them, as well as ideas for solutions. Creating an atmosphere where it is alright to make mistakes, the servant-leader confers with the employees on what needs to be changed in the system to prevent a problem from recurring.

Finally, the Montessori philosophy highlights the importance of

supporting the child to become independent and self-disciplined by giving them freedom of choice and freedom of movement in the classroom. It means that the teachers carry the flame of freedom to the children, who in turn, attain their full potential. The Montessori principal, as servant-leader, supports the teachers in the same way by giving them freedom to develop their highest potential, for the best interests of the children.

HOW I CHOSE THE PRINCIPAL TO BE INTERVIEWED

How I (Christine) came to invite Bonnie, the principal of a public Montessori elementary school, for some interviews is a story like Jaworski's (2011) synchronicity stories. A few years ago, when I was doing my PhD, my PhD supervisor was talking to me about a public Montessori elementary school where she went to meet preservice teachers doing their practicum. She described the environment in positive terms and I never forgot her anecdote.

Two years ago, when I was teaching a course with preservice teachers at the university, I became interested in finding a Montessori teacher that I could invite to speak to the preservice teachers about classroom management. This would give them another perspective about the topic as well as introduce them to another form of education. I decided to call the school that my supervisor had mentioned to me and asked for a teacher who could come to my class as a guest. I was transferred to the principal (Bonnie) and I explained to her what I was looking for and why. Much to my surprise, she volunteered to come instead. I was thrilled!

Bonnie gave a wonderful presentation and really piqued the students' interest. She made connections between what the students were learning and what she was doing in her school. It was a positive experience for everyone. I decided to invite her for the second year. Bonnie was so passionate about Montessori and her topic that the

students were enthralled. During the debrief with the students, after Bonnie had left, they had glowing words to describe how much they appreciated her presentation. In retrospect I can see how she was talking like a natural servant-leader which made her presentation so compelling.

I decided to keep in touch. Last summer we touched base again and I asked her if she would like to write an article with me about Montessori. Servant-leadership came up in our conversation and we both agreed that it was an exciting idea for both of us. At the same time, I was taking a course at the Greenleaf Center and I had decided to do the final paper that was an option for us. Bonnie was interested in doing an interview with me and I was able to suggest to the facilitator our topic that fit with the course. I brought in the resources that we studied for the course. Eventually, the facilitator, who was mentoring me, suggested that we submit the article to the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. That is how we came to be where we are now.

THE ROOTS OF BEING A SERVANT-LEADER

Christine: You have indicated to me that you have a great interest in servant-leadership. When did the roots of this philosophy begin to flourish in you?

Bonnie: My belief in servant-leadership in education began when I was an impressionable, curious, education student many years ago. Some of the courses I was enrolled in required an observation of service as part of our assignment. At the time I would do the required service and reflection just to complete the task so I could graduate, but what I didn't realize was how embedded serving would become in my everyday work as an educator. It has been through the process of serving others that I have grown my capacity as a leader to lead with ethical integrity, compassion, and humility.

Christine: Could you give me some other examples as to when else you have been serving others?

Bonnie: I think I have been in service of others my entire career beginning with being a classroom teacher and ensuring my students were the focus of my work. I'm not sure that educators recognize or realize the organic formation of their servant-leadership through their genuine care for others in their work.

BEING A MONTESSORI GUIDE

Christine: Why did you become a Montessori teacher or "guide" as some schools call it?

Bonnie: I was a public-school teacher before I became interested in the Montessori philosophy. I was introduced to the Montessori curriculum through a teaching colleague who was employed in a public Montessori school. Her stories of what she was doing in her classroom and what the children were capable of intrigued me and many of the values of Montessori aligned with my beliefs in educating children.

Christine: What was your experience as a Montessori teacher or guide?

Bonnie: In a Montessori classroom, the lead adult is termed a *guide* rather than a teacher. The term *guide* reflects the adult's role in guiding children in their learning rather than teaching them. As a Montessori guide, I understood my responsibility not to impart my knowledge onto my students but to provide conditions and opportunities for them to realize their own potential.

The intentionality of Montessori lessons was something I appreciated and continue to reflect on. Being mindful of not overwhelming the child through great amounts of talking, keeping movements paced so not to appear hurried, being relaxed and calm during delivery of lessons, and movement with purpose were all built

into the constructs of my Montessori lessons. I appreciated how I could nurture learning in various ways throughout the work period. My actions guided the children and they, too, generally became peaceful and careful in their learning environment. There was something so beautiful about my classroom when everything was as it was intended to be: organized, peaceful, and loving.

Christine: You have demonstrated that you are passionate about your experiences as a Montessori guide and that it created a foundation for your work as a principal with heart. Greenleaf (1991) wrote about the feelings that a servant-leader has and that when the servant-leader is transparent, the followers trust the leader more. Did you find that this also occurred with people that you worked with as a guide?

Bonnie: When we think of effective leaders, we recognize their emotional investment in others. A leader should be genuine and open with others as much as possible. There will be times and situations where confidentiality is needed but if there is a trust relationship created and nurtured, a leader will be supported. Trust is a two-way relationship and those I have worked with have earned it. They have demonstrated care and compassion to others and worked in support of the greater good. They have set their own desires and needs as a secondary priority after determining what impact their choices have on the community.

Christine: Could you talk some more about your growth as a servant-leader, before becoming a principal?

Bonnie: To be completely candid, I never really thought about my growth as a servant-leader until later in my career when revisiting servant-leadership in graduate school. I just did what felt natural to me. Now that I am more cognizant of the term of servant-leadership, I do a lot of reflecting and journaling as part of my

personal leadership growth and this has helped me to be a better practitioner and role model to others.

My observations in the Montessori realm and as a Montessori guide has definitely highlighted the authentic servant-leadership embedded in Maria Montessori's philosophy. When the child is at the core of the work, every decision, every aspect of the classroom teachings and environment become about what is best for the child. When, as a teacher or guide, you are able to set your own agenda aside and allow the children to provide feedback and advocate for their own learning and you address their needs, to me, that is true servant-leadership. Servant-leadership is not about my comfort and doing things that are easy just because it's always been done that way.

Christine: Your focus on the team instead of individual accomplishments reminds me of a statement of Hayes and Comer (2010). They stated that when a leader has humility it is "about one's values and attitudes about oneself, others, and the world" (p. xi). Montessori (1972b) also emphasized the importance of humility in the teacher. Does this resonate with you?

Bonnie: Very much so. Education, whether it be as a student, teacher or leader, is never a solo endeavour. Success is determined by the success of each child in a school and that cannot be addressed or accomplished by one person. My interpretation of Montessori's belief in humility in the teacher has to do with allowing the child to be the driver of his learning.

Often teachers feel it is their responsibility to be the keepers of knowledge in a classroom when in reality, it is liberating and effective to provide the child with the tools and skills to gain knowledge through experience. Children are capable and curious and, if interested and engaged, will learn in more meaningful ways

than a teacher being a “sage on the stage”. Teachers must be comfortable with letting go of some of the control in their classroom and allowing the children to have more control as advocates of their education.

Christine: A research study I conducted (Lapierre, 2017) confirmed what you said here: that observing in a Montessori classroom, its peace and tranquility, inspires people to become Montessori teachers. In turn, they self-transcend and become peace makers themselves (Montessori, 1972a). Children, then, look upon the teacher as a role model and develop peace and love themselves (Montessori, 1995). Have you experienced this congruence between guides and children in your teaching?

Bonnie: Yes! The nature of a Montessori classroom is to be an environment where children are mentored by other children and the guide. When you step into a Montessori classroom where the children are, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) presented, in flow, everything is calm, purposeful, and happy. When the adult is regulated, the children are regulated. I feel the same applies to a school leader and the staff. Humans are influenced by each other’s energy so if you want to build positive energy among your community, it starts with you first!

BEING A MONTESSORI PRINCIPAL

Christine: Can you tell me about your experiences as a Montessori principal?

Bonnie: I began my Principalship in a Montessori public school. It was Maria Montessori’s philosophy of having children realize their purpose through meaningful experiences and understanding of the cosmos that appealed to me as an educator. My belief was that the recognition that humans are a small part of a very large existence is how we remain humble. My work as a school-based leader still

affords me the ability to lead by example as a servant-leader. The qualities and values I prioritize include gratitude, humility, and authenticity. I embed aspects of servant-leadership as a Principal not because I have to or have learned to but because of who I am as a person.

Christine: You have touched upon some important leadership qualities such as gratitude (Emmons, 2006), humility (Hayes & Comer, 2010), and authenticity (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). According to Greenleaf's thinking you can be considered as a natural servant-leader. I say that because your willingness to serve was exhibited in the way that you placed the interests of your staff first. According to Hayes and Comer (2010) this quality will attract the followers to you, your teachers. Do you see whether that is happening in your school?

Bonnie: The role of a school Principal has many facets. Part educator, part leader, part manager, part designer, part diplomat, and part CEO. I wear many hats during the day usually at the same time. There is also much literature written on the types of leadership one can aspire to embody; Distributive, Visionary, Transformational, Servant, and the list continues.

My belief is that school cultures are visioned by the leader and are developed through the voice and values of the school community. What the leader, or in my case, Principal, values ultimately guide the staff, students, and parents in creating an environment grounded in those values. I can never let my ego guide my decisions or dominate a communication as I understand my role is not to be right but to do what is right. My life values have led me to where I am today and how I lead my school community. I have always been, and will always be, of service to others in some capacity.

Christine: You have eloquently expressed your desire to be a

positive role model for your staff. This indicates respect for each one of them, whatever they could bring to the conversation. Furthermore, you implied that you are willing to look at all sides of an issue and are willing to be "wrong" (Hayes & Comer 2010, p. 83) so that your staff could see that you are not perfect. How do you approach your staff on this point?

Bonnie: I would accept that my staff are also not perfect. I believe we all come to this work with our hearts in the right places and wanting to do our very best each day. This engenders trust and a sense of fairness. To be an effective leader is to be authentic in the decisions, priorities, vision, and values one holds.

In my experience, efficiency addresses the managerial aspects of leadership while effectiveness focuses on the people. My realization of leadership is grounded in "what is best for students" and often efficiency is not a factor that I consider. I have built a strong foundation of trust relationships with my school community by ensuring I am visible, approachable, and with an unwavering priority of service. This commitment has not changed since I was a beginning teacher and although my official "title" may have evolved, how I view my work has not.

Christine: Having said that, what do you think about what Autry (2004) said, that "Efficiency is not the same as effectiveness, and a preoccupation with efficiency has proved, over and over again, to be the enemy of effectiveness" (p. xvii)?

Bonnie: I interpret Autry's statement to mean when one prioritizes efficiency over effectiveness, which to me is actioning change where and when change is needed, then the focus becomes one of quantity over quality. Although there is nothing wrong with being efficient, there is far greater impact as a school leader, when you are effective.

To me, efficiency is orderly, organized, timely but the work of a school leader is messy, non-linear, and takes as much time as required to be thorough and thoughtful. I don't believe growth and progress are fostered through efficiency as much as effectiveness and with so much of our world either already on or moving towards a digital, virtual presence, humanity should not be focused on efficiency as a measure of success. Would you rather a surgeon who is always on schedule or one who adapts and responds to individual patient's needs as they are presented?

Christine: Well said**.** What role does trust play in your work?

Bonnie: I believe in the importance of building trust. I understand that trust comes up in the field of leadership. If a leader is not trusted or does not trust their people, then everything that comes up is viewed through the lens of suspicion. It becomes a focus of "who is this benefiting?" That is why servant-leadership is an integral part of my leadership competency. If I am of service to others, and in particular each child, my staff know that decisions and priorities are grounded in the children benefiting. It has taken years and many key decisions to build trust relationships among the staff and with each individual and I view every interaction as an opportunity to maintain the trust relationship. I'm not saying I have always succeeded but I do try.

Christine: Yes, in servant-leadership it is an outcome of being perceived as a servant by the followers. For Wheelan (2016) it is also a key to building a high performing team. Greenleaf (1979) described the feelings you have when you contemplate your work, that "service was the key to a fulfilled life" (p. 78). Do you have that feeling?

Bonnie: I often think about those who ask, "What is my school doing for me?" rather than "What am I doing for my school?" and offer my observation that those who are of the first question mindset

are often not fulfilled or happy in their work. It is our basic human instinct to support and help others and I believe doing so provides us with a purpose.

THE PROVINCE'S LEADERSHIP QUALITY STANDARDS

Christine: How do you do your work with provincial standards for principals?

Bonnie: As a Principal I am guided by established leadership competencies as per our regulatory body. These competencies, or qualities, provide a framework for educational leaders in Alberta for their leadership growth. The first standard is based on fostering effective relationships and the expectation that "a leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as: (a) acting with fairness, respect and integrity; (b) demonstrating empathy and a genuine concern for others" (Alberta Education, 2018).

I hold these qualities in high regard as a servant-leader. I understand my role in creating a culture of care at my school and I make it a priority to be visible, have connections with others, and take time to genuinely listen to what is being spoken. A genuine concern for others' well-being begins with a genuine effort to make the connection. It would be efficient and easy for me to finish typing or reading while speaking with a teacher or student, but I feel if they are taking the time to come and have a conversation with me I, too, should take the time to be fully present during the conversation.

Christine: I find that you demonstrate a large sense of self-awareness that Lopez (2012) considered "the fuel of the servant-leader" (p. 27). Moreover, what you articulated above is a clear vision of what you would like the school to be about, a future that you and others really are concerned about. Kim (2002) would agree

with you about your school staff internalizing the values that you espoused, knowing that step by step you will together achieve what you are striving for. Additionally, you mentioned that you endeavoured to embody the characteristics identified by Autry (2004) as essential to being a servant-leader: be authentic, be vulnerable, be accepting, be present, and be useful (pp. 10-19). Can you speak about these qualities?

Bonnie: I have continued to mention the qualities throughout our conversation as I feel they embody servant-leadership in my context. It is most important that I continue to be open to learning and growing as a servant-leader and that I practice and express the characteristics as defined by Autry. The characteristics are defined in the context of each individual and live not as independent entities in servant-leadership, but as part of a collective within a leader. Self-awareness is also a key concept in leadership as it is part of developing self-efficacy as a leader which supports effective leadership practices.

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Christine: How are you developing leadership in your school?

Bonnie: Part of my work in formal leadership, and part of the Leadership Quality Standards, is in developing leadership capacity. Principals recognize the power of a strong leadership team in building a cohesive, dynamic, creative, collaborative school staff. Montessori (1972b) also emphasized the import of humility in the teacher. Rarely do effective teams happen by chance and I try to model my beliefs at all times. I feel strongly about students and staff having a sense of belonging at our school and I consistently use language to support my beliefs.

I refer to our staff as Team, our students as Family, and our stakeholders as Community. Learning Leaders are valuable members

of our staff in regard to being a link between teaching staff and administration, not as go-betweens but more within leading the system and school work in a teaching context. Learning Leaders are often selected because they demonstrate leadership capacity and are respected colleagues to their teaching peers. Our Learning Leaders have a robust understanding of their roles in the service of others to support our school's plan of improving student achievement.

Christine: In this example, you demonstrate that you have foresight. Kim (2002) stated "In the end, foresight is about being able to see all things that are important" (p. 10). Greenleaf (1991) helped us in understanding that awareness on the part of the servant-leader creates a situation where they can see all things in the environment and what is coming up next. It would be comprehensible that as you serve all the groups in your environment that they, in turn, will become servant-leaders themselves. Do you see this happening in your school?

Bonnie: I continue to build capacity in my Assistant Principal and Learning Leaders to understand and value the qualities of servant-leadership. By providing opportunities for them to support the growth and progress of our staff in leading Professional learning and development opportunities and through self-reflection of their work, I am building their capacity as servant-leaders. During our Leadership Team meetings, we review our accountabilities by discussing what learning has occurred, our own learning, and how we move forward.

To be held accountable for leading a school community is not a comfortable place but it does elevate one's own awareness of leadership. Not everyone can be a leader and those who are willing to be vulnerable will grow into stronger leaders. I also observe our Leadership team to have innate characteristics that foster their

growth as servant-leaders. Being a servant-leader does not mean pleasing everyone but finding a balance of what is right, what needs to be done, and what are our first steps. Servant-leadership is not easy as there are many personalities, beliefs, priorities, and values in place.

Having a leadership team strengthens my own leadership as the work is now a shared experience with all of us bringing different perspectives and strengths to our community. Being in service of others can be an exhausting endeavour but it is who I am at the core of my existence. Servant-Leadership, to me, does not mean being beneath or at the call of anyone but allowing me to have a purpose and fulfillment in serving others and in the company of others.

Christine: In this instance, you have been clear about your own purpose, which in turn establishes a solid underpinning on which other choices are based. Kim (2002) contended that this necessitates a deep sense of self-knowledge and, in turn, a profound awareness of one's core values. These core values "define who we are…both at the individual level and at the organizational level" (p. 14). You appear to be dedicated to what Lopez (2012) said about Greenleaf: he "saw servant leadership as a way to make the world a better place. He wanted us to take action" (p. 26). You see the whole, not just your immediate staff and students. Would you agree with Lopez (2012) that the development of relationships is key?

Bonnie: Maria Montessori developed a "Cosmic Education" and although it sounds quite abstract it actually speaks to the concept of how we are all connected in this universe. When, as humans, we understand this, it supports a connection to all things which, in turn, supports us to be more aware of our impact in the world. I believe that this knowledge is of utmost importance not just as a teaching point to our children but as a foundation for the human race to create

conditions for a harmonious existence on this planet. As I articulated earlier when we put the focus on serving others, we grow personally and as a community.

Christine: What other experiences have you had in serving others as a leader?

Bonnie: I have had the opportunity to organize a variety of professional collaborative experiences as part of my growth in leadership competencies. Working with other leaders in support of each other's professional practice has highlighted my affinity for serving others. As part of our generative dialogue process, we demonstrate vulnerability, humility, and a growing sense of self-awareness as we grow our self-efficacy as leaders. The work we do with each other transfers into the work we do in our school communities.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SERVANT-LEADER

Sipe and Frick (2009) have taken the characteristics of a servant-leader that have been explored in the literature and extended them to seven pillars and 21 competencies. The seven pillars are:1) Person of Character, 2) Puts People First, 3) Skilled Communicator, 4) Compassionate Collaborator, 5) Foresight, 6) Systems Thinker, and 7) Moral Authority. Each of these pillars has three competencies. These competencies will be presented below. Bonnie, in her role as principal and servant-leader, reflected on these characteristics and indicated where she considered her strengths and areas of growth were. It is very interesting to consider how she approached her work in a holistic manner.

Christine: The first pillar is being a Person of Character. The competencies are maintaining integrity, demonstrating humility and serving a higher purpose. You have mentioned humility a couple of times already. How do you bring the other two to your work?

Bonnie: As a servant-leader I feel it is important for me to be a person of strong integrity. I can only be of service to others if I have a deep awareness of my values and beliefs. It is not my role to expect others to share my personal values but to understand our shared school values through ethical practice and consistent expectations for all.

Christine: What about having a sense of purpose?

Bonnie: I think having a sense of purpose is what brings fulfilment to one's life. We all have an innate desire to feel needed, to be loved, and to love others, and by working towards these feelings we are able to gain a sense of purpose**.** Sometimes there is clarity but more often it is one's own sense of self in the context of others where purpose is realized.

Christine: The second pillar is Put People First. Competencies that are included here are displaying a servant's heart, being mentor-minded and showing care and concern. Your earlier example about building a leadership team in your school appears to speak to being mentor minded. Would you consider that to be accurate?

Bonnie: Oh, very much so. I love teaching and supporting others' growth. Over the years I have learned the difference between doing things for others and supporting others to do things for themselves. I know the importance of allowing the learning and growth to come from the individual. My role is not to be irreplaceable but to build capacity in others so I can be replaced.

Christine: What about the other competencies?

Bonnie: I place great value in collaborating with others and feel that it is through these connections that we are able to do our best work. My priority is in the relationships with others that are created and putting people first is the most important concept a leader can honour. Staff and students come wanting to do their very best and

when things go sideways it is not for lack of intention. An effective leader recognizes others need support, guidance, and care and provides opportunities for growth among struggles. I often ask the people in our school, adults and children, “how are you today” with a genuine curiosity and care.

Christine: The next pillar is Skilled Communicator. With this pillar, a servant-leader would demonstrate empathy, invite feedback, and communicate persuasively. Can you talk about your thinking about these?

Bonnie: As I have grown in my role as Principal, I have gained a deep awareness of the difference between being a problem solver and a generative communicator. It is not my role, or my desire, to solve anyone’s problems. I am more than interested in a dialogue that generates understanding and actions and will ask questions, so I have a full understanding of what is happening. I try not to make assumptions or add judgment during any interaction I have with others. I offer feedback when appropriate and often ask for feedback from others to ensure my perceptions are the same as others. We may have different perspectives, but we should all be looking at the same view.

Christine: The next one is Compassionate collaborator: that is, one expresses appreciation, builds teams and communities and negotiates conflict. What do they mean to you?

Bonnie: When one has a strong sense of relationships, being a compassionate collaborator is a priority pillar. People must feel valued and recognized for the work they do and the effort they make to build the success of the school. No one person has the responsibility or owns the results for a school’s achievements or reputation. Expressing appreciation does not have to mean accolades but acknowledging the parts are pieces of the whole. For me

negotiating conflicts is more about a generative dialogue. I believe every one of us comes to the work wanting to do our best and when that does not happen and conflicts arise, it is more purposeful to recognize our own role in the conflict. We can't control the actions of others, but we can control how we respond to those actions.

Christine: Do you consider that you have foresight? With this next pillar a servant-leader is a visionary, displays creativity, and takes courageous and decisive action. Can you give me some examples?

Bonnie: I feel the most recent example of my values was demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic class cancellation situation. Immediately after it was announced that classes were canceled and teaching and learning would be shifting to a digital platform, our leadership team agreed we needed to keep relationships at the core of our work. We began with connecting with each teacher and understanding where they were emotionally first, then technologically in moving forward with building an online presence.

We consistently messaged out to staff, students, and families: do the best you can; nothing more, nothing less. We were in it together and we would remain beside each other. Our weekly school messages always began and ended with similar messaging. Our focus on people and our care for others got us through the final 4 months of uncertainty, worry, discomfort, and continues to guide us in our new reality. Our leadership team recognized what was important and what would always remain as our legacy.

Christine: Those are great examples of all three competencies of pillar 5. The next to the last pillar is Systems Thinker. This means that one is comfortable with complexity, demonstrates adaptability, and considers the "Greater Good." Can you elaborate on these three?

Bonnie: In the Alberta Leadership Quality Standards one of the

competencies a leader should demonstrate is Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context. As a Principal it is expected by our governing authority that I recognize the work we do is in service of fostering a promising future for our society, and it is also what I believe.

A society that values education and has a strong, authentically inclusive, education system creates a strong foundation for a healthy, compassionate, vibrant community. I once read there is a sign at the entrance to a South African University that states, "the collapse of education is the collapse of a nation." When we acknowledge the responsibility we have, in education, to shape our future existence, we are humbled. It is through this humility that I lead our school community to nurture not just the best "in" the world, but the best "for" the world.

Christine: Those are insightful statements. How do you work with complexity?

Bonnie: I view complexity as an integral part of my world as a school leader. Complexity is what makes my job interesting and working through complex situations allows me to learn and become more adept in my role. It's not realistic to avoid complex situations. Therefore, I have learned to take time to gain as much information as I can about the situation. I then chunk out what is needing to be done to address it or come to a resolution, by tapping into the knowledge and expertise of others when possible. I always seek multiple perspectives, so the dialogue does not centre around my perceptions or assumptions. I don't know that I would say I will ever be "comfortable with complexity" as there is no growth in comfort and no comfort in growth.

Christine: Lastly a servant-leader leads with Moral Authority. To do so, one would accept and delegate responsibility, share power

and control, and create a culture of accountability. What are your thoughts about these competencies?

Bonnie: I would be imprudent to think I could lead alone and be able to meet the needs of both staff and students. The tenet of leading with moral authority is valued in my professional practice by serving and being served as a reciprocal process in my leadership. Sharing the responsibility of leadership and relinquishing the need for control at all times is liberating. Our successes are truly OUR successes and when things do not go as planned, we all take responsibility and work together to regroup, make plans, and move forward. As a Principal in a Montessori program, I nurture a culture of shared accountability by including and integrating many voices, many ideas, and many perspectives. I am then assured to have a well-informed foundation to make the best decisions for the school community.

CONCLUSION

We began this article with a focus on the Montessori philosophy and the connections with servant-leadership. Bonnie, as a Montessori principal, reflected on the various aspects of servant-leadership and presented her view about how she is a natural servant-leader in her school. Beginning with her roots, she explained how she became passionate about serving, when she was a young university student. Exploring various aspects of her position as a Montessori guide, and then as a principal, Bonnie demonstrated that she is intentional about serving everyone, throughout the week. With examples from her leadership team, Bonnie provided an examination of how she leads so that others in her school can also become servant-leaders. Finally, her consideration of the seven pillars of servant-leadership indicated that she continually strives every day to be a more thoughtful and compassionate servant-leader.

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Christine M. A. Lapierre, Ph.D., was inspired by Maria Montessori's philosophy for teaching children and youth of all ages and decided to dedicate her life to Montessori education. She is an instructor at the university level and has conducted her own research for her MEd, in Social Emotional Development, and at her PhD level, on Spirituality and Montessori Teacher Teams. Christine also worked on two other large research study teams. As a consultant, she specializes in Montessori learning and servant-leadership. Seeing many similarities between the two, she is enthusiastic about supporting leaders in their servant-leader journey. Her doctorate is in adult learning, and she is the author of many articles. Christine is passionate about Montessori education for children and taught several years in Montessori early childhood classrooms. Her Montessori training is MACTE accredited.

Bonnie Caldwell MEd is a school-based principal in a Montessori K-6 public school in Calgary, Canada. She has been a Montessori Casa guide, public school educator, Learning Leader, and Assistant Principal prior to her current role. Bonnie's interest and work in servant-leadership began when she was an undergraduate education student and continues to inform her leadership practice. She has presented at ULead, The Research Council of Alberta Symposium, and the Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference. Bonnie is also a graduate student (EdD) at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, studying professional learning and mentorship opportunities for continued growth of leadership competencies.