

The Mystery of Pleasure

***Thoughts on Teaching and learning Sex and Gender Relations in
a Democratic Montessori Elementary Environment***

Matthew Henry R. Rich

Director: Nahoon Montessori School

East London, South Africa

Cell: 072 517 9549

Email: matthew@freedomtolearn.co.za

Postal: M Rich
C/o Nahoon Montessori School
74 Beach Rd
Nahoon
East London
5247

“The great task of education must be to secure and to preserve a normality which, of its own nature, gravitates toward the centre of perfection. Today, instead, all we do is to prepare artificially men who are abnormal and weak, predisposed to mental illness, constantly needing care not to slip outward to the periphery where, once fallen, they become social outcasts. ... What weights upon it is the fact that, without knowing it, we are ignoring the creation of man and trampling on the treasures which God himself has placed in every child. Yet here lies the source of those moral and intellectual values which could bring the whole world on to a higher plane”.

Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (1988) p.219

“The question is: How do we help children learn about sexuality not in the gutter, not from misogynist song lyrics? Parents and schools have a responsibility to teach kids a partnership model of sexuality - a model in which one person is not dominant over the other, but where both are equal”.

Riane Eisler, *Making Sex a Sacred Pleasure: an interview with Jyotsna Sreenivasan for New Moon Network* (March/April 1996)

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Abstract

Dr Maria Montessori (1870-1952), saw the child as a ‘spiritual embryo’ naturally gravitating towards a state of ‘normalization’ through the evolving discovery of a ‘cosmic task’ that emerged from inquiring into one’s identity and role in the universe. Although she laid a philosophical framework for this ‘educating of the human potential’; she never openly discussed sexuality and sexual knowledge as a necessary part of this development. Dr Riane Eisler is a contemporary feminist systems theorist whose ‘partnership model’ of sexual politics embraces (and, in fact, openly endorses) the tenets of the Montessori approach.

This paper discusses the use of Eisler’s work in the teaching of sex and gender relations in the Montessori Elementary environment which caters generally for children between six and twelve years of age. The educational implications of this stage of development are explored in terms of Montessori’s developmental approach and an attempt is made to formulate a developmentally appropriate way of guiding the child in an exploration of sexuality and gender within the Montessori prepared environment. The focus is on demystifying the sexual act and viewing pleasure as a poignant spiritual experience in the context of a partnership liaison, instead of something based on guilt and shame and used to dominate and disempower.

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theoretical aspects it is possible for the author to give some thoughts and examples regarding an integrated approach to guiding the child in her exploration of sex and gender relations. The paper will explore a number of ways in which learners have expressed their interest in the topics covered by this paper and will go on to explore some of the approaches used or observed by the author in light of the theoretical understanding laid down above. The aim of this exploration is the demystification of the sexual act and a greater understanding of the spiritual power of sexuality in the context of a partnership liaison.

The ‘Dominator’ and ‘Partnership’ Paradigms and the concept of ‘Sacred Pleasure’

Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987)¹, traced two different models of human relationships throughout history. ‘Dominator’ refers to relationships based on ranking, control, exploitation, and pain. It is epitomized by what our society has constructed as typically male attributes (aggression, ambition, assertiveness, and – on the flipside - apathy, sycophancy, and passivity). By ‘partnership’ she means those relationship patterns based on equality, empathy, and pleasure. Partnership patterns are characterized by what are often considered to be feminine attributes (cooperation, peacefulness, generosity, and empathy). She also sees these patterns as applying to both individual and broadly societal situations, “be it in the bedroom or the boardroom, be it in our intimate relations or our international relations” (Ogden 2000).

Eisler stresses that these are learned behaviors that are designed to fit in with our society’s own constructions and that ultimately the need to dominate leaves everyone unfulfilled. She points out, however, that the basic model of male-superior/female-inferior relating - that is so prevalent - is not just a male issue, because women have also adopted this paradigm, whereas femininity is not equivalent to passivity (London 2006).

This way of thinking has imbued every aspect of our society and our public schools are one of the places where the ‘dominator’ paradigm is most palpable. We have constructed an artificial system of ranking and dividing children by age (in a way in

¹ Dr Eisler saw Minoan –Crete as the exemplar of partnership society before a cataclysmic collapse around 5000-6000 years ago. See also (*At Work Magazine* 1998)

which no other human institution does), measuring them and valuing them in terms of their performance against a set of arbitrary and discriminatory standards. Children are sifted and their future possibilities limited in terms of these criteria; they are molded for their place in a ‘dominator’ society. Children are made to sit silently in rows, to march from class to class to the sound of a bell, to show unquestioning obedience to the orders of their superiors (educators) or to face the consequences, educators must submit to their superiors, and so the chain goes, while all of them surrender without demur to a dogma and curriculum into which they had no, or little, input. This is preparation for the real world...or at least *a* real world...the dominator world of the boardrooms, battlefields, prisons, offices, hospitals, marriages, and classrooms which we send our children out to face by the thousands.

In short the ‘schooling system’ in terms of the way it is practiced today (and has been for the last 200 years)² epitomizes the dominator paradigm and is the ideal environment for instill the learned behaviours and steeping in the stereotypes which characterize this style of relating. On the other hand the group of ‘alternative learning’ environments referred to in the introduction of this paper appear to embrace the characteristics of a partnership approach; most namely: freedom. Max-Neef (1990) places freedom at the pinnacle of his taxonomy of human needs. He deconstructs the need for freedom to include – among others - the following elements: autonomy, passion, self-esteem, open-mindedness, equal rights, and the development of awareness. I feel that many involved in the unschooling and alternative learning movement would accept those as being goals of learning and development; likewise they are values which are directly counter-productive in terms of a dominator paradigm and extremely useful in the establishment of a partnership liaison.

These paradigms affect the way in which men and women (as well as boy- and girl-children) relate to one another in a host of settings. And obviously the dominator paradigm has a profound influence upon the way in which we construct sexuality and relate to each other sexually. In the dominator paradigm human relationships are governed by a struggle for power and competition. The sexual act has been constructed in

² For further reading on the history of factory schooling see (1) JT Gatto’s (1991) essay, *The Public School Nightmare*, (2) Matt Hern’s (2003) paper *The Emergence of Compulsory Schooling and Anarchist Resistance* or (3) Gatto’s *The Underground History of American Education* (2001).

this way and has thus become a violent³ act. Sexual relations have become an integral weapon in the power play which necessarily must fester below the surface of a dominator society. Throughout modern history sexual acts have been portrayed as dirty and have been associated with guilt and shame as a necessary means of subjugating and controlling women specifically by religious fundamentalists (who maintained comprehensive control of the Western psyche from around the fourth century until the liberation and have held some sort of moralistic prominence ever since)⁴. On the other end of the spectrum sex has been associated with violence, pain, and manipulation as part of the discourse of pornography. This "...linking of sex with domination and violence (is) not natural; it's part of the social construction of sexuality for the requirements of this top-down model, man-over-women, man-over-man, nation-over-nation, race-over-race. Ultimately, of course, these rankings are backed up by fear of pain and violence, as they must be" (London 2006).

In contrast Eisler proposes that there is an intimate connection between love and spirituality and that one might reach an ecstatic state almost like when one is fasting or meditating (see for instance London 2006), in the context of a loving, i.e. partnership, liaison. She proposes that apart from our clear evolutionary need for love and for altruism, exhibited by our unusually long weaning period, the study of neuro-peptides⁵ shows that humans gain pleasure from both *giving* and receiving acts of love, caring, empathy, and joy. She even cites studies concerning man's inborn capacity for empathy where it has been found that infants respond with stress to recordings of other children's cries, but not of their own (Harris 1999). Accordingly, Eisler has constructed the concept of 'sacred pleasure'. In a dominator society the sacred is associated with sin and

³ Feminist theorists such as Katherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (1998) talk about man's response to nature as being akin to that of a rapist: ravaging, penetrating, etc., Dr. Eisler would agree with this however she would argue that this is learned behaviour supported by societal conventions and *not* an inherent behaviour (e.g. London 2006).

⁴ The idea of the body being associated with sin and violence "...certainly became one of the centerpieces of medieval Christianity. But if you analyze so-called primitive Christianity and the teachings of Jesus you find an emphasis on caring, non-violence, and compassion. ...Only later did the Church become authoritarian and rigidly male-dominant... So it wasn't simply a question of religion, and it certainly had nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus. It is one of the ways that dominator systems distort this enormous human yearning for bonding and for connection that we have, by constantly associating it with domination and with violence" (London 2006).

⁵ See for example the work of the Italian biologist Humberto Maturana (2000), which expands upon the 'pleasure bond' theory of Masters and Johnson.

punishment, but in a partnership society pleasure is to be considered as one of the hallmarks of cooperation. And in cases where the sexual act is approached in the correct context with this sort of loving and empathetic consciousness it should be considered as sacred (London 2006).

Contextualizing the democratic Montessori Elementary Environment

Montessori is one of the largest and longest-running twentieth century alternative learning environments (having celebrated the centenary of the first Montessori *Casa dei Bambini* (Home of the Child) in January of 2007). Montessori was appalled at the ways in which schools were used as a weapon for the disempowerment of young people for ‘their own good’. She sought to create a prepared environment in which the freedom and autonomy of the child could be enabled and their vast hidden potentials actualized (Montessori 1988a, p.219). Montessori proposed a theory of child development based upon long hours of careful observation and interaction with children across numerous cultures. She drew a number of important conclusions from this well documented process, but she never claimed that these discoveries should under any circumstances be used as an instrument whereby the child’s learning is controlled. On the contrary she writes that what is important in the environment “is the idea that “I go and study where I find things which are useful to me and which I find interesting (1998, p.68)”. If one was to summarize the educational philosophy of Montessori one could do no better than to look to her constant directives to “follow the child”.

Broadly, Montessori understood that children pass through a number of developmental stages on the road to maturity (this developmental approach is outlined in the attached diagram). Each of these stages might be associated with a number of very specific interests, inclinations, and modes of thinking. Accordingly there are favored activities and behavioral trends which might be associated with each of these stages. During each stage there are also certain tasks which the child appeared to have an innate desire to accomplish in order to enable normalization to be fully achieved. If the child is not enabled to explore her spontaneous interests this may impede her subsequent development, likewise compelling a child to engage in activities merely on the basis of a

theoretical understanding of ‘normal development’ without allowing her to exercise her own choice could be highly detrimental. Using a biological concept, Montessori called these stages the *sensitive periods*, after similar developmental stages in animals. This seemed revolutionary at the time, and took many years, following Piaget’s initial explanation, to become generally accepted in child psychology (Seldin & Seldin 1986, p.9). Montessori viewed each of these stages as completely distinct and in one instance used the development of a butterfly from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly to clarify this process (Kripalani 1946). No person can control the time or order in which developments take place within the personality of the child – although generalizations can be made – each child responds in their own secret way to an individual rhythm.

This process of ‘normalisation’ often fails to occur because of ‘deviations’ in children’s natural development primarily because of the distraction and interference of adults in the environment. Thus the teacher-centered educational model embraced by our society is inappropriate. An arbitrary syllabus or curriculum cannot ensure the culture we need today. What is needed is an approach which liberates the child which can give an understanding of the conditions of man in modern society with a cosmic vision of history and the evolution of human life. Education must help man “to a knowledge of the environment to which he has to adapt himself” (Montessori 1983, p.14). The term: “normalization”, encapsulates Montessori’s aims of education. The objective of this process is an “individual who is at peace within and without” (Kripalani 1946)⁶.

She saw the transition from the first to the second developmental plane as a movement from a material, sensorial and motoric plane to an abstract, moral and intellectual one. In the first plane it is important “to find the relations between objects and to observe, by means of the conscious keys given to the senses, the exterior world; while in the second plane there are parallel keys to what happens in another field.” Children begin to operate in the moral field because they start to judge the actions of others and are typically preoccupied with their own actions and the desire to know if they are approved

⁶ Montessori used the metaphor of the “spiritual embryo” to describe the process of normalization. She describes it as follows: “All the organs of the body develop in the physical embryo so delicately that nature defends it, but the psychic embryo does not have this strong defence...It meets with many obstacles. If the physical embryo had to meet with such obstacles it would result in a monster... As the psychic embryo encounters obstacles in the environment we get many deviations from the creative natural line of development (Montessori 1995, pp.76ff)”.

or not. At this stage the child is especially sensitive to the problem of good and evil as a natural part of developing a moral conscience. Montessori stressed how important this age between 7 and 12 is for the moral education of the child. She emphasized that the tactful non-interference in children's activity that was so necessary during the first plane needed to be extended to the child's moral life during the second plane. "If this development has not been helped during the period of sensitivity when this moral construction takes place, then at a later stage, situations will arise, difficult to deal with, which will require social adaptations to be enforced from outside" (Montessori 1939).

The issues dealt with in this paper may of course be dealt with at any stage of the development of the child, however the way in which one might assist a three year old in understanding these concepts would be qualitatively different to the way it would be presented to a nine year old which would differ substantially from the way it would be discussed with a fifteen year old. This paper deals particularly with the second plane as it seeks to explore the teaching of sex and gender relations against the context of the move away from the egocentrism that characterizes early childhood and the sensitivities for searching out a rational and moral understanding of the way in which the universe works.

Inspired by a revolutionary understanding of human development Montessori formulated a revolutionary framework for education in the elementary environment, which is often referred to as 'Cosmic Education',⁷ this approach uses a loose structure that she referred to as 'the Great Lessons'. These are:

- (1) The Story of the Universe (theories concerning the origins and development of the universe including creation myths and theories);
- (2) The Story of Life (which continues to survey creation myth and theories as well as exploring the development of life on earth);
- (3) The Story of Man (which continues to interrogate creation myth and theory about the origin of man and the history and development of human civilization and biology);
- (4) The Story of Language (which deals with the origin, development, history, and use of written, spoken, and signed languages); and

⁷ The original work which deals most completely with this is: Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential* (1999).

(5) The Story of Numbers (which traces the origins and development of counting and mathematical systems).

This very holistic and multidisciplinary approach is able to cater for different learning styles and educational levels making it ideal for the inclusive, multi-age, Montessori environment. It creates general interest discussions that percolate insouciantly through many different self-chosen learning activities⁸. Montessori intended that this approach would arouse a sense of wonder in the heart and mind of the child (Montessori 1999, pp.1ff). And what could be more wondrous than the very creation of new life through the beauty of the sexual act⁹.

From the perspective of a guide in a Montessori elementary environment it is ridiculous to conceive of presenting this cosmic view of reality without making reference to reproduction and sexuality and placing it within the context of a partnership paradigm. It is equally absurd to conceive of a curriculum in which children would be compelled to engage with these topics when their own interests and explorations within the prepared environment had not led them there. It has been my experience that this is the stage in which children first engage first order metaphysical questions on a basic level and seek a broad understanding of their place in the universe. Consequently engaging with queries of various descriptions ranging from ‘where babies come from’ to ‘the purpose of life’ is in many cases inevitable. The guide needs to find ways of answering these questions, within this open-ended context of exploration, in a way which promotes a partnership way of thinking.

The commonly held view that parents have the primary responsibility for providing their children with opportunities to learn about sex is supported principally for two reasons: firstly, an inquisitiveness surrounding ‘where did I come from’ and ‘how are babies made’ – under most circumstances arises long before the age of six and will normally be directed at one or both parents, and, secondly, given the belief that parents have a right to instill their own set of values and cultural beliefs surrounding reproduction (provided they are not patently dishonest or oppressive) in their children. However,

⁸ Dr. Montessori emphasizes that guiding the child in their understanding of the Cosmic Task should not stand in the way of them continuing their exploration on all fronts including what are normally considered as appropriate ‘academic subjects’ (Montessori 1999, ch.2).

⁹ Consider, for instance, what the psalmist says: “You have knit me together in my mother’s womb...I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” (Psalm 139, *New International Version*)

alternative learning environments have a responsibility to support parents in this role and where parents have neglected this role (that of supplying choices and access to relevant information) the school must shoulder even more responsibility. In an environment – such as a Montessori environment - as well as many other unschooling and liberty-based approaches – which purports to be assisting the child in a self-directed approach to life learning, it is essential that the adult, or possibly even a younger support person, is equipped to be available to guide the child through the learning process in a way which is developmentally appropriate. It is also important for all adults who have an interest in the well-being of children to actively protest against media which puts forward a negative or distorted sexual image (Sreenivasan 1996).

Parents often have a view of sex that is shrouded in guilt, sin, and fear as a result of their own dominator upbringing (Sreenivasan 1996). This leads parents to lie to their children about sex¹⁰. Many adults are under the mistaken belief that by delaying sexual knowledge they are protecting their children and preventing them from teenage pregnancy, disease and other problems (Sreenivasan 1996), but the converse appears to be the case. Eisler (2000, p. 224) holds, and backs up with reference to relevant research, that failing to educate children about sexuality does not reduce sexual activity (Reinsich & Beasley 1990; Harris 1986), what it does do successfully is to deny children access to the information they need to make responsible and informed decisions and to impede their ability to gain a holistic understanding of their environment.

It is ridiculous to think that one could hide the reality of sex from children; firstly they discover the erogenous zones on their own bodies almost as soon as they are able to reach them, and secondly they are inundated by an almost endless stream of sexual images in the media (Sreenivasan 1996). Adults should respond to this fact by modeling a sexual ethic of respect for the bodies of others as well as their own. Also the vulgar and depersonalized representation of sexuality through popular culture in the media needs to be effectively neutralized through a portrayal of sex and love as part of the evolution of spiritual development (Eisler 2000, pp.224ff).

¹⁰ Often the lies that we tell our children in this regard (consider ‘the stork brought you’, ‘we bought you at the shop’, etc.) are seen as being innocent (Durstun 2006), but as will be seen here this is often not the case.

Thoughts towards implementing an holistic integrated approach to sex and gender explorations in the learning environment

The adults in the learning environment in which the author works take ultimate responsibility as ‘environmental engineers’ (i.e. for the maintenance of the environment and in guiding children in making decisions that maximize the accessibility of learning opportunities in the environment), however the children in our environment have elected to take responsibility for day to day maintenance (using a constantly evolving roster system), and are actively involved in repairing materials which have been damaged, purchasing of resources and materials, and the layout of the classroom. In all of these matters each child and each adult would, if push came to shove, have one vote although in actuality a consensus is often reached after a number of rounds of discussion. This democratic approach informs all major policy and conduct related decisions made in our environment. Part of the child’s exploration during this plane of development is experimentation with various decision making modalities and the ways in which they can be used to establish effective partnerships and break down the traditional adult-dominated classroom, therefore there is constant experimentation with different decision making methodologies although we very often use an approach which is similar to the “Iroquois Democracy” suggested by - for instance – Jerry Mintz (2006). This has direct relevance to the way in which sex and gender relations are taught as it informs the partnership approach which underpins our practice. This approach ensures that children must remain active subjects of their own learning experience and the typically dominator ‘banking’ approach (Freire,1970,) – in which the learner becomes the passive, objectified recipient of pre-selected information to education is effectively avoided.

As a general rule the Montessori elementary classroom is designed so that materials and resources dealing with a wide range of topics relevant to ‘Cosmic Education’ may be freely chosen by children in the environment for their exploration. Certainly reproduction and sexuality should be among these topics and as such there should be material dealing with these topics available for children to peruse or for the guide to direct them to in response to a particular question. Examples of this sort of material which may be explored independently may be (although they shouldn’t necessarily be limited to) books, software, art, music, film, activities, or specifically designed Montessori didactic materials (such as three part cards).

Often the discovery of this material or the asking of a pertinent question by one child leads to a general interest in a topic by the group. In the Montessori environment this could be dealt with in a number of different ways. Children may take turns in using the material, however children will often seek the guidance of an adult or older child who will facilitate a ‘seminar’ i.e. an open ended discussion forum in which those who have knowledge of the topic at hand may share it with others under the guidance of a facilitator (either adult or child). For instance, the three part cards depicted in the accompanying image sparked sufficient interest in how a fetus grows *in utero* to lead to discussion (also depicted in attached image) where the director used an additional visual aid to stimulate an in depth discussion with about half a dozen interested children¹¹. Here material in the prepared environment serves as a stimulus for learning in an organically formed small group. This creates a space in which children are at liberty to set their own learning agenda (they are at liberty to choose whether they wish to engage this topic, to what extent, and in what way). In this case they chose to approach an adult as a recourse to direct them in their further exploration. I have found that in this sort of circumstance it is most useful to use a Socratic approach in order to assist the child in gaining further clarity. The adult acts as a guide who directs the child to other sources of knowledge – such as the visual aid used in this example – but also as a sounding board against which the child may assess the validity of their own understanding.

Other examples of this sort of spontaneous seminar included discussions on the phenomenon of twins (this ranged from discussion on genetics to psychic phenomena), cloning (including a lengthy chat about Wilmut’s experiment with Dolly and time spent exploring the ethical dilemma of this sort of technology), and Down’s Syndrome (after a book on the disorder was included in a human rights display at the insistence of a learner who has the syndrome). Once again these discussions arose out of the explorations or questions of an individual child or group of children. A facilitator was then elected through a sort of informal consensus (or in some cases a prepared lesson was freely offered. No one would be compelled to attend this sort of discussion; if it is not of interest to a particular child that child is at liberty to manage their own activity in a way in which

¹¹ Incidentally those who were not interested in this topic ignored the seminar and went on quietly with their own self-chosen activity.

they feel is appropriate to them. In this way a partnership approach is modeled by adults in their interactions with children in the environment.

We have established that one of the hallmarks of the dominator view of sex is that it should be used to shame people (as it makes them easier to control), and – by extension – the understanding that pleasure is to be shrouded in guilt and something dirty. This attitude often creeps into our learning environment and at times even saying the word “sex” or “fuck” can lead to peels of laughter. Adults in our environment make a concerted effort to respond openly and with excitement to the miracle of the human body even though it may at times make them uncomfortable. I remember observing the following incident: as I was describing how the testicle is made up to young girl another adult in the environment became at first increasingly uncomfortable and blushed, however by the end of the discussion they found it so engrossing that they had all but joined in. As a result of this sort of frank discussion of these topics, alongside the option of private exploration of a host of different materials (and the open invitation to enter into private discussion with an adult in the environment on any issue which is troubling you), a partnership consciousness begins to develop. As a result, at least within the environment where the educator works, the body and the sexual act are in effect being seen as miraculous and beautiful, rather than as shameful and dirty.

Once the causal connection between sexual activity and reproduction is firmly established it is appropriate to equip the child with a sense of sexual responsibility, one way to equip the child with this sense is by supplying her with access to hands on experience in caring for young children. Under these circumstances most children are able to see that child rearing is hard work and that there are a number of other risks that go along with being sexually active. The Montessori environment is a multi-age environment which applies strategies of vertical age grouping and as such older children are constantly in contact with children much younger than them. Older children are encouraged to spend time assisting younger children (even changing nappies when necessary) in this way they learn excellent practical life skills while also realizing that having a child of your own is a very onerous responsibility, but also a very rewarding one for which it is well worth waiting (Sreenivasan 1996). Sexually transmitted diseases

would often form another area of exploration as they affect all people regardless of whether they are sexually active or not.

Careful attention also needs to be given to sexual violence as a part of everyday life. Children should be well prepared to keep themselves safe and then these crimes, which are almost constant headlines (and therefore difficult to ignore), need to be analyzed in terms of the partnership paradigm. In the context of our environment an emphasis on 'Peace Studies' is evident in a number of ways: Firstly, peaceful relationships are being constantly modeled by adults in the environment (this also forms part of our concentration on what Montessorians broadly refer to as a "grace and courtesy" curriculum) this is done – for instance – by adults modeling the Non-Violent Communication (NVC) modality pioneered by Marshall Rosenberg (2003; Hart & Hodson 2004). Secondly, the democratic structure of our environment lends itself to the practice of a number of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methodologies; we use a number of mediation strategies as well as a full meeting hearing for serious breaches of conduct. In the past we have used something strongly resembling the Judicial Committee (JC) system used by for instance by Sudbury Valley (www.sudval.org) and The New School (www.thenewschool.com) both of which have been very influential in our school's development but at present it is felt that because of the peaceful nature of our environment this is unnecessarily formal and distracting process. Thirdly, in the discourse of adults in the environment care is taken in the discourse of adults in the environment to use a partnership approach as a basis for understanding and exploring the world.

By way of example, there was a twelve year old boy (now thirteen) in the environment who began each day with reading the local papers over a cup of coffee. He would then move onto the internet to verify the authenticity of all important stories and find some varied perspectives. After he had gathered all relevant information he would come and give a report to me and we would discuss the relevant stories I would consistently view the stories of conflict which litter the pages of the newspaper through a partnership, and – as a child who had been in the environment for some years – so did he. The development of a partnership worldview obviously has very real repercussions upon the ways in which this teenager has chosen to construct his own sexuality and his understanding of gender. Children in our environment develop a constructive intolerance

for tyranny in all of its various guises, from this perspective an androcratic dominator society is seen as both cruel and outmoded. I am particularly aware of the sensitivity that children in our environment have developed for picking up misogyny and racism in speech, and the vehement antipathy they show to the abuse of women and children (this is a crime which is wide spread in our country and to which many people respond with tepid, apathetic indifference).

The lens of Eisler's systems theory and its use as a critique of the way in which gender is constructed in 'dominator' and 'androcratic' societies also informs the way in which both history and literature are approached in our learning environment. It is clear that narrative and culture have a profound effect upon the way in which children construct gender (Fausto-Sterling 1985), in fact this socialization is sometimes so powerful that it overpowers very palpable evidence to the contrary¹², and it is important that cultural stereotypes are effectively identified and deconstructed so that ultimately the child can make their own rational choices concerning their understanding of gender. In the environment in which the author works we have discussed a number of poems ranging from Byron ("Women, thy vows are traced in sand"), to Plath ("...and I eat men like air") and interrogated the cultural stereotypes which they represent. We have also explored the historical reasons behind these stereotypes in the hope of instilling what the social psychologist, David Loye, refers to as 'partnership tolerance' (Eisler 2000). For instance: a discussion surrounding ideological domination in Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible* (1952), quickly led to discussions surrounding witch hunts and the inquisition and eventually the construction of witches in local *nguni* culture. It became apparent to me that this approach was working particularly effectively when an eight year old girl asked how come in fairy tales witches are almost always women and the hero is always the man.

In explorations of the history of art using available books and didactic materials led to one of the children in a group commenting on how the women in much Renaissance art were all fat, while another child thought they were quite beautiful. These interchanges lead to a discussion on the construct of beauty, which lead to a discussion on

¹² For example some young girls assert vehemently that only boys can be doctors although their own mothers are physicians, see Maccoby & Jackson (1974).

sexual attraction, and eventually to a discussion on alternative sexual preferences. In this way the partnership-dominator continuum proved to be a useful lens for helping children become aware of harmful cultural messages pertaining to their and others bodies, and to direct them in constructing a healthy respect and appreciation of the human body (Eisler 2000, pp.212ff). A good extension based upon this discussion might be to display some material concerning prehistoric gylanic art and, with a group of older students, conduct a seminar on an artist with a different perspective on the body such as Judy Chicago.

An important aspect in developing partnership literacy in the Montessori environment is the fact that the sort of arbitrary, inflexible hierarchies that exist in most other schools are broken down and replaced by a far more democratic approach to governance and discipline. Put simply: Montessori is a partnership approach (a fact which Eisler (2006) openly acknowledges), whereas the schooling paradigm is unequivocally based on violence and domination. In our environment children, staff, and other stake-holders work together to clarify and establish the values and standards by which they wish to operate their environment, and these are published periodically in the *Nahoon Montessori School Meeting Guidelines for Best Practice*. Children are then encouraged to take responsibility for acting within these parameters, where there is conflict they are equipped and advised to resolve this in an assertive and peaceful way. As a last resort many children and all staff are trained as mediators and any person may request another person in the environment to assist them in this way (this was also discussed above). Neither punishment nor rewards are used as incentives¹³, and acts and threats of violence are understood as dominator actions and are therefore frowned on by the community. Acts or threats of violence or nastiness against those with handicaps and acts of violence where a stronger person preys upon a weaker person are treated with particular contempt by the meeting.

This approach focuses on actualization rather than on defense and is transformational in outlook. In other work this approach does not seek to avoid conflict, or even to transcend conflict, rather it seeks to transform conflict. It is acknowledged not only that conflict is inevitable when differing viewpoints come into conflict but also that

¹³ For more information on the harmful nature of this sort of approach the reader is directed to: Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: the trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes* (1993).

it can be productive (Miller 1976, ch.11); in terms of a partnership outlook one should seek to establish how any conflict is able to expand our view of reality and inspire positive change (Eisler 1987, pp.191ff). In other words: children learn they have power *for* each other, but not *over* each other (Miller 1976, p.116).

Conclusions

Montessori had a beautiful vision of the child as having the secret potential to bring about a new world, a world of peaceful cooperation and love. The schooling system - because of its inherently violent, dominator orientation - is entirely unable to bring about this vision; on the contrary it serves to propagate the ideals of violence, subjugation, and disempowerment which it seeks to serve. This paper proposes that a rejection of the schooling paradigm and the adoption of a partnership approach - as envisaged in the work of Eisler - in learning environments would make an essential difference in terms of the effectiveness of educating for a new world. Sex and gender are two of the places in our society which the dominator approach has made inaccessible through the erection of a number of taboos yet this is the most intimate area of human relations where a celebration of partnership and pleasure should be most intense and joyful.

The author has undertaken to subvert the harm caused by the dominator approach to sex and gender relations used by modern society through actively encouraging a partnership approach to these topics within the Montessori prepared environment. Integral to this approach has been doing away with an inflexible and limited curriculum and allowing children to be self-directed in their learning choices. Likewise the author's learning environment has done away with the adult-directed hierarchies which are a hallmark of any 'factory school' classroom. It is felt that this approach is a true reflection of Montessori's educative vision and supplies a true alternative to the 'schooling paradigm'. The results of this shift in thinking have been represented in some of the examples given in this paper. Not only has the view of sex, gender, and the body been transformed but there has been a strong movement towards the normalization of the child. It is envisaged that these children will develop to become increasingly transformative in their interactions and a force for good and peace in our world.

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Matthew Henry R. Rich is a director at Nahoon Montessori School a leading democratic Montessori environment affiliated with the International Montessori Council (IMC) and International Democratic Education Network (IDEN) operating in the Republic of South Africa. He has experience facilitating learning across diverse contexts from early childhood to university level including parent and teacher education. Presently he is an online tutor for USA Montessori's Philosophy and Peace Education courses. Matthew holds a number of Theology qualifications and is presently a candidate for the M.Div. degree in Apologetics, he also holds a credential in learning facilitation from the historic Fort Hare University. Matthew is an avid musician and - when he isn't writing or teaching - he operates a small *Kindermusik*® and music education studio. He is a member of the South African Montessori Association (SAMA), Association Montessori International (AMI), and the Alternative Education Resource Organisation (AERO).

CONTACT DETAILS:

Matthew Rich
 c/o Nahoon Montessori School
 74 Beach Road
 Nahoon, East London
 5247
 Republic of South Africa

Tel/Fax: +27 (0) 43 735 2221 (GMT+2)

Cell: +27 (0) 72 517 9549 (GMT+2)

Skype ID: matt_nms

matthew@freedomtlearn.co.za

<http://www.freedomtlearn.co.za>