EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND MONTESSORI PRINCIPLES, VALUES, AND PERSPECTIVES

AN INTERVIEW WITH MITCHEL ADLER, PSYD

By Dane L. Peters

"Montessori has always offered an education for life, giving a child a strong foundation on which to build an authentic self, a robust community in which to discover an individual voice. In 2016, we are gathering in Chicago, the City of Broad Shoulders, to discuss and reflect on the fundamental principles, values, and perspectives at the heart of Montessori." When I first read these words on the AMS website, about the upcoming AMS 2016 Annual Conference, in March, I instantly saw the connection between this year's conference theme ("Montessori Principles, Values & Perspectives") and emotional intelligence, the work of keynote speaker Dr. Mitchel Adler. A licensed clinical psychologist, certified group psychotherapist, and co-author of the book *Promoting Emotional Intelligence in Organizations*, Dr. Adler is also the director of MindBody Intelligence (MBI) Consulting in Davis, CA. He began his career as an elementary math and science teacher at an independent school in Los Angeles.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Adler about his work and gained some insight into what we might hear from him this spring in Chicago.

DANE PETERS: Tell me, do you have any knowledge of Montessori education?

MITCHEL ADLER: I do. My wife was a Montessori kid in preschool. She's definitely one of the coolest people I've ever known, and when I told her that the American Montessori Society had asked me to speak, she proudly reminded me of her Montessori connection. She loves learning, and she attributes that, in part, to having started her education in a Montessori school. Now I wish I'd sent my kids to Montessori schools. (We enrolled them in a Spanish immersion program instead.)

DP: You began your own career as a math and science teacher, right?

MA: Yes, I taught fourth- and fifth-grade math and science to Jewish immigrant children from Iran and Russia at a private elementary school in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles. Many of these children had fled their countries due to sociopolitical oppression and anti-Semitism. But my first job was in the film industry. When I graduated from the University of Michigan, I moved to Los Angeles and worked in film for a couple of years but soon felt like I needed to do some work that was more meaningful. Without a teaching credential, I applied for a job posting for a private elementary school math and science teacher. I got that job and taught kids from November until the end of the school year. Three teachers had already quit that job because the kids were so incorrigible. They basically hired me because I was young, and I had a lot of energy. It ended up being one of the most rewarding yet difficult jobs I have ever had.

DP: As I was learning about you and your work, I began seeing you more as a minister without a religion, in terms of how well you know the psychology of people. I am so impressed with what you have been and are doing.

MA: Thank you; I appreciate that. I have always been interested in people and in helping them. I think I first went into film because I knew it could have a meaningful and positive effect on people. I spent a lot of time watching television as a kid and learned to be a decent person from shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Facts of Life*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*. I really loved how film and television could make people think, feel, and connect with

themselves and others in healthy ways, and teach meaningful lessons. I needed to work in film for a while to see if I could make a positive impact on people. However, what I found was that teaching really put me in contact with people in a way that I could see the positive impact directly. There was something really meaningful in that.

I realized I was much more interested in the social and emotional well-being of the kids than I was in making sure that they knew how to multiply, divide, and understand how electricity works. So I finished that school year and moved up to the San Francisco Bay Area to direct a county-wide youth program. I did that for 4 years, and it put me in touch with what I really wanted to do—make a difference with kids and with people. That is when I decided to go back to graduate school in psychology.

DP: Can you explain the history of emotional intelligence by talking about the connection between Daniel Goleman's 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, John Mayer and Peter Salovey's 1990 research on emotional intelligence, and Howard Gardner's early 1980s work on multiple intelligences?

MA: The best place to start is with Gardner because he really began breaking down the construct of intelligence into multiple intelligences, in 1983, with his book *Frames of Mind*. He had 8 primary areas, which included interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. The latter two very much relate to emotional intelligence. We can think of this whole scheme, let's say, as a garden, and he was sort of the gardener. He laid the foundation for us to plant this beautiful garden that reflects what humans are and can become through the concept of multiple intelligences.

Then Mayer and Salovey published an article in 1990 called "Emotional Intelligence" and really got much more specific by laying down a set of skills they believed would lead to a better appraisal and expression of emotions in ourselves and in others. They looked at how we can effectively regulate our emotions and feelings to help with motivation in planning and, ultimately, achieving our goals in life. As we consider the garden metaphor, I think while Gardner found the field and planted the seeds, Mayer and Salovey cared for the seedlings so they would sprout.

Goleman is a great writer. He was the science editor of the *New York Times* and is a fantastic synthesizer of scientific material. His book made this construct of emotional intelligence accessible and understandable to the masses, and as a result, I think he helped spur others on to value it more broadly—in schools, in the workplace, and in communities, including political spheres. Goleman is the one who saw this little seedling growing, took the appropriate fertilizer, amended the soil, and created a rich environment for the seed to grow. Today, there are lots of people who are helping build and care for this emotional intelligence garden, and it can all be traced back to Gardner.

DP: When did you first learn about Daniel Goleman and emotional intelligence?

MA: I discovered Goleman the summer before I started graduate school, when I went to Indonesia for a month. In the airport, I came across his book *Emotional Intelligence* and thought, "That is an interesting title." I bought it and read the book cover to cover while I was in Indonesia. I was fascinated because I could immediately relate to what he was saying. I knew I was a relatively smart guy, with an average or a little bit above average IQ, but I knew I had something going for me in my ability to connect with people, read situations, listen well, empathize, manage my impulses, and have pretty good follow-through. And I think I did well academically because I could do all *those* things.

When I read Goleman's book, I thought, "This is speaking my language; this is actually speaking to some form of intelligence that I feel like I have and have seen in other people, not articulated to me before. When I got to graduate school, I discovered that one of the professors there, Cary Cherniss, was working with Goleman as a co-founder of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (www.eiconsortium.org). I got to meet Goleman and was fortunate to be able to work with both of them on an article. Later, that article became a book that Cherniss and I co-authored (*Promoting Emotional Intelligence in Organizations)*.

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DP: Part of your work deals with team building and facilitating teams. In a Montessori classroom, one of the critical aspects is the teacher team. What do you find to be the most important characteristics of strong teaching teams?

MA: I do a lot of work with teams, and most of the teams I work with are managing teams—they're managing other folks. The first thing that any good team needs to do is start with a very strong belief in the philosophy of what they are doing. For Montessori education, as I understand it, there are very clear principles—respecting the child, the absorbent mind, sensitive periods, prepared

environments, and self-education. To me it seems very clear that a lot of folks believe deeply in this philosophy.

Authenticity helps us to become more grounded in the teams that we're working with. Once there is a very clear set of values and beliefs that people can get behind, then people need to feel safe enough in their environment to take risks to share their creative and innovative ideas without feeling like they are going to be criticized harshly. It is important to be able to develop the culture of your team, using agreed-upon guidelines—so not only do you have shared goals and visions, but you also have a shared set of guidelines.

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Teams can start by saying, "How do we want to be? We have differences, let's talk about them and be open about that." Conflict is really about perceived or real differences. These differences are opportunities for us to learn and grow. In my work, one of my favorite quotes is from Daniel Boorstin. He says, "The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance, it's the illusion of knowledge" (Forman, 2011, p. 1).

I think what happens in many teams is that people don't actually listen to each other. All members need to be heard. In order to learn, we have to have open minds. A teaching team must have an environment where people can be okay with not knowing, because when you don't know, the team can sit and discover. But when we think we know, we close our minds to what's possible. This means that we also need to keep people's egos in check. Overblown egos tend to get in the way of developing good teams. Self-awareness is important—the ability to know ourselves more deeply, understand our emotional selves, and recognize when we get reactive. What triggers our emotional state? How are those emotions manifested in us? And how do we manage and cope with them? If team members can have that emotional self-awareness, it facilitates more effective communication and group cohesion.

DP: I want this interview to appeal to those emerging leaders who are just discovering their leadership skills. Dr. Montessori stressed the importance of the teacher as a role model. Is there a connection between your work and role modeling for others, especially for the child?

MA: This is a great question. Role modeling is essential in emotional intelligence. I think this fits well with Montessori's idea of the absorbent mind. Children, as well as adults, are constantly watching each other to learn how we function in the world. As social mammals, we have resonance circuits in our brain, such as mirror neurons, that help us to understand the behaviors of others so that we can learn how to mirror and be attuned to them—as well as glean information that helps us to survive. When I do emotional intelligence training, I try to model emotional intelligence in the way that I interact with the audience. I know that everything I do and say is being observed and taken in on a deep level that the receivers might not even notice. Social and emotional learning occurs on many levels.

Teachers are constantly modeling for their students, and something called emotional contagion can come into play. For example, if teachers are nervous about making mistakes or if they are nervous about their own feelings, the children pick up on this and they start to show concern: *Should I be worried about this task? Should I be worried about making mistakes?* The more teachers are able to embody what they want children to learn, the more children will be able to learn.

DP: Communication is one of your specialties. How can the Montessori community help the greater educational community, particularly parents, understand misperceptions about Montessori pedagogy, for example, that it's too structured, or that the child has too much freedom?

MA: Going back to some things I've said before, I think you have to believe in it yourself. I can't stress that enough. When we believe in something enough, particularly when it comes to communication, our authenticity comes through. I'll just tell you a little bit about how important that is from a neurobiological standpoint. Again, our brains have what are called resonance circuits, parts of our brain that pick up on others' nonverbal cues. That part of our brain actually works faster than our executive functions, our middle prefrontal cortex. Someone can be saying something to us, and all the words sound right, but somehow you just feel uncomfortable believing what the other person is saying. It's like the classic salesperson saying, "You look beautiful in this car." He's saying the right things, but you feel yucky inside…and therefore you don't trust him.

That happens because there is an incongruity between what the person speaking believes and what she/he is saying. When folks believe what they're saying, it's communicated nonverbally as well as verbally, and the people spoken to feel that in a much deeper way. So to bring it back to Montessori, I'd say that you have to

believe authentically in what you're sharing, and what you're communicating, and you have to be authentic in how you do it, because that's more compelling and more persuasive than just the content alone.

I believe that Montessori education is about an education for life, which involves balancing issues like too much structure and too much freedom. That is an inherent dialectic of the human condition, and we struggle with that dynamic. What I understand is that Montessori actually creates an environment for exploration of that dynamic engagement between each of the two dialectical poles. It's not an "either/or" paradigm, where we have structure or freedom; it is always going to be a "both/and" perspective.... The method creates space for structure and freedom.

DP: Speaking of selling and communicating, I know that you are familiar with the author Daniel Pink. In his book *To Sell Is Human*, he talks about the ABCs of selling. What you are selling does not have to be a product or a service; it could be a doctor trying to sell a patient on a needed procedure, or trying to convince your boss you need a raise, or a teacher attempting to convince a child to be kind to another child on the playground. For him, the A in the ABCs stands for Attunement. What aspects of your work in teaching can help teachers be in attunement with colleagues, parents, and children?

MA: First and foremost, I'd say this would be an issue of self-awareness—that is, understanding our own feelings, our own buttons, our own triggers, and how our feelings are manifested. We are our own best tools, and by understanding and finely tuning ourselves, we can then understand others. Next, we need to be able to value the emotional needs of others—we need to have empathy. Empathy from an emotional intelligence standpoint is not just being able to sense other people's experience but being able to do so with interest and concern. When we can actually convey and communicate true interest and concern, then we can understand other people's experiences from an emotional place, because we can understand our own emotional experience from the inside out.

Jerry Lewis (not the comedian!) has done some interesting research looking at how often parents are accurately attuned to their infant; what he found was that parents are only accurately attuned about one-third of the time. But one-third of the time is all that is necessary to develop a securely attached child. The key is noticing when the misattunement or the rupture takes place and making an effort to repair it by realigning and learning to pick up those nonverbal cues where you missed the child's message the first time—so that you can reconnect. That's where the secure attachment and attunement really take place.

Our need is not to always get it right but to be aware when a miss occurs, to go back and repair what got ruptured and check in when we're not sure if we missed something, so that we can stay synced up with others. That's how we really build connections with people.

DP: Finally, what would be one wish you have for educating our children?

MA: I think it would be to value their social and emotional competencies as much as their formal academic skills. I think that the social and emotional well-being of today's children will be the social and emotional well-being of the future.

As we closed our conversation, I could not help making the direct connection between what Dr. Adler had to say and a major part of Dr. Montessori's work with children. In her book *Montessori: The Science behind the Genius*, Angeline Lillard notes, "Montessori education includes explicit instruction on social behavior in part of the curriculum called lessons of Grace and Courtesy, which are on a par with lessons in math, music, and language. The goal of Montessori education, in fact, is explicitly stated to be the education of the whole person, not only the intellect." I believe that this is also Dr. Adler's message, and I am eager to hear him speak at the AMS conference this March in Chicago.

Don't miss Mitchel Adler's keynote address at the AMS 2016 Annual Conference. For information and to register: amshq.org/2016Conference

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Suggested Reading

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