

# NOTRE DAME Mission driven Montessori education: Cultivating place and pedagogical fidelity



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# How does the mission statement of Good Shepherd Montessori School inform everyday practice, place making, and pedagogical fidelity within the school community?

Introduction

The mission of an organization is bigger than any one person. It shapes the environment, experience, and place making capacities of a school community. Good leadership and instruction must serve and inform mission. In the case of Good Shepherd Montessori, a private, independent, inclusive educational environment our mission emerged from conversations where the imagined goal was, "making the community and world better for having known us."

Our mission inspires our community. We aim to be true to Maria Montessori's understanding of cosmic education and embrace the fullest vision of our purpose and place in the world. Our mission demands that we continually ask ourselves individually and collectively, "does this action serve the larger vision implied in our mission and the intent and philosophy of Maria Montessori?"

Most importantly, our mission calls for a respectful approach to every member of the community, beginning with the child. It does not demand adherence to one ideology, faith paradigm, or definitive way of life. Rather it is centered on the unique gifts of each individual in our community and holds the hope that all of our actions are inclusive, hospitable, forward thinking, and respectful.

Dan Driscoll, Head of Good Shepherd Montessori School

## Research Background

Documented mission driven educational practice resides predominantly in higher education and business circles. It is often referred to as "transformational leadership". (Caldwell, Dixon, et.al., 2011; Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Promising leadership practice, also coined authentic leadership, is often framed around individuals and individual characteristics rather than group dynamics, practices, or mission statements and varied definitions of authentic leadership exist. (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997; Gardner, Cogliser, et. al., 2011; Bess & Goldman, 2001; George, 2003).

Mission statements hold value in multiple arenas: constituent attraction (families and educators), institutional cohesion, group motivation, and outsider evaluation of purpose and efficacy (Borema, 2009; Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011).

Ideally, mission driven leadership encompasses four education related domains: learning environment, curriculum and pedagogy, policies and procedures, and partnerships (South Australia Department for Education and Child Development (DECD), 2007).

Place making is the work of creating belonging and cultivating identity through space and time. The study of place has been relegated to human geography circles but is highly relevant to educational contexts, particularly Montessori (Cresswell, 2015; McKenna, 2015; Greene, Burke, McKenna, 2016; Sobel, 2012, Tuan, 1977).

Attention to mission across Montessori education in the US continues to grow with the shifting educational policy landscape. Significant attention is now being directed to questions of access, equity, race, and inclusion in Montessori education (Banks & Maixner, 2016; Debs & Brown, 2017; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008).

Likewise, as Montessori education expands in the US attention to fidelity is a priority among many Montessorians and Montessori advocates to ensure Montessori philosophy and methods are properly implemented and researched (Beatty, 2011; Block, 2015; Lillard & Heise, 2016; Lillard, 2008, 2013; Murray & Peyton, 2012; Murray, 2015).

\*References available upon request



\*Word cloud generated with survey response data

#### Methodology

#### Study Design:

Qualitative, Single case design (Creswell,2014)

Theoretical Frame: Community Based Research (Israel, Schulz, et.al., 1998; Strand, Marullo, et. al., 2003)

Descriptive & Instrumental

Embedded proposition/inductive process

#### Sample:

Purposeful sample

Primary-8th Grade Montessori School

Private, independent, accredited American school

Focused on Christian tradition

Inclusive environment 15 years in operation

## **Data Collection:**

Asset based data collection in accordance with school mission & CBR Interviews, focus groups, survey data, document analysis Varied internal constituent based subgroups

#### Data Analysis:

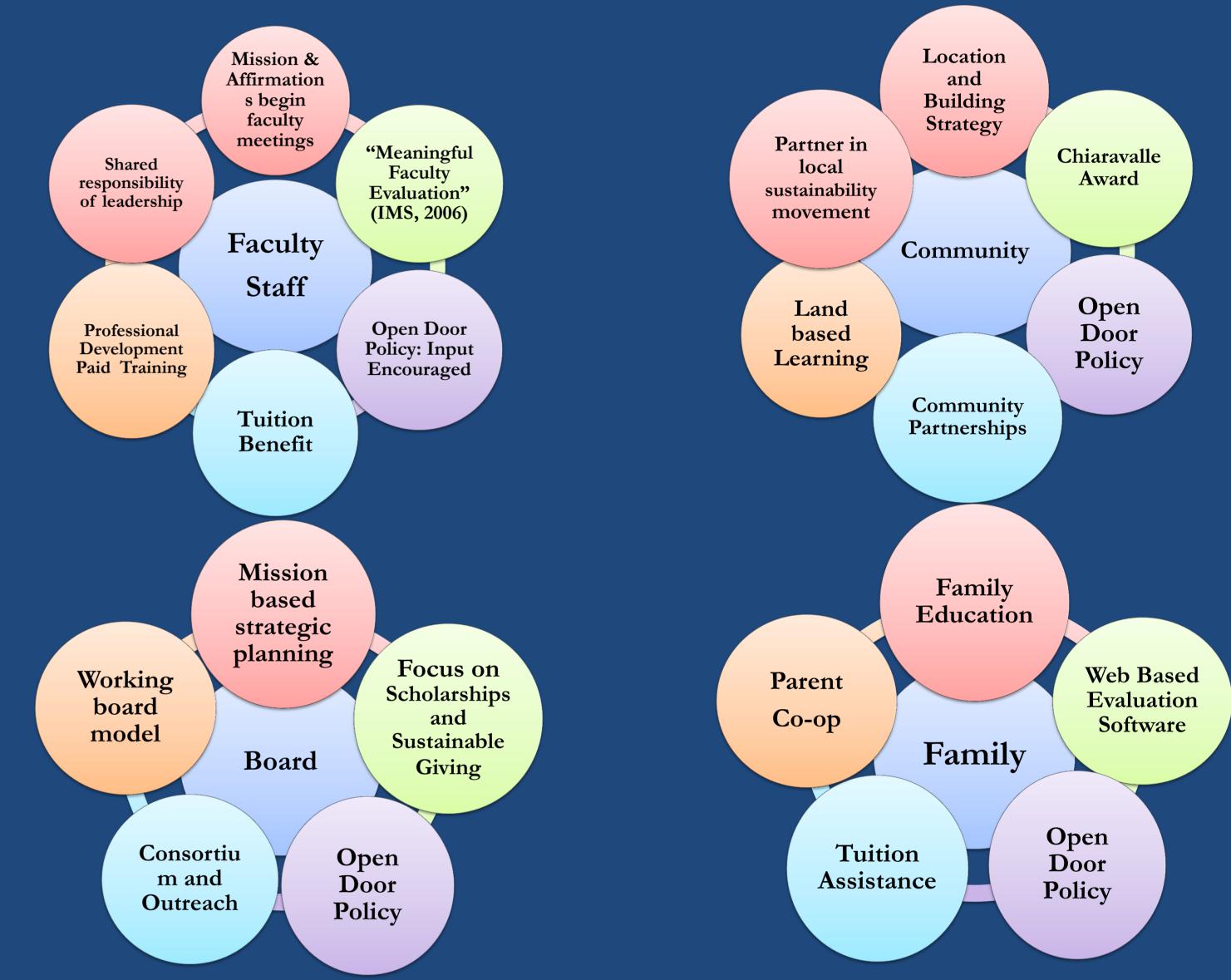
Thematic /key word count coding Within and between case analysis of subgroups Attentiveness to participant status in research context Dual researcher analysis/bias explication (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin 2003)

# **Findings**

Observations, artifacts, survey data, and focus groups indicate fidelity to a mission focused learning environment.

Data demonstrate a unique commitment to the child remaining at the center of all mission based practices.

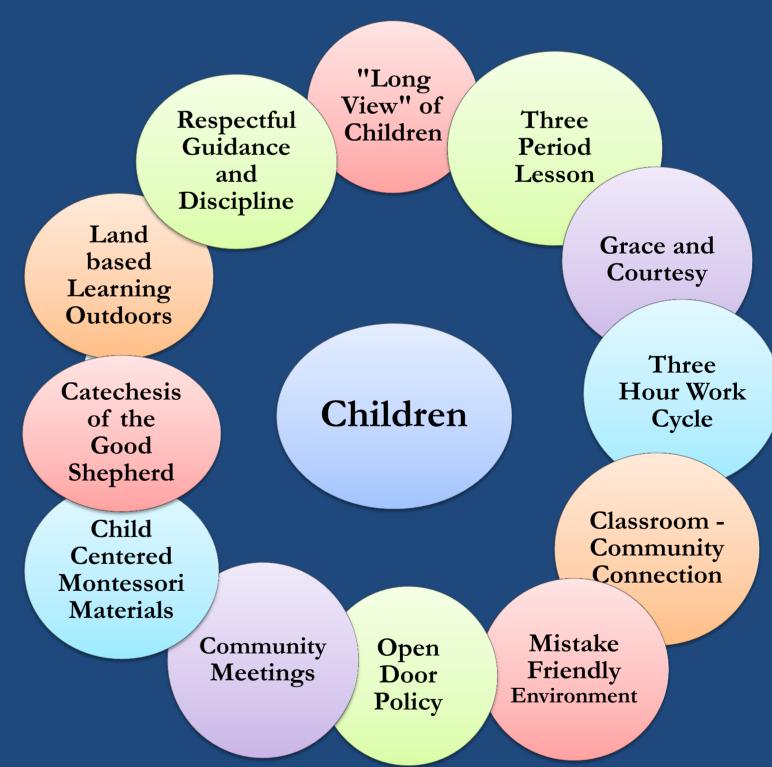
The visual displays below represent the institution's core constituent groups and their collective perceptions of mission based practices impacting Montessori fidelity and place making as identified through data analysis.



As a result of mission based practices Montessori philosophy and fidelity are centered.

Community impact and place making are more implicit ideals in the understanding of mission driven work in this environment.

Children, families, and faculty/staff/board recognize mission as unique and integral to the everyday practice of their education.



#### Discussion

Our findings illuminate the depth of impact of mission driven Montessori education on fidelity and place making in this particular case study. Based on these findings, we assert that consistent attentiveness to mission even in the most mundane of actions within any educational environments can be mission driven and improve fidelity. In addition, we verify and expand upon previous findings in the related bodies of research as noted below.

- 1) Attention to school mission allows individuals to coalesce around a "common text", building community, solidarity, and transparency.
- 2) Mission can be as a litmus test for planning, action, and reflection. Mission can, but need not be, tied to faith traditions.
- 3) Mission statements can, and should, be proactively integrated into the daily decision making/rhythms of a school, including (or especially) with children.
- 4) Mission based leadership is compatible with Montessori philosophy and pedagogy.
- 5) Mission based Montessori forms the foundation for excellence in working conditions, faculty/staff culture, pedagogical fidelity, inclusion, and place making.
- 6) Missions must be constantly revisited and discussed to provide consistent and clear interpretation over time.
- 7) Careful attention must always be paid to areas of weakness and the danger of unintentional exclusion in mission driven organizations.