Looking back to the future: The current relevance of Maria Montessori's ideas about the spiritual wellbeing of young children

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Abstract

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) was an Italian educator whose ideas and principles have validity in informing, understanding and responding to the challenges faced by contemporary educators. Many of her foundational principles are at the forefront of current educational thinking but are not acknowledged or known in mainstream education. It is argued that her ideas and principles about the spiritual wellbeing of young children have validity in the current debate. Montessori saw spirituality as innate in young children; the primary force driving their development, and central to their capacity for joyful and deep engagement with their environment. She saw children's capacity and ability to concentrate deeply as a spiritual pathway to a new level of individual consciousness and connection to the environment. These principles can inform our current thinking, understanding and response to young children's spirituality. The conditions to bring about, support and protect what Montessori calls 'concentration' should be considered in pedagogical responses to the spiritual needs of young children.

The most human of all the needs of the child is neglected – the exigencies of his spirit, of his soul ... Moral malnutrition and intoxication of the spirit are as fatal for the soul of man as physical nutrition is for the health of the body. Therefore child-education is the most important problem of humanity. (Montessori 1987, p.10)

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Introduction

We are living in times when the ideas of what childhood is, who children are, and what and how they learn, are being re-examined. As we explore and seek a better understanding of the childhood issues that have emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, the question arises: should we take time to rediscover and reconsider ideas articulated in earlier times? Educationalists in prior centuries anticipated and articulated issues that exist now. This paper will explore the current issues around the identification and incorporation of spiritual wellbeing into young children's lives. Maria Montessori's central ideas regarding education and principles of spiritual development and support in young children, specifically the role of concentration, will be addressed. It is argued that these ideas and principles have contemporary validity and can be used as an impetus for extending our thinking about, and understanding of, children's spiritual wellbeing.

Redefining 'the child' and reconsidering wellbeing and spirituality

Educational practices and policies are the products of how society views children and the purpose of education; views that can contribute to regarding children as future 'products' whose worth will be evaluated by their later performance as adults (Wyness 2006). The young child, in this light, is seen as

the first stage in the process of producing a 'stable, well-prepared' workforce for the future, and thus as a foundation for long-term success in an increasingly competitive global market.

(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999, p. 45)

However, a new understanding of the child is emerging: one that challenges how this and other dominant concepts of the child have been constructed and conceptualised (Malaguzzi 1993; Mayall 1996; Prout & James 1997). By problematising existing constructions of the child, new views of childhood are emerging. They seek to replace the view of the child as deficient, incapable, controllable, primitive and dependent – as something that is in the process of 'becoming' an adult (Woodrow & Press 2007). Instead, the child is seen as 'being' recognised as an intelligent, competent individual capable of active engagement with the world, whose 'stage' in life should not be considered 'preparatory' but significant in its own right (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999).

The construction of 'the child' as competent and valid is a new lens which can be used to view the value of young children's 'wellbeing' in their educational experiences. The idea of 'wellbeing' is now seen as broadly definable and as a necessary part of a child's life and learning experiences. The South Australian government has integrated this concept into the Learner Wellbeing Framework (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) 2007), an inquiring approach that "links care and education practices to the wellbeing of learners" (DECS 2007, p. 4). The defining ideas of wellbeing centre on "... being optimistic and engaging with life. It means having a sense of purpose, self-acceptance and positive relationships" (*ibid*, end page).

In the last decade, as the redefinition of the child as a 'being' not a 'becoming' has taken hold, there has been an accompanying resurgence of interest in the 'holistic' education of children and a greater focus on the spiritual dimension of children's lives. Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) believe that spirituality can be seen as

a dimension of human life and experience as significant as cognitive development, emotional development or social development. All of these dimensions of development are interrelated. (2006, p. 1)

They elaborate further, placing spirituality in a position of dominant meaning-maker, central to wellbeing: "it is the spiritual dimension that is most involved in a person's effort to integrate the many aspects of development" (p. 1).

In this context, there is a need to see spiritual development as "a quest for connectedness with self, with others, with the worlds of history and nature, and with the mystery of being alive" (Palmer cited in Sisk 2008, p. 25). Viewing spirituality and wellbeing as of pivotal importance to how we live and learn is becoming integrated into the debate about children's experiences and their impact on learning.

Education as the mediator between children's experiences and wellbeing

As the experiences of childhood and their effect on children's wellbeing are publicly debated and discussed, a number of themes are emerging around the physiological and psychological problems that appear to accompany the contemporary childhood experience. These include depression, the impact of technology, learning disorders and obesity. Although the etiologies of these issues are complex, many are seen as either linked to or redeemable by children's educational or formal care experience. The recent report by Dr Fraser Mustard (2008) highlights this nexus between such experiences and a child's learning, health and behaviour, particularly in the early years when development across all areas of human functioning is at its most rapid and influential

In our continuing efforts to respond and to improve life outcomes for children, the public and educational profiles of a number of issues surrounding childhood have become prominent. This has resulted in some effective identification and intervention programs and an understanding of the preventative value of knowledge of children's developmental needs. Within the South Australian context, examples of wider community programs include 'Eat Well, Be Active Community Programs' (nutrition and exercise), 'Auskick' (sport and exercise) and The Advertiser's 'Little Book Club' (early literacy). Our eagerness to understand and improve life outcomes for children has led to consideration of the overall wellbeing of children, including their spirituality. The State Government of South Australia has demonstrated it is taking this seriously in developing a 'Learner Wellbeing Framework' (DECS 2007). This incorporates five dimensions of wellbeing, including spiritual, and was developed to support formal care and education sites in improving learner wellbeing. The inclusion of spiritual wellbeing in a secular document reflects the increasingly broad view of what defines 'spirituality' and how it impacts on children's learning.

Spirituality – definitional and conceptual issues

A groundswell of interest in what defines spirituality, and how it develops in children's lives, is emerging in various disciplines. Researchers are exploring whether spirituality has a biological basis, and are moving to study spiritual development empirically and place it within mainstream scientific research into human development (Roehlkepartain et al. 2006). This research suggests that experiencing spirituality may be inherent and universal in children (Ratcliff & Nye 2006, p. 479). There still appears to be a fear or uneasiness in education around the term 'spirituality', as something not grounded in the 'real' world; a testimony perhaps to the 'hocus pocus', new-age cloud that hangs around the term. This reticence may contribute, at least in education, to the difficulties in attempts to define the term. Hyde comments that what is important is not defining, but describing spirituality (2008b, p. 23), a position also supported by Claxton (cited in Fraser & Grootenboer 2004).

A broadly accepted working definition of 'spirituality' from current literature appears elusive. The semantic difficulties are accentuated by the use of the seemingly interchangeable terms of 'spirit', 'spiritual', 'spirituality', 'spiritual development' and 'spiritual nurturing'. The word 'spirit' is derived from the Latin 'spirare' to breathe, which may resonate with the view that in our fast-paced, scheduled world, children currently have very little opportunity to breathe deeply or 'take a breath'. The Latin origins may, however, be the closest we get to a common understanding of the term.

Teasing out the distinction between 'religion' and 'spirituality' is equally problematic. As Eaude (2005) points out, the historical coupling of the two terms has dominated discussion of their defining elements. This tension permeates the literature, and it is not within the scope of this paper to analyse further or add to the current definitions or debate in this area, but to work within the framework of existing approaches to definition that are secular and focus on the human dimensions of connectedness and purpose.

Spirituality can be seen as coupled with 'student yearnings' for answers to, among other things, meaning and purpose in life, and a hunger for joy and delight (Kessler cited in Sisk 2008, p. 25). For Wagener and Moloney,

Spirituality ... is the essential potentiality for addressing the ultimate questions that are intrinsic to the experience of being human ... (it is) an integrative function that leads to an experience of personal wholeness and defines the links between the self and the rest of creation, locating the individual within a transcendent system of meaning. (2006, p. 139)

The reference to transcendence in considering spirituality alludes to the idea of 'the getting of wisdom' and a focus on the function and role of the individual in relation to others. Through spiritual development, there can be personal transformation that benefits individuals and the communities they belong to. Bigger (2007) argues that a rational way to approach transcendence is to look for external, natural and rational sources of inspiration. With reference to spirituality in young children, this promotes consideration of the experiences and environments that may

provide such opportunities. If spirituality is also seen as innate and observable (Gisenberg 2000), then it opens up the possibility that 'spirituality' is a driving, transformative 'life force' that leads an individual to explore 'who I am' and 'how do I understand the world'. It is reasonable to consider this as observable in a young child's drive to interact with his or her world and the joy and delight shown in discovery and exploration.

This concept of a driving force, or urge to learn – energy within a child that guides his or her development – is at the core of Montessori's approach and her educational practices, particularly with 3–6 year olds (Montessori 1966, 1967a, 1967b). This 'inner vitality' Montessori saw as the unacknowledged, unprotected and neglected psychic or 'spiritual state' of a child's development (Montessori 1966, p. 46). Adults who attend to this development are urging a child to "... new insights and discoveries both in his external environment and in the intimacies of his own soul" (Montessori 1967b, p. 320). So, as we begin to consider these ideas, we might ask: who is Maria Montessori?

Montessori – ideas, principles and educational method

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) was an innovative Italian educator, and the first woman to graduate in medicine from the University of Rome in 1886. She was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. She is unique in having developed a pedagogy or method of educational practice to support her philosophy of education and theory of child development. Her work still flourishes across six continents in schools that practice her educational method. Montessori herself was an eclectic borrower of the best ideas available to her at the time, but her strength lay in how she used the ideas of others in combination with her own "for new purposes and in new ways" (Kramer 1976, p. 238). Thinkers who preceded and influenced her include Rousseau, Locke, Itard, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Bergson (Chattin-McNichols 1998). She lived, wrote and worked over the time when the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber were being transformed into the discipline of sociology. In the educational arena, there may have been a reciprocal influence with Piaget, who was well aware of her work (Lillard 2005).

Montessori's educational method was developed through her observations of what children are deeply interested in and capable of doing by and for themselves when internally motivated and supported to do so. Recognising the experiences of children from 0–6 years as crucial in their development, Montessori saw that the environment can be an effective facilitator of change, and that the relationships children develop with the environment are where they connect their ideas and deepen their general knowledge and understanding. Her educational philosophy reveals a focus on understanding the needs, development and potentialities of the child. Montessori (1965) saw children and adults as distinct and separate entities, and that the rights of children needed greater recognition compared with the rights of adults because children 'create humanity' but are without voice (1966, p. 214). Concerned about the perception and social status of children, Montessori wrote that

A child ... is condemned by adults to ... places of exile until he reaches an age when he can live in an adult world without causing others distress. It is only then that a

child is admitted to society. Prior to this he has to obey adults like a person deprived of civil rights. (1966, p. 193)

She spoke of liberating children by providing education that suits the developing soul of the child and by respecting a child's developmental pace and his or her need and ability to work, concentrate and exercise choice (Chattin-McNichols 1998). Montessori believed that our attitudes as adults towards children will only change when the rights and needs of children are accorded deeper respect. Then, she argued, we may be able to move away from educating children in ways that suit us (Montessori 1965). In understanding this, her principles may be seen as pre-empting concepts and thinking that are considered 'cutting edge' today; principles that place a child's wellbeing as central to her or his experience.

Montessori's ideas for an education system that aimed to develop independent-thinking individuals led to her schools being closed and her books burned by German and Italian Fascists in the1930s. Her ideas have never been far from controversy, misunderstanding and misinterpretation but, intriguingly, they have not infiltrated the mainstream of education and related disciplines, nor have they had the exposure of Piaget's or Vygotsky's theories for example, despite current research that supports her psychological theories (Lau 2008; Lillard 2005). Lillard (2005) considers that this may be because Montessori herself was foremost a practitioner, lacking interest in theory and an experimental rigor in developing her educational ideas, and also because of the impact of the influential criticism of William Kilpatrick (1915) in the United States at the time her method was receiving international attention.

Montessori's ideas and principles and current relevance

However, Montessori's unique approach to children's learning experiences and her deep commitment to education as a means of positively transforming society and the environment has seen her principles and the application of her method continue for more than a century. Montessori's approach has been described as a humane educational theory that actively opposes seeing education as a way of preparing children for employment and moves to, among other things, "nourish the souls of students" (Postman 1999, p. 131). These principles, embodied in her philosophy, are considered innovative even now. It is the range of principles that Montessori articulates about how we view education, learning and the child that can be seen to still hold their value in this century. They have value because they are capable of informing contemporary issues and knowledge. Addressing the current challenges in early childhood may need alternative ways of thinking, acting and accommodating, and it is argued here that Montessori's ideas can contribute meaningfully to this process.

It is not the purpose of this paper to outline the breadth and complexities of Montessori's philosophy, theory and educational method, as a number of authors have skillfully attended to this (see for example: Chattin-McNichols 1998; Lillard 2005). However, we are at a time when the idea of 'spirituality' as a part of student wellbeing is a concept of increasing scholarly and pedagogical interest. The consideration of 'spirituality' in education is now entering mainstream thought. As

Hyde states, however, it is "a relatively new field of exploration" (2008, p. 13). Questions about the defining qualities of spirituality, its role in young children's development and wellbeing, and how it may be recognised and supported in the early years, are being actively debated. Montessori's principles and pedagogy may assist to inform and problematise this questioning, and her writings are deserving of closer scrutiny at a time when the ideas of spirituality, wellbeing and educational practices for the under 6s are all receiving serious and significant attention.

Montessori and spirituality

For anyone interested in children's spirituality and wellbeing, Montessori has much to offer. For Montessori, nurturing the child's spirit is critical to a child's whole development. She wrote that

There are some who still cling to the mistaken conviction that a child's natural education should be wholly physical; but the spirit also has its nature, and it is the life of the spirit that should dominate human existence at every stage. (1967b, p. 320)

The spiritual dimension of young children's development, and its critical importance in their education, are foundational to her philosophy, theory of development and pedagogical practice. Montessori lived and worked much of her life in Italy, where the dominant religion was Catholicism, and she was brought up as a Roman Catholic. In the historical context of Montessori's writing and practice in Catholic Italy, her views on spirituality could arguably be seen as inextricably integrated with religion. She wrote about religious teaching at various times in her life. Her methodology and principles concerning religious teaching have been developed further; the work of Sophia Cavaletti (1983) is one example. Cavaletti's 'Catechesis of the Good Shepherd' is based on Montessori's principles, and focuses on providing a carefully prepared environment for children that supports and encourages their spiritual relationship with God. Children are provided with materials such as religious figures and an environment where they can reveal the qualities that Montessori saw: a capacity to deeply concentrate, a joy in engagement and the ability to thoughtfully reflect within and respond to an atmosphere of still and quiet (Hyde 2004; May 2008). These ideas on the religious education of young children have been applied by educators developing religious education programs in diverse faiths.

In light of this, we need to consider whether Montessori's spirituality principles have 'universality', that is, whether her ideas can contribute to the debate about spirituality as a secular experience. However, it is not just her religious education writings that are dominated by principles of spirituality: spirituality is central to her educational method. Thus we need to consider these principles and reflect on them in the broader context of representing a spirituality that is not defined by religion. Montessori's view on spirituality was that all children have the capacity for spirituality and can and do experience it. Spirituality is holistic and innate in the sense that there is an inner, spiritual force that drives a young child's development. This aspect needs to be further considered.

Spiritual foundations – children's 'work', interests and the environment

Montessori saw a child's relationship with the environment as the key to his or her self-understanding. The quality of this relationship was thus both paramount and central to a child's physical and mental health and development because

Education ... is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. (1967a, p. 8)

This sentiment is echoed by Ratcliff and Nye (2006), who suggest that any framework for examining children's spirituality needs to focus those children's own experiences. The environment can be viewed as having a profound influence on a child's experiences by the limitations and possibilities it contains. Kennedy sees that for the child, the environment "... forms and instructs lived experience" (2006, p. 170). The environment and what it affords a young child's experiences is arguably where we should also start when considering, recognising and supporting young children's spirituality.

The crucial aspect for consideration is Montessori's view that children have an inner *spiritual* drive for development. This idea is fundamental to a child's active engagement with the environment, which is then seen as the *spiritual* process of self-construction – and that this is a child's 'work'. 'Working' in this sense, is defined by Montessori as a child's efforts and experiences of interacting with the environment (1967a, p. 88). The idea of a child 'working' is not a concept exclusive to Montessori's thinking, but is one that has attracted significant criticism, as it challenges the notion of a childhood as a period of 'play'. Kennedy (2006, p. 271) raises ideas that echo this in exploring the relationship between 'play' and 'work' for children, and the transformative nature of task engagement and mastery. According to Montessori, for 'work' to successfully occur, the environment needs to be "rich in motives which lead interest to activity and invite the child to conduct his own experiences" (1967a, p. 92). This can be achieved if the tasks available "arouse such an interest that it engages the whole personality" (1967a, p. 206). The adults in a child's life are able to provide this if they are attuned to that child's interests.

This was something Montessori believed was recognisable when a child shows intense interest in aspects of the environment. Referred to as 'sensitive periods', these interests are marked by intense energy, are internally motivated, propel a child's development and are the times when learning is optimal. She identified, among others, sensitive periods for language. For Montessori, the adult's role is to not only follow the young child's interests in the immediate, but to also see these interests as catalysts for deeper knowledge and understanding. The adult needs to provide ways for children to freely but purposefully engage with their environment in a way that will bring their initial contact to a different, deeper level, as this is the means by which children can experience concentration. Concentration then, is the *visible* spiritual force that leads to optimal development and wellbeing, where a child is "... in communication with himself and opens up his soul" (Montessori 1967b, p. 179).

Writing in 1912, Montessori observed that *concentration* in young children was the key to self-mastery (1912/1964) central to a sense of self. Concentrating (described in her writings as an intense focus of mental energy on an object or activity in the environment) leads children to engage in the world with different motives and a different level of understanding. She believed that concentration feeds a 'spiritual hunger' (1917/1965, p. 153) and fulfils the spiritual need for self-development in young children. Children experience a spiritual repletion when they engage in the environment in ways that bring about their development; that is, through an initial portal of deep concentration.

Concentration as a spiritual force

For concentration to occur, adults need to prepare the environment and "provide 'motives for activity' so well adapted to the child's interests that they provoke his deep attention" (1967a, p. 206). This deep attention is the necessary precursor to concentration.

One thing certain is that no child concentrates just by making an effort of will ... nature ... gives the child special interests, interests of exceptional intensity. (1967a, p. 217)

Concentration, Montessori believed, was a key to all pedagogy.

I studied with great care how to produce that environment that would include the most favourable conditions to arouse this concentration, and it was in this fashion that I began to create my method. Certainly, here is the key to all pedagogy: to know how to recognize the precious instinct of concentration in order to make use of it in (the) teaching. (1987, p. 18)

She saw that children who have deeply concentrated appeared deeply rested and 'intimately strengthened': "It seems almost that in their soul a path has been opened" (1987, p. 18). Concentration then becomes a spiritual pathway to a new consciousness; that of a child's own individuality and the unlocking of his or her true development.

When he comes out of his concentration, he seems to perceive the world as a boundless field for fresh discoveries ... The spiritual process is plain: he detaches himself from the world in order to attain the power to unite himself with it. (1967a, p. 272)

There is an argument that wellbeing is established through self-understanding and finding purpose in life (Cohen 2006), and that this is a key to supporting spiritual wellbeing in young children. If this is so, providing a supportive environment is important for the fulfillment of children's capacity and need for spiritual expression. If it is also accepted that the capacity to concentrate and the requirement to engage in it are of spiritual value, then the challenge facing educators is to provide opportunities for this to not only occur, but be protected when it does (Cossentino 2006).

Exploring the conditions for spirituality through concentration

For Montessori, the spiritual dimensions of a child's life and experiences go well beyond the focus of this paper, and are integrated into the complex layers of her overall educational method. However, the grounding considerations for an environment that supports and protects concentration have already been stated here. Children need an environment that is rich in activities that are meaningful for them and have the potential to fully engage their attention. Children also need the opportunity to freely choose such activities. Many would argue that pre-school environments already exist that achieve this. But there is a cultural and philosophical shift needed to achieve conditions for a child to not only fully engage in a way that brings deep concentration into being, but allows him or her to continue uninterrupted. We need to shift our focus from viewing early learning experiences as being quintessentially social, and see and respect the need for very young children to engage deeply with activities in private and without interruption. Young children of 3 and 4 years have the will and the capacity to deeply concentrate for lengthy periods of time, given an environment that values and supports it.

Children need spaces that allow and encourage this to happen: places where they can engage with activities on their own if they so choose. A place chosen by a child for this purpose might be represented by just one chair at a small table, or may be in some other way delineated. In Montessori environments, the rolling out of a small rug on the floor is a signal to others that this is just such a place. Children may choose to have others join them, but they also need the license and the language to ask that adults and other children allow and accept their need to be on their own. To do this, we need to acknowledge that children to have the right to say 'I'd rather be engaged with this activity on my own right now', and that sometimes they don't wish to share what they are doing with others. Periods of time are needed where interruptions by adult-driven agendas are minimised, and where other children understand that someone who is deeply engaged is not to be interrupted

Spirituality – a new 'curriculum'

For Vialle, Walton and Woodcock (2008), how to approach spirituality in a mainstream curriculum is a new frontier. A number of authors have touched on practical considerations for supporting spirituality that echo the ingredients for concentration in Montessori's writings. Bone (2005) and Bone, Cullen and Loveridge (2007) have explored the idea of 'everyday spirituality'; something that arises from the social experiences and practices children have in the course of their daily living which enable them to become attuned to their 'inner life' or rhythms. Part of this includes the ability to freely choose activities, which Bone describes as having "the power to awaken the soul" (2005, p. 312).

Fraser and Grootenboer (2004) explore the characteristics of environments that enhance the spiritual dimensions of children's lives, including making provision for "deeply meaningful events and activities that initiate a transcending experience" (p. 312). Zohar and Marshall (cited in DECS 2006, p. 9) raise the idea of a 'natural spirituality' in children as an impetus for their creation of a 'metaphysical framework for their lives' that is grounded in their deep interest and curiosity about their world. Nye and Hay (1996), in reflecting on children's spiritual experiences, maintain that concentrated attention, which can arise through mastery of new skills, can have long-lasting spiritual significance. The concepts considered here again

raise the point of looking back to past ideas, as we reflect on where we are going with spiritual concepts and curriculum with young children.

Provoking current educational thinking with past ideas

Concern about young children's wellbeing is not new. Tucked away in writings from the 19th and 20th century are ideas and reflections relating to the rights, wellbeing and spiritual health of children. Postman (1999), in exploring the possibilities of meaningful ideas from the 18th century having value in this century, states that,

in order to have an agreeable encounter with the twenty-first century, we have to take into it some good ideas. And in order to do that, we need to look back to take stock of the good ideas available to us. (p. 13)

The question is not whether we should be unquestioningly embracing ideas from earlier times, but whether these ideas have the capacity to problematise the discourses of this century. This concept is not a new one in education, where past theories and ideas continue to influence the rethinking, redefinition and reevaluation of educational pedagogy and philosophy. Writers such as philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859-1952), for example, continue to have a powerful influence on early childhood thinking in relation to, amongst many areas, the role of direct and relevant experience in young children's learning and the democratic potential that exists in children's social experiences (see for example Fraser 2006; Hedeen 2005). The Reggio Emilia approach may reasonably be seen as a product of a process, where multiple and diverse theories and ideas, including those of Montessori, Vygotsky, Dewey, Erikson and Brofenbrenner, have influenced and inspired new ways of approaching and implementing young children's educational experiences (Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998), and have been instrumental in provoking a critical approach to many assumptions of what is considered 'best practice' in early childhood education (Fraser 2006). It is in this context that the ideas of Maria Montessori (1870 -1952) are worth considering; not as a panacea, but as "a provocative approach that can fit into current educational reforms" (Wakin 1974, p. 29).

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the care and education of children in the 21st century faces unique challenges, and that Montessori's ideas and principles have contemporary validity in informing, understanding and responding to these. Her foundational principles are grounded in viewing children as capable, intelligent and active learners who are significant in their own right. These concepts are at the forefront of current educational thinking. In addition, there is now a groundswell of interest in the spiritual dimension of children's lives and its role in their wellbeing and education. I have argued that Montessori's views on spirituality have validity in the current debate. Montessori saw the primary driving force in all children's development as spiritual in nature, and it is this spirituality that gives children a capacity for joyful and deep engagement with their environment. Children's capacity and ability to concentrate deeply is a spiritual pathway to a new level of individual consciousness and connection to the environment, enabling a 'spiritual

life' which is "... built upon the fundamental basis of a unified personality, well attuned to the outer world" (Montessori 1967a, p. 266). The conditions to bring about, support and protect young children's concentration should be considered in responding to their spiritual needs.

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