



## Personal Reflections on Professional Practice: A Portrayal of Nora

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on ways in which teachers' conceptions of their professional roles reflect their own personal values, beliefs and convictions. Data exploration has comprised journals, interviews, written reflections and collaborative contextual analysis. Analysis of the teachers' occupational life histories and the findings as a whole have been used to shed light on underlying values, conceptions of professional roles and future perspectives. Eight Swedish Montessori primary school teachers participated in the study. Although relevant issues pertaining to the group as a whole will be raised here, this article will focus mainly on one teacher. By presenting Nora's story I hope to be able to illustrate, through a personal portrayal, the complexities involved in coming to terms with personal values and professional roles.*

### INTRODUCTION

In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is.

(Goodson, 1981, p. 69)

By encouraging a group of teachers to speak openly about their lives and work, I hoped to be able to document authentic accounts of the processes involved in coming to terms with personal and professional identities in relation to past, present and future influences.

In Sweden, Montessori teacher training programmes and courses are offered at all major universities and institutes of higher education. The Swedish Montessori Association consists of members from 260 local Montessori societies throughout the country. Although still predominant at the pre-school 3-6 level, Montessori elementary 6-9 and secondary classes are on the increase. In 2004 there were 558 registered Montessori pre-schools and schools in Sweden. Of these, 144 were primary 6-9 and lower secondary schools (Malm, 2004a). To date, these statistics remain relatively constant.

In New Zealand, Montessori education experienced a revival in the mid-1970's which is still in progress (Shuker, 2005). However, due to the shortage of

qualified Montessori teachers, growth of authentic Montessori pre-school and primary programmes has been limited. Demand outstrips supply and teachers must be registered before schools can gain government funding (Montessori Association of New Zealand Inc.). Auckland University of Technology offers the only degrees with Montessori that meet New Zealand Teachers Council teacher registration requirements, enabling graduating students to become registered to teach in both Montessori and mainstream settings (<http://www.montessori.org.nz/teachertraining.shtml>).

What unites Montessori teachers worldwide is a specific philosophy of education. They believe in and apply educational theories that are based on a holistic understanding and interpretation of the developmental patterns of children. Of interest to the study has also been to discover how Montessori teachers today cope with an educational ideology whose fundamental principles and modes of practice in certain instances have remained relatively unchanged since the original writings of Maria Montessori, although the educational context in which Montessori teachers today find themselves has changed considerably.

By presenting Nora's story I hope to be able to illustrate, through a personal portrayal, some of the many ways in which teachers' conceptions of their professional roles reflect their own personal values, beliefs and convictions.

## **THE LIFE HISTORY APPROACH**

Occupational life histories were constructed in collaboration with eight female Montessori primary school teachers. Use was made of journals, interviews, written reflections and discussions. Through collaborative contextual analysis, life histories were constructed whereby the private, personal and professional content of the teachers' lives acquired meaning within an overall historical, cultural and social framework. In this study occupational life histories constituted data exploration on a vertical (individual) level combined with data exploration on a horizontal level (as part of a group sharing a common professional identity). The life histories in this study were thus a collection of individual (unique) female voices (from different backgrounds and with different life experiences), united by a common educational outlook and at work within the same divergent society.

The life histories of women have been found to differ from those of men in regard to the strategies used to consciously organise as well as 'tell' their lives. Conventions and symbols used by women and men in telling their stories often reflect and make visible the cultural implications they are a part of. Women's life histories are often less consistently structured; the same ideas are varied (even contradicted) at different levels (Salminen-Karlsson, 1994, p. 30). Herein lies the challenge for the researcher/interviewer. This 'transaction-reaction' (between the researcher and the narrator) in collaborative research, Pamphilon (1999) believes, is one of the central issues in social science today.

The role of the life historian is to offer a narrative interpretation of someone else's 'text' or 'story', based on what that particular person has chosen to tell (interpret) of his/her life at any specific moment in time. As such, the

construction of narrative is a creative process and consequently life history research can be presented in many different ways (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

One can never tell the "whole" story of a person's life. The teachers I met and spoke to told me about their life situation at a particular moment in time. The life process continues and individuals adapt and develop accordingly. Nora's story is based on my understanding and interpretation of the way in which she has described and interpreted her life.

## **NORA'S STORY**

Nora is in her late fifties. She is the oldest teacher in the group and has also had the longest career as a Montessori teacher. Nature has been one of her greatest inspirations and contact with others sharing the same interests has been important to her development. Music she describes as being an integrated part of everything she does. She is divorced and has three grown children. Having had children of her own has been a positive influence, "If I had a daughter I'd be glad if she became a Montessori teacher. Even my sons, of course. I think they'd have an interesting life. One learns the meaning of quality. One becomes critical. Aware".

Nora came into contact with Montessori education while studying psychology at University. She went on study visits to Montessori pre-schools and found them very interesting. Having encountered the pedagogy in a positive way and already having some knowledge of it, Nora felt that she was able "to understand and identify with the intentions and expectations of the teachers. The children were treated in a way I also believed they should be treated".

She also discovered a way of nurturing her interest for music in collaboration with the children. Nora has studied music and taken her Montessori Teacher's Diploma overseas. She has worked as a Montessori teacher for 24 years (pre-school, principal, lower and upper primary). At present she works at a private city school (20 students per class, 3-12 years old) where she has been a head-teacher for several years. The school has a lot of immigrant children and subjects are taught in five languages.

## **IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO STICK YOUR CHIN OUT IN OUR COUNTRY**

Nora's professional role has been strengthened by her teacher training, which, she writes, has given her "knowledge, creativity and the strength to move forward". She also mentions "disappointments" in her life, which have helped strengthen her professional identity. In relation to experiences in her career that have been of significance, Nora writes:

In the beginning when I worked for municipalities and parent associations I felt that everything was going well. When I became independent I knew that I was better than ever. But it's impossible to 'stick your chin out' in our country! One becomes the centre of suspicion. Perhaps the motive for starting a school is to be able to make a profit? Impossible in Sweden today! We're a normal

foundation, not a company. This 'suspicion' has limited my work in school. It's difficult to work in such a climate.

The problems she was confronted with during her period as principal affected her to such an extent that she went back to working as a teacher.

I didn't like the scepticism I was surrounded with. Why are you principal of your own school? That's why I work as a teacher instead. (...) I couldn't handle it anymore. (...) I was disappointed. I've probably been influenced personally, become quieter, perhaps. Keep to myself more. (...) I don't have so many professional years left. The ones I have left I want to be able to enjoy.

Nora teaches different subjects but misses having her own class. Although "it's nice working with a bigger perspective, the greatest satisfaction would probably be having a class of one's own".

### **THE LOVE ONE RECEIVES FROM THE CHILDREN IS PERHAPS THE BEST OF ALL**

As a Montessori teacher Nora describes herself as being "quite demanding". The children are asked to evaluate their activities and she believes that her genuine interest in children is the reason for the sensitivity she says she feels for the group. Although she says she plans a lot, the plans often change. "I work with small children so it's necessary to be flexible". She believes that a good teacher needs to be calm and have patience, "be encouraging in *our way*". Consistency is also important. For Nora a good day is when she feels she has done something of benefit for the children. Mutual respect and the prepared environment are also important. In her journal she writes:

I've had a good day. I've felt appreciated. I'm pleased that I've been able to be a little strict, which I'm normally not, this morning. This way I felt that they were able to stretch their endurance and were very satisfied with their results, their sums and their pages. They looked very pleased with themselves. Now I look forward very much to see what happens tomorrow when a similar morning is planned.

Her greatest work satisfaction comes from time spent together with the children: "The love one receives from the children is perhaps the best of all. I can judge this emotionally. One receives love and trust". In regard to the students, Nora says that she tries to be "like a tutor to them".

I try to support them in their work. I try to create a prepared environment where everything necessary for the day can be found and everything looks neat and tidy. It's important that I also feel refreshed and looking good and expect them to show respect for me as well.

## **IT'S IMPORTANT TO ME THAT MY FEELINGS ARE CONFIRMED**

Her greatest source of dissatisfaction has been in relation to parents; she feels they do not make the same demands on their children as the school does. She keeps parents informed of the children's development and says that she has "different relations to the parents as they have different needs". She mentions that in her opinion foreign parents have more respect for the school as an institution and have higher ambitions for their children.

In conjunction with what she had written in her journal I asked her to describe her feelings of being "needed" and "appreciated". She replied: "It's important to me that my feelings are confirmed. I can become sad and disappointed if I'm misunderstood. I'm very sensitive". When asked whether or not her sensitivity has been of use in her working situation she answered:

I haven't had direct use for my sensitivity, except in my work with the children I think... small children. I'd like to work with children that are younger than 9 or much older, 15, 16 years old. They also have this vulnerability. A small child needs such a lot of care.

Having sympathetic parents is important to her: "When they don't understand what it is that I want then I feel sad. That's the worst part. I believe it's important – parent's appreciation, the children's appreciation". I asked her how she coped with problematic parents.

Nora: I've noticed that it's different depending on whether it's a man or a woman. If a male teacher says that he doesn't have time for these kinds of things, that he's dissatisfied with how the children are brought up at home, that he doesn't like them coming to school late. If he says these things then it has more effect than if I stand there and say that I don't think things are going well. This I've noticed and it irritates me.

Interviewer: How do you interpret this?

Nora: I don't know. I've just noticed that it is like this. One is required not only to supply the children with a good education, one is expected to give service as well.

Interviewer: Do you think a man is taken more seriously?

Nora: Absolutely. It's like that. One works together every day and I notice that that which he says works better than if we women say it. It irritates me enormously! It's accepted in a different way. A "man-to-man" principle exists between the fathers.

She comments on the fact that there are many divorces and has noticed a certain pattern of behaviour among the fathers.

I've noticed that fathers bind their children closely. We've had discussions with some of the fathers telling them not to bind their children so much, to let them be more independent. (...) It's a catastrophe if the child isn't at home enough and they're very careful about the child not being with the mother too much. They hug and kiss a lot, especially when they drop their children off in the mornings. Maybe they want to demonstrate that they 'can'. Perhaps they're also afraid that the child will come home and say that he'd rather be with his mother instead. (...) There are even cases when they phone the child at school, so much that we have to tell them that we don't have time to fetch the child to the phone during lessons. I don't know if anyone else has had similar experiences. It would be interesting to find out.

Nora is satisfied with her choice of profession and describes her colleagues as being "friends who work with the same thing I do". She feels that they share the same intentions and that they strive towards the same goal. "We have the same guiding stars".

## **A LOT DEPENDS ON THE PERSONALITY OF THE TEACHER**

She says however that she has sometimes found it difficult working where there are only women. "There's quite a lot of jealousy among women, which is a pity". She has also experienced competition between different schools.

Here in the city there's definitely competition between the schools. Private schools. They hold back certain information about the school and things like that. It wasn't like this before. It's a pity. (...) One wants the most beautiful school, the best school. They don't want to reveal how many children are queuing, or where they come from. Mostly things like that.

Nora has also experienced critique from the Teacher's Training College.

I think they see us as competition, although I don't really understand why. They're not critical of our school, but of Montessori along traditional lines. If I could decide, one should do one's Montessori training at a Montessori Institute, not only at a Teacher's College. I've noticed a difference in quality among the teachers. There's another approach to those who have done their training at an Institute compared to those who have forty points from a Teacher's College. Quite a marked difference, I'd say. It's a delicate question. There's a difference in the way they practice Montessori. It's difficult ignoring the personal aspects. (...) A lot depends on the personality of the teacher and the atmosphere surrounding the teacher. Their knowledge and what they do with their knowledge and their talents. How far they dare go.

## **THERE IS NOTHING I WOULD WANT TO CHANGE**

In regard to Montessori's philosophy she finds it difficult to "think of anything I don't agree with, that's my big problem".

Although children are different today and mature earlier, it still rings true. There is nothing that I would want to change.

She believes the role of the teacher to be the main difference between mainstream and Montessori education.

The tutorial role, thoughts on upbringing – penetrating these on a deeper level. Trusting the child's own capabilities.

Nora believes that the future of Montessori education depends on the forms of teacher training used to educate Montessori teachers. She says that she will "definitely not change my own Montessori attitude to the child".

I feel that traditional teachers tend to do so if imperatives come from teacher education or from teacher training colleges.

She believes that the traditional school will become more Montessori-inspired in the future, based on the necessity of implementing and maintaining sustainability in life and education (the holistic perspective, a child-centred approach, facilitating a positive and prepared learning environment).

Discussing her own career cycle in relation to Huberman's (1993) themes, Nora wants to see herself as "serene" although she admits to being bitter sometimes when she finds it more difficult to reach children today, mainly due to stress. "I should be better myself, having worked as a teacher for so long". She had "self-doubts" in relation to her period as headmistress, when she took on more than she felt she could handle. "Now I've gone over to 'experiment/serene'". She feels that she still "experiments" a little today, although less than before.

Now I'm here (pointing at the table with themes) - stability. I feel I've become more capable of handling the children and the group. And I let the children decide almost everything - for example, if they want homework or not. It's their decision. It doesn't come from the parents, it comes from the children.

## **I HAVE BECOME BETTER – MORE SKILLED**

As a Montessori teacher in Sweden today Nora feels a general sense of appreciation from others. She also thinks it is important to take an active part in school activities.

I often feel appreciated by teachers from other categories. From those who are here on study visits and those I meet under other circumstances. I feel that there is a great interest for what I do, I get many questions. (...) Also, it's easy finding work. One needn't worry about unemployment, which is a relief - a stress factor one needn't account for. As a Montessori teacher I also feel that I want to give the children all that I have. So I've started a course for parents at my school.

Personally she says that she is happier today than she was some years ago. This she believes is due to experience. "I've become better - more skilled". In the future she dreams of being able to continue teaching overseas.

## INTERPRETATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

... the way we study teachers reflects the value we put on them. It confirms what sort of people we think teachers are and should be.  
(Goodson, 2000, p. 14)

In this study, Nora's choice of profession has shown itself to be dependent on critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) related to individual normative values and convictions. Sometimes critical incidents have been imposed from without (political, economical changes) and sometimes from within (family, friends, colleagues). The teachers share a common philosophical outlook, where the holistic perspective and the approach to the child are the most significant. They also had similar views regarding concepts central to Montessori education.

Nora, however, was the only teacher who said she could not think of anything she disagrees with in Montessori education. This troubled her and she returned to the question again later during our conversation.

I can't think of anything that I don't agree with. That's my big problem. Unless it's that one shouldn't concentrate too much on the materials. One should be able to imagine a Montessori school without a single piece of Montessori material. Nature, paper and a pen go a long way.

In trying to come to terms with why she had found it so difficult identifying something she could disagree with in Montessori education, I asked her:

Interviewer: Could it be because the philosophy has grown along with you – that you have made it into something of your own?

Nora: That's very probable. It's even possible that that's the way it is!  
(Laughs) It's probable that I ignored that which didn't fit.

Here Nora's strategy is that of a "subjective knower" (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberg & Tarule, 1986). It is also an example of the dynamics of the professional self and the subjective educational theory - the result of a reflective integration of

the experiences a teacher has had during his/her career (Kelchtermans, 1993). Nora had strong self-doubts during her headmistress period, when she felt she took on more than she could handle. Going back to being a teacher resulted in a period of stability for her.

Strong memories or experiences the teachers may have regarding their own schooling, be they positive or negative, one can assume have asserted some influence on their present teaching practice. Nora enjoyed school and liked many of her teachers; she particularly remembers her upper primary school teacher.

She was very strict and demanded a lot of us. And I loved her. She taught us incredibly much.

She also remembers a teacher she had in upper secondary school.

She never spoke one private word to us but always kept to the subject. Always quiet. She had a very gentle way of presenting herself and we all had great respect for her. We felt she took us seriously. She was proper and consistent.

Negative emotions connected to school experiences relate to how she saw her friends being treated.

The teachers didn't treat my friends well; the one's who had difficulties. This has influenced me all my life.

In these descriptions I feel one can ascertain the way in which Nora herself wants to be regarded as a teacher, with respect and as a person who is committed to her task. Feelings of moral obligation and fairness are very important to her. Paramount to these teachers are their convictions concerning the holistic approach to the child and the philosophical implications thereof. Nora, for example, feels that she wants "to give the children all that I have".

Of special and overriding significance is the care and concern the teachers in this study have for their students. Teaching, Hargreaves (1998, p. 835) writes, is "an emotional practice". This is because emotions "are at the heart of teaching. They comprise its most dynamic qualities, literally, for emotions are fundamentally about movement". In a study examining aspects of the emotions of teaching and educational change, he found that the emotional bond teachers had with their students was the central influence in regard to their choice of method, teaching context and practice.

Montessori teachers operate within a specific context of educational ideas where beliefs adhered to such as the holistic perspective determine their approach to the child as well as ways of working adopted in the classroom, based on freedom and respect. These are the philosophical guidelines generally advocated by Montessori teachers. There is thus already a well-defined philosophical structure underlying the individual teacher's views on the theories of humankind and of society that help determine the organisational structure and choice of curriculum. These factors will naturally also be

influenced by the directives laid down by the national curriculum as well as be dependent on the personal interpretive framework of each individual teacher.

There are obvious connections between the ways in which the teachers in this study describe their thoughts and that which Gilligan (1982) refers to as an ethic of care among women – the fact that actions are motivated through concern for and feelings of connectedness to others. This is evident in many of the teachers' descriptions, related to different aspects of their lives. Childhood and background are often significant influences. Nora mentions the fact that she has always been able to actively integrate her interest for music with her teaching. Motherhood has also been an inspiration. All these factors can be related to the concepts of caring (concern, responsibility) and the need for sharing that is often evident among female teachers; perhaps most pertinent when working with younger children.

Nora also has specific opinions regarding gender roles, in most of the cases these are related to feelings of irritation. She feels that when men and women work together, it is the man who is taken more seriously. She has also observed that divorced men bind their children to them; they are demonstratively affectionate and seem to encourage a bond of dependency.

In describing the process of continuity and change in women's roles and identity, Esseveld (1988) suggests that women's efforts to create different forms of existence are limited and restricted by the possibilities of a particular time and place, although the past continues to be a significant factor. New insights should thus be able to lead to further growth and development. This is not always easy to do by oneself; critical friends or critical incidents are often necessary to spark off new initiatives leading towards change and hopefully also to improvements of one's situation.

As Hargreaves suggests, there needs to be a genuine desire for change.

In addition to having the capacity to change, there must also be a desire for change, based on personal choice and related to each teacher's own private understanding and creativity in regard to strategy, courage of conviction and direction of values.

(Hargreaves, 1996, p. 18)

Not all teachers are prepared to implement changes in their lives even though their desire for change may be strong. There are many defences against change; one is a tendency to wait and see and hope that things will change for the better.

Contrary to her expectations, Munro (1998) found that change need not be revolutionary, but can also occur through conventional channels, depending on the person and situation. In other words, resistance and working towards change can manifest itself in many different ways, depending on the continual construction of the teacher's subjectivity in relation to different realities, as demonstrated by the teachers in this study.

Nora's situation (being regarded with scepticism and suspicion) when headmistress of her own school affected her to such an extent that she succumbed to the pressure and went back to teaching. She never had a class of her own and this was a constant source of dissatisfaction to her.

On the whole, the Montessori teachers in this study have very little contact with Montessori teachers from other schools and areas, apart from sporadic

study visits. The impression given is that Montessori teachers are isolated from one another even within the teacher group or culture (e.g. from the opportunity of sharing and learning from each other's experiences). Collegial sharing and collaboration between Montessori teachers (from different schools and in different areas), it seems, are not common.

Some of the teachers feel there is competition between groups of Montessori teachers with different teacher training backgrounds. There is also a feeling that different schools compete with one another in regard to student intake. In cases where Montessori classes have been incorporated into the ordinary school, some kind of 'rejection' from other teachers has often been experienced, at least in the beginning, resulting in a negative form of balkanisation and strained working conditions.

The teachers in Gannerud's (1999) study stress the importance of conversations and discussions with colleagues in order to create a common frame of reference (a common professional identity), as well as giving emotional support and being an arena for professional development. Of current critical significance to many of the teachers in this study is an on-going problematic relationship with parents. Negative reactions from parents were described as being one aspect leading to dissatisfaction with the working situation. Few of the teachers in this study speak positively of parental influence. Nora mentions parents as her greatest source of dissatisfaction.

Hargreaves found that the strongest source of negative emotion among teachers was having their academic purpose and expertise questioned by parents. The teachers "were angry, outraged and upset when their purposes, judgements, expertise and basic professionalism were criticised by parents" (Hargreaves, 1999, p. 15). On the other hand, the most frequently cited source of positive emotion was positive feedback from parents.

Some of the teachers describe feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. Nora, in particular, describes experiencing feelings of jealousy from other female teachers. Although most of the teachers feel it is of current significance that Montessori educational principles comply with the national curriculum, there still seems to be a need to defend oneself against traditional ways of working – in regard to parents, other teachers and in some cases even municipalities. However, when asked what their thoughts are in regard to Montessori education in the future, the teachers were all very positive.

As a whole the teachers in this study seem to have an open-minded attitude to change and educational development. They express concerns in regard to various forms of fundamentalism, for example in regard to teachers attitudes and teacher training programmes. There is an evident awareness among these women as to what they believe in and the ways in which these ideas are manifested in action, in the classroom and in their relationships with others.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

A significant contribution of this study is, I believe, the fact that individual Montessori teachers have been given the opportunity of speaking out and openly reflecting about their lives and work; voices that in many cases would not be heard outside the framework of their direct professional setting (Malm,

2004b). By addressing specific as well as general concerns related to teaching and to education, other teachers might also be encouraged to reflect deeper about their own situations, thereby widening horizons considerably. In the present context Montessori teachers in New Zealand should be able to gain valuable insights into the lives and work of Montessori teachers in a global perspective, an experience that should be able to enhance and develop their own personal and professional processes. This should even be the case with teachers involved in mainstream education. In fact, all types of teacher categories would benefit from learning from each other.

Issues raised in conjunction with this study and which I believe teachers need to address more are how to develop a philosophical and pedagogical awareness, the holistic perspective, the cognitive as well as emotional (caring) aspects of teaching, and meaningful collaboration. In principle, developing the professional role of the teacher I believe entails developing a personal understanding of the implications of teaching as a moral as well as ethical profession.

Tendencies towards continuity or change in education depend to a great extent on the ways in which teachers are able to critically reflect on their lives and work. Taking seriously what teachers have to say is in fact essential in order to understand the forces that, among other things, govern and sway teachers' inner as well as outer motivations, something I believe to be of relevance and concern to all involved in teaching and educational processes.

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