

# CREATING A CONTEXT FOR FLOW: THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL INSIGHT AND EXPERIENCE

by Kevin Rathunde

*Kevin Rathunde reflects on his early studies of flow in Montessori adolescents and surmises that adults need to experience their own flow in order to guide young people to peak levels. He recounts his early music experiences as having “peaked” and that he needed to come back to his flow of the past to fully enter into his work with flow as a researcher. He would like to study the impact of flow in teachers and parents to measure how adult’s experiencing flow in their work impacts the children in their environment.*

This article focuses on a two-fold theme: 1) success in creating optimal environments for students’ flow experience (i.e., episodes of deep concentration) is more likely when parents and teachers understand flow from the inside (through personal experience); and 2) this perspective is consistent with Maria Montessori’s views on teacher/adult preparation for guiding children’s attention. These themes are elaborated by drawing on my past research on flow and Montessori education as well as some new work on flow and identity

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development in middle adulthood. In addition, the thoughts presented here draw heavily from personal reflections on my experiences of flow and how they have affected my life and work.

### BECOMING A KINDRED SPIRIT WITH MONTESSORI EDUCATION

The Montessori method is built around the goal of creating a context for deep, uninterrupted concentration. Over the years, I have written about the parallels between key aspects of flow theory and Montessori education (Rathunde). Both place an intrinsically motivated state of deep concentration at the heart of education and lifelong development, and both focus on how to cultivate this state to promote growth. Maria Montessori's descriptions of deep concentration and its positive consequences for learning are, in fact, very close to research-based characterizations of flow. For example, in *Spontaneous Activity in Education* she commented, "The paths the child follows in the active construction of his individuality are indeed identical with those followed by the genius. His characteristics are absorbed attention, a profound concentration which isolates him from all the stimuli of his environment" (218). Compare this with a quote from "genius grant" (MacArthur Fellowship) and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Strand describing how he feels when he is "right in the work" and at his best writing poetry: "You lose your sense of time...The idea is to be so saturated with it that there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're making meaning and dismantling meaning" (Csikszentmihalyi 121).

The central challenge of implementing a concentration-based vision of education is figuring out how to prepare an environment for children that promotes flow rather than discourages it with distractions, busywork, or other extrinsic demands imposed by the adults in charge. This was the key challenge facing Maria Montessori after she famously witnessed a young child so deeply concentrating while trying to fit wooden cylinders into a wooden block that the child's concentration did not waver even when other children were asked to cause distractions. Based on this observation and others like it, Montessori resolved to make the goal of her method to facilitate these episodes of deep concentration, and for over one hundred years others inspired by her work have taken up this challenge.

I did not become fully aware of the parallels between flow theory and Montessori education until starting research on Montessori middle schools in the early 2000s (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi). However, based on delving into the Montessori literature at that time, I realized I had become an unwitting kindred spirit with the method back in 1985 when selecting my dissertation topic: the family context of flow experience. The selection of this topic was influenced by the previous twelve years I had spent as a professional musician where I was fortunate to have many opportunities to perform with a pop-jazz-rock group across the United States and record in state-of-the-art studios with excellent producers. There was a direct connection between those years as a musician, my dissertation topic, and my eventual connection to Montessori education: *the countless experiences of flow I had while playing music.*

I developed a fascination with the intense, flow experiences that occurred while improvising, performing, practicing, and writing music. I was unsure what to call these episodes until one night performing in a rundown club in a suburb of Chicago. At the time, I was seventeen years old and attending Loyola University of Chicago during the day and reading Abraham Maslow's *Toward a Psychology of Being* in the evening in order to prepare for a Philosophy of Psychology course in the morning. I would try to read on breaks between sets in a storeroom that doubled as a dressing room for the band. The book described transcendent *peak experiences* that Maslow thought occurred while doing intrinsically motivating and self-actualizing activities. I immediately realized I was having peak experiences playing music, especially while improvising. In fact, some of these experiences were so memorable that I documented them on small pieces of paper and taped the papers behind an electronic access panel on the back of my Les Paul guitar. For the next twelve years as I progressed professionally in music, I began avidly reading about these "optimal" experiences and why researchers thought they were linked to learning and creativity. Eventually I applied to

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graduate school at the University of Chicago so I could study flow experiences with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the person doing the best contemporary research on optimal experience.

My two daughters, Casey and Kendall, were very young (ages three and one) when I entered graduate school, but I was so impressed by the flow experiences I had as a musician that I decided one of my primary goals as father/graduate student should be to understand how to create a family context for flow. Years later, when I learned that Maria Montessori's central focus was on how to create a context for children's concentration, I immediately felt like a kindred spirit with the method. I was still learning the details about what teachers actually did in the classroom, but in the big picture, I wanted to do the same things Montessori educators were trying to do: promote learning through intrinsically motivated experiences of deep immersion and concentration. I knew first-hand how powerful such experiences were and how they connected self and world in moments of oneness and exhilaration.



Montessori High School at University Circle, Cleveland, Ohio, courtesy of Hugh Kdayssi

## WHY EXPERIENCING FLOW IS IMPORTANT FOR PREPARING AN ENVIRONMENT

While putting together my presentation for the 2015 Atlanta NAMTA conference, I was thinking a great deal about the events described above and how important music had been in opening my eyes to flow theory and Montessori education. Then, by chance, I stumbled across some things Maria Montessori had to say about teacher preparation that indicated she was well aware of how important this type of personal experience was for an adult's ability to prepare an environment for concentration. I already knew of her belief in the importance of deep absorption for educating children and adolescents: "What he learns must be interesting, must be fascinating. We must give him grandeur" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 36-37). And referring to these states of absorption: "It is necessary to make use of this psychological state, which permits the viewing of things in their entirety, and to let [the student] note that everything in the universe is interrelated." What I had not assimilated as thoroughly the first time reading these passages, however, was what she had to say about *teachers* a few pages later: "Would that the teacher allowed herself to be imbued by the grandeur of this whole to be able to transmit it to the child" (40).

By pursuing this interesting new connection on the importance of flow-like experiences for teacher training, it was easy to discover other instances where Montessori discussed this aspect of adult preparation: "[A teacher] must be filled with wonder; and when you have acquired that you are prepared....It is not enough for you to love the child. You must first love and understand the universe. You must prepare yourself and truly work at it" (Standing 309). This outcome of "love" for the universe was related to working on one's character and identity: "The real preparation for education is a study of one's self....It includes the training of character, it is a preparation of the spirit" (*The Absorbent Mind* 31). In other words, the path to becoming filled with grandeur or wonder, and being able to transmit this to the child, involves intimate self-knowledge; in a non-religious sense, it requires a spiritual transformation.

These passages from Montessori strongly remind me of Alan Waterman's (1990, 1993) well-known work on identity develop-

ment, and Maslow's (1968) seminal work on self-actualization. In both approaches, one's authentic self (what Waterman refers to as *daimon* following Aristotle) is cultivated by pursuing personally meaningful and expressive activities that reveal one's highest potentials. Not surprisingly, Waterman (1990) found such activities are empirically associated with optimal states like flow: "Experiences of personal expressiveness, from feelings accompanying intrinsic motivation, through flow, to peak experiences, constitute a sign that one is acting in a manner consistent with one's daimon" (56). Maslow likewise concluded that self-actualization was associated with having more frequent peak experiences. Therefore, frequent flow or peak experiences can indicate that one is on a path of identity development and self-knowledge, and this is precisely the path of nurturing the spirit, I believe, that Montessori recommended for teacher preparation.

If these observations are correct, they suggest that a key component of teacher preparation for Montessori education is self-actualization and the pursuit of an authentic identity along a path of intrinsic motivation, flow, and immersive/

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peak experiences that merge the self with the environment. Many descriptions of flow and peak experiences highlight these moments of unity between self and environment and recall Montessori's descriptions of someone filled with wonder and love of the universe. Such a person, according to Montessori, would be a better guide for students because they would have fewer personal limitations that could interfere with their ability to comprehend the child's path of self-construction. In Maslow's terms, such a person would be less motivated by their own *deficiency needs* (D-needs) and would therefore be better able to promote another's self-actualization. What gives me confidence that these interpretations of teacher preparation are correct is how closely they mirror Montessori's views of child development. In other words, normalization and the child's capacity for self-regulation and lifelong learning were the result of *recurrent experiences of deep concentration*. Whether talking about children or

adults, therefore, Montessori thought that experiencing flow and deep concentration was essential for personal growth. For adults, in addition, it was essential for their ability to appropriately guide the attention of children.

An adult who has personal experience with flow would be more willing to trust and place a high value on intrinsic educational goals rather than looking for validation in extrinsic goals like test performance. Such an experientially attune person would also be more likely to notice deep concentration in a child, just like it is easier to have empathy for others who have shared similar life experiences. I do not think it is a random occurrence when particular graduate students are attracted to the study of flow, when some academic colleagues take an interest in such research, or when a handful of students light up in a class when I talk about these subjects; I believe they are feeling a connection that resonates because of their past experience. *They are better able to recognize and comprehend what they have experienced firsthand.* Moreover, I have heard similar stories from Montessori teachers over the years: Many were attracted to the pedagogy before receiving training because of the high value they had already placed on intrinsic motivation.

#### FALLING AWAY FROM FLOW AND THEN FINDING IT AGAIN

If it is true that personal experiences of self-actualization and flow make it easier for an adult to appreciate a child's self-construction, then this unfortunate truth must also be admitted: It is often extremely difficult to stay on a path of self-actualization in the face of adult responsibilities (e.g., the pressures of jobs and parenting) and the fragmented and hectic nature of modern life. Family and career concerns often take center stage in early and middle adulthood and often force the passions of youth to the background, no matter how well-loved and important they were at the time. Having asked thousands of students to write short papers about their history of flow experiences, I can confirm that the majority of young, college-aged adults report that it is harder for them to find flow now than it was as a child or adolescent. When they were younger, many felt they had a protected space created by their schools and parents where they were encouraged to explore their interests. I must admit that I too started falling away from flow in my daily life with all of the

tasks associated with career and family responsibilities, despite the fact that I spent many years immersed in music earlier in life, and then continued my interest in flow as a professor.

My past history ensured that I would never stop valuing flow as a central component of development. However, my guitars were too often locked in their cases, and playing and writing music stopped being a priority. I increasingly realized what was being lost in terms of momentary engagement and how the cumulative loss was negatively affecting my life. I became determined to rediscover music because I also knew it was the source of inspiration for my academic work. Therefore, approximately five years ago I made an effort to reintegrate music back into my life. The long story of this reintegration is contained in an autoethnography written for a forthcoming chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Leisure* (Rathunde & Isabella). For the purposes of this article, I will only touch on the highlights of this journey back to music and flow and will spend more time discussing its positive consequences.

I started re-engaging music by setting aside adequate time to engage a myriad of challenges, both technical and musical, that needed to be addressed to gain back a level of proficiency on the guitar. As some of the challenges started to be resolved, I began to have the familiar insights and flow experiences that had always been associated with music. In order to elaborate these internal changes and connect to others in the “real” world, my wife and I made the decision to organize a fundraiser for a local movement disorders clinic and have me perform that evening. Again, the many difficult challenges involved in this more socially oriented process evoked a great deal of energy, and as the various challenges were engaged and resolved, I repeatedly experienced flow while preparing for the fundraiser. All went well the night of the event; we raised money for a good cause and only encountered a few small glitches. I enjoyed the performance and received positive feedback suggesting others had enjoyed it as well. All of this bolstered the feeling that being a musician was part of my *present* identity and self-actualization and not just a part of the past.

It is hard to provide readers with hard evidence that this re-connection with music and flow had a profound effect on my life

and work, or that it was related to the positive outcomes discussed earlier in terms of authentic identity, self-actualization, or the sense of wonder that Maria Montessori thought prepared an adult to better understand her pedagogy. Nevertheless, that is what I believe. Just as it had provided the inspiration for my academic work on the family context of flow (and eventually the Montessori context of flow), music again provided inspiration for a number of projects I was excited to explore. Most important among them was an interest in trying to understand how to help adults reconnect with flow despite the extrinsic pressures they might be feeling in their daily lives. The first concrete step along this new path was a non-Montessori study of identity development in middle-aged adults using interviews to explore how some were able to stay passionately engaged with their interests (Rathunde & Isabella, *Identity Flexibility During Adulthood*). That ongoing study, in turn, set the stage for my NAMTA presentation in Atlanta, this article, and a new Montessori-related study that will look at the consequences of trying to help Montessori adults reconnect with flow. These various research initiatives emerged, without question, from a reinvigorated faith in the dynamics of intrinsic motivation and flow resulting from my reengagement with music.

#### NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

One central question driving my new Montessori research is if adults (parents and teachers) were more strongly connected to their own flow experiences, how would it affect their lives and their ability to guide children in a Montessori way? Would it change the way they experience the adult-child interaction? Would it change how much they value and trust intrinsic motivation? Would it change how they spent their time or the things they focused their attention on? The central (and obvious) issue driving this new study will be to try to determine the best way to help Montessori adults reconnect with flow.

An assumption providing a starting point for the research is that we are likely to encounter Montessori teachers and parents in three different circumstances. Some will not need to be put back in touch with flow because they have been able to maintain and cultivate their passions from childhood onward with relatively little

interruption. Based on my experience in the Montessori community for almost fifteen years, I do not believe this to be a rare type of person. Many teachers, for example, find their true passion in their work with children, as Maria Montessori intended. A second group, however, is also sure to be well-represented: individuals (like me) with rich histories of flow experience who nonetheless have struggled to find time to stay intimately connected with their most



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passionate interests outside of work. Despite struggling, however, their interests are relatively close at hand and within reach of being reignited; in fact, from time to time these individuals still engage in the activities they love. I would guess that this group will contain the largest numbers of teachers and parents in the Montessori community. A third group will also be represented, but it is unclear to what extent. The flow activities of these individuals are truly dormant and not easily accessible. Some of these teachers and parents may have experienced flow in the past, but it was a long time ago. Some, perhaps, may never have experienced repeated and intense flow. The key challenge in this applied study will be to create an adult education program that can benefit all three groups described above. I hope to report back my progress to the Montessori community in the years ahead.

A Montessori teacher or parent is not (or should not be) a typical teacher or parent. When observing children engaged in learning, such a person should be seeing different things, namely, the dynamics of concentration and flow. Accurately observing this process is what allows the benefits of the pedagogy to emerge. It allows the teacher, for instance, to guide the flow of children's attention, to know when to give a child freedom *or* discipline, more time *or* less time for a task, more *or* less instruction, and so on. These are the things that differentiate the Montessori approach. As Maria Montessori commented, "With my method the teacher teaches *little* and observes *much*...it is her function to direct the psychic activity of children" (*The Montessori Method* 173). The perspective offered in this article is that this skill of directing psychic energy or attention is bolstered by the adult's past and present encounters with flow along a path of identity development and self-actualization. This view not only has a basis in psychological theory across the fields of identity development, intrinsic motivation, and optimal experience and growth, it resonates with Montessori's thoughts on teacher training and preparation. What she referred to as preparation of the spirit, training of character, self-examination, or being imbued with wonder or grandeur, are all intimately connected with flow-like, immersive experiences.

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