

# the symbol of spiral for collaboration

## The key to renewal and revitalization

by Beth MacDonald



Burnout in early childhood professionals has always been a concern of mine and, therefore, the subject of a personal research project since I became an early childhood director 23 years ago. The overload of responsibility on early childhood directors has been of special interest and fascination as I have struggled to balance the complexities of my life and work. I found myself considering the following issues:

- Why do all the strings of responsibility and control connect to one person?
- Why do early childhood centers cling to old models of management?
- Why do we continue to be surprised when directors quit from work-related stress or stay in their jobs, operating in isolation and loneliness?

As years have passed, I have seen virtually every other profession undergo incredible cultural and technological



Beth MacDonald is the Director of MacDonald Montessori School in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Our school is in our 24th year in early childhood education and inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach since 1994 and in collabora-

tion with Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children consultant to schools and coordinator of the Reggio International Network. MMS serves 170 children ages six weeks through eight years and has a fun, creative staff of 40 men and women.

change and development and wondered why doesn't the early childhood profession do the same?

### Developing a management team

We are in our 23rd year here at MacDonald Montessori School in St. Paul, Minnesota. When I began my journey as director, I wasn't sure what I was doing and I didn't want to lead this school on my own. Fear of failure is a great motivator, so I asked several of the co-teachers who were working with me under the previous director and her non-profit organization to create a management team of five teachers. Two of those original five teachers are still on my management team today, along with three of our long-term teachers.

In the early years, each of us taught half-time and took care of our various administrative duties in the other half of our day. Three of us taught in the morning and two in the afternoon, so there was always someone on duty in the office. This style of management was many times messier and more unclear than if I would have assumed the sole leadership, held all the power and controls, and made all the decisions myself.

However, I knew immediately that collaboration, shared responsibilities and energies, humor, and mutual respect would keep the school afloat and all of us from drowning in the hundreds of demands on our time and energies each day. If two of us were sick or having personal or family concerns that were overriding our productivity, the other three were ready to take care of everything. Sometimes four were down and only one stayed afloat, but I don't recall a time when all five of us were non-functioning. I can't even imagine what shape I would be in if I operated as the sole director, trying to manage everything myself. Power struggles were abundant in our team, but successes and friendships were solid and true.

### Using symbols to find meaning

I love symbols. They help clarify what is really going on in a situation in ways that words cannot express. Angeles Arrien, an anthropologist, educator, author, and corporate consultant has a wonderful book called *The Signs of Life* (1998). In it Arrien explores five universal shapes: the circle (wholeness), square (stability), triangle (goals, dreams, visions), equidistant cross (relationship), and the spiral (growth and change) and their place in history, art, and culture. I have

been strongly connected to how each symbol can reflect the energy of a place, person, or process. While my interpretation is different for some of these symbols, they offer a lens to view our individual situations and learn what is going on and hopefully offer a new approach.

The symbol of the CIRCLE reflects the process we entered into in the beginning years of our school. We entered the circle of support to share responsibilities and dialogue; we had much to do as we began this journey.

When we faced issues of health and safety, licensing regulations, parent feedback and concern, staffing challenges, flooding, boiler failures and power outages, the SQUARE was the symbol which reflected our behavior and approach to solve these problems and keep our doors open every day.

Several times in our history the TRIANGLE reflected the management style that had developed with me at the top and the lines of communication and decision making flowing downward to everyone else at school. This style, while efficient, lacked collaboration, dialogue, creativity, positive energy, and widespread participation or investment in the decisions to guide the vision and goals of our school.

The symbol of the EQUIDISTANT CROSS is a symbol that wove itself — and continues to weave itself — into and out of our experience, reflecting times when relationships and their complexities influence decisions and programs positively and negatively. As a director, my understanding of the importance of relationships has been critically important for everyone at school — parents, children, and teachers. Balancing everyone's needs is crucial to making decisions that support everyone.

At this point in time, the SPIRAL is the symbol that reflects our school and its children, parents, and teachers. I hope that we stay in the spiral mode, as I think it offers the deepest expression of collaboration, connection, community, and continuity. The symbol of the spiral to me is the most valuable as multiple perspectives are crucial to deeper growth. With limited involvement, organizations can grow widely but not deeply or in the most authentic way. When embracing the concept of the spiral, you realize that you are not in a linear experience but are returning to the same visions, goals, and ideas again and again, hopefully at deeper and more significant levels each time.

### The symbol of the spiral

There are many benefits to the director who chooses the symbol of the spiral to inform his/her model of leadership and administration. Here are some of the many factors that supported me in my process:

- A natural interest in the collaborative process even though my preferred style in stressful situations is a dictatorship.
- Understanding that the wiser decision requires time for me to gather information from the teachers, children, and parents involved before making a decision.
- Multiple perspectives are the most interesting, the most creative, and the most profound, but not necessarily the most welcome. It takes more time, more process; and it is not neat and orderly and can be very challenging to consider multiple perspectives.
- Collaboration permits freedom from control and micro-managing and more leisure, relaxation, and peace of mind.

One of our first steps in adopting a collaborative model was committing to meet every Wednesday for three hours — a commitment we have kept for the last 11 years. Having discovered the deep value of this kind of collaboration and mod-

eled it for our staff, the word and spirit spread and teachers began asking for time to plan and collaborate together.

Two years ago we made a systemic change in our school by hiring three additional teachers and forming a collaboration support team that visited all classrooms every week and engaged in experiences with the children. This allowed the three classroom teachers to participate in a two-hour collaboration meeting with their Education Coordinator. In addition, the support team returned to the classroom every other week to give the classroom teachers a two-hour prep time together.

Collaboration is now a central part of the life of our school which the teachers rely on to work deeper with the children, parents, and each other. The spiral of collaboration has spread to children and parents through deeper classroom meetings and parent participation, and widened decision making, delegation, and leadership; and it has fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among the staff.

### Additional strategies

Here is a collection of strategies or structures we have put in place over the years to support the concept of collaboration and a broader and deeper approach to leadership in an early education program:

- We created three education coordinators who meet with and support classroom teams and supervise classroom environments and materials.
- We look for experienced teachers who show leadership skills and can teach 6-7 hours per day and, with the other hour or two, take over responsibilities that include:
  - staff scheduling and coverage
  - hiring interviews and input
  - parent tours

- coordinating school events
- shopping for materials/groceries
- writing parent newsletters
- developing marketing materials and brochures
- keeping staff files updated
- preparing licensing materials
- supervising children's files
- coordinating field trips and summer programs
- cleaning environments
- organizing materials and storage areas.

We ask for parent involvement and participation in:

- web development
- plumbing
- architectural design
- computer technical support
- graphic design
- photography
- painting
- paneling
- gardening
- cleaning

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



- professional development workshops on art media, customer service, and collection of recycled materials.

We offer flexible, part-time schedules for senior staff as they mature and develop; a scholarship program for staff with children; teachers on maternity leave can work on children's files and immunization records; and sensitivity for working parents and teachers who are balancing work and family.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

The spiral of collaboration has an added benefit for the director who is 66 years old and doesn't possess the energy she did when she was 43 years old — when the journey began. I have no plans to retire, and want to continue my leadership in the school for many years to come. With the spiral of collaboration expanding and adapting itself everyday, the school will continue to run itself in many ways. We are not perfect, but human in our daily struggles to give children the best

quality early education program we can. We face each day and each other with appreciation, friendship, and with a great deal of humor, humility, and love.

## References

Arrien, A. (1998). *The signs of life: The five universal shapes and how to use them*. New York: Tarcher.

Footnote: These photos from MacDonald Montessori School share a painting project with four- and five-year-old children guided by our studio teacher, Monica Malley. Separate from this article, Monica explored symbols with the children and had them choose a symbol or shape and then develop a repetitive design for their painting. She began with a small group of children and then expanded to involve many children in the older preschool classrooms.