

The Child in the Family  
Presented by Stan Ferguson to EsF Assembly 2018  
Lumin Education, Dallas, Texas

“All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship”.

John MacMurray from *The Self as Agent*

## Introduction

I am delighted to be here today in South Africa...now I never in my wildest dreams ever thought I would utter those words...to report and to share my perspective, ideas, and experiences arising from my work with Lumin Bachman Lake Community School. It has been a real joy to hear of all the good things happening with children, parents, Montessori educators, and schools all over the world. I confess I come here feeling like a bit of an outlier compared to all of you who are steeped educationally and professionally in the Montessori community. I have no real Montessori training or certification though I have read several of Paula Polk Lillard's books!

The best description of me is that I am an ardent fan and supporter. I am the father of two daughters who received fine Montessori educations, and I am now the grandparent of three granddaughters who are doing the same. I have been involved as a parent in Montessori schools, as a consultant to Montessori schools, and as a therapist who has received many referrals from Montessori schools. I served on the planning committee that applied for and received our state charter to open Lumin Lindsley Park Community School in Dallas and personally located the property and original buildings that house that beautiful campus. I have good friends who are Montessori teachers.

Technically, I am a Psychotherapist and Marriage and Family Therapist with a clinical practice in Dallas. I also am a part time staff member of Lumin Education and spend a good deal of that time working specifically with Lumin Bachman Lake Community School which is why I am here today.

All this is to say is that I am here to report on the many excellent and meaningful things that are happening in the lives of children, parents, and staff at Lumin Bachman Lake Community School. Members of the EsF Assembly have had the opportunity to visit our campus and previously Terry Ford, Lumin's Executive Director, Mary Caroline Parker, Executive Director of MINT, and Charo Alarcon, Lumin parent educator and Montessori mentor, have presented on various aspects of our work. Their presentations are available in the Assembly Documents section on the EsF website.

## The Child in the Family

“The idea that education must begin at birth has been a consistent theme in the preceding discussion, although the question of how has not yet been dealt with.”

“The adult ought never to mould the child after himself, but should leave him alone and work always from the deepest comprehension of the child himself.”

Maria Montessori, The Child in the Family, p. 18

"Discovery consists of seeing what everybody else has seen, and thinking what nobody else has thought."

Albert Szent-Györgyi, Nobel Prize Physiology or Medicine, 1937

In her book, The Child in the Family, Maria Montessori argued for a universal and enlightened understanding and support of children’s growth from infancy. She grieved and criticized common parent and educator attempts to shape children into their own image and promoted a new paradigm of allowing the inner life of the child to shape itself. In the ensuing years researchers and theorists in child development, psychology, and other related disciplines have contributed ample empirical support for many of her ideas.

At Lumin, one of our greatest commitments is to support and nurture the parent/child relationship from its earliest beginnings. This commitment flows out of two of our primary values as educators: start young and involve parents. Whatever success we have had in education we attribute to these beliefs. The attachment experience and resulting parental relationship form and shape children’s personalities and perspectives so profoundly that it influences all future encounters they will have within their world. Our respect for this primary relationship establishes the basis for the involvement of both children and parents in our school communities.

My goal today is to share our Lumin, and specifically our Lumin Bachman Lake Community School story, to share some of what we and I have learned along our journey, and to indicate specific ways we support child and family as natural and indispensable facets of education. When possible, we begin working with parents even before our future students are born. Of course, this is not always feasible, but in many cases, it is. Early in our history, because we developed such a long waiting list for our initial school, it was common for pregnant moms to sign up their unborn to make sure there was an opening available when the time was right. These pregnant parents and those with infants and toddlers too young for our Montessori primary classes were encouraged to join our Parents as Teachers program to learn about children, child development, and parenting. This birth to three program provides trained parent

educators who visit twice monthly and for our Bachman Lake families, weekly, in their home setting, to support and educate.

What we discovered was that those parents involved at such an early stage were more likely to become engaged, involved parents in our school programs. They were more eager to meet for teacher parent meetings, were more likely to attend parent education programs that were offered, and were more involved in volunteer activities. These outcomes perfectly aligned with our hopes, values, and beliefs about what would be best for the child and family educationally.

My intention today is to describe the children, families, and community we serve, indicate the fundamental concepts and theories that underlie our understanding of the child in the family, and then outline what services and programs at Lumin we use to act upon that understanding.

### The Children, Families, and Community We Serve

#### Demographics: Lumin Bachman Lake Community School

200 children (160 from pregnancy to 3 years and 40 from 3 – 5 years of age)

96% of Bachman Lake children are economically disadvantaged

39% of Bachman Lake children live in poverty

72% of residents speak Spanish as their primary language.

76% of children are limited English proficient (LEP)

1 in 10 Bachman area residents are under age three, the highest rate in Dallas.

The Bachman Lake neighborhood is a densely populated area of mostly apartments and some residences nestled squarely under the glide path of jets landing at Dallas' inner city Love Field airport. The vast majority of the community's residents are Hispanic and because many of the businesses and shops cater to Spanish speaking customers it has also become an important first stop in Dallas for those who are newly immigrated to the United States from Mexico, Central, and South America. Those who are undocumented, including about 500,000 in the greater Dallas Fort Worth metropolitan area, are at a severe disadvantage in terms of working and living conditions, earning power, general health issues, and mental health problems including anxiety and depression.

Because one of our founding goals is to prove that all children, regardless of race or income, can succeed in education when we start young and involve parents we are committed to this community and established the Lumin Bachman Lake Community School in 2009.

## Concepts Fundamental to Our Understanding of the Child in the Family

### **Concepts: The Unconscious Absorbent Mind and the First Plane of Development**

**“...a whole life...” - The importance of the first three years**

#### **Attachment theory**

Because of the unparalleled capacity of the child to learn in the first three years of life after birth, Maria Montessori considered this period of growth of paramount importance.

“The development of the child in the first three years after birth is unequalled in intensity and importance by any period that precedes or follows in the whole life of the child...If we consider the transformations, adaptations, achievements, and conquest of the environment during the first period of life from zero to three years, it is functionally a longer period than all the following periods put together from three years until death. For this reason, these three years may be considered to be as long as a whole life.”  
(Montessori, 1963)

It is amazing to think that a concept so well accepted and embraced today, the centrality of the attachment relationship to children’s development, was poorly understood and even considered controversial by many prior to World War II. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth pioneered both the conceptual framework and the research methods that helped establish this essential idea. Fortunately, they and others persevered in their efforts to explore this area and provide an empirical understanding of the role of different attachment experiences and patterns to children’s development.

What is now clear is that the attachment experience not only contributes to or impedes the child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development but also significantly shapes the quality of all future relationships the child will experience. Success in the classroom and life is fundamentally influenced by this primary relationship and period of development.

### **Lumin’s Approach: Parents as Teachers Home Visiting Programs (PAT)**

Because of the crucial importance of the child’s early experience in the family, Lumin seeks to establish a collaborative and supportive connection with parents and their children as early as possible employing the Parents as Teachers program which we utilize and apply with Montessori principles. In cooperation with the Montessori Institute of North Texas and utilizing our own experienced Montessori guides, our Parents as Teachers educators (PAT) at the Lumin Bachman Lake Community School campus have received special training and ongoing mentorship in how to facilitate the adoption of appropriate Montessori ideas, techniques, and attitudes in the home environment.

Parents as Teachers is a home visiting parenting education program based in the United States and founded in 1984. The organization provides the model, infrastructure, training, and support. The four main goals of this evidence based program are 1) Increase parent knowledge of early childhood development and improve parent practices, 2) Provide early detection of developmental delays and health issues, 3) Prevent child abuse and neglect, and 4) Increase children's school readiness and success. Lumin utilizes the PAT model as an affiliate and there is ample leeway in the program's design and requirements to allow for a Montessori emphasis.

At Lumin Bachman Lake Community School, our parent educators in the 0-3 PAT program meet weekly in the home for approximately 90 minutes. These intensive weekly sessions, currently involving about 160 children, can begin in pregnancy and last, often without interruption, until the child's third birthday.

## **Concepts: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**

### **Scarcity**

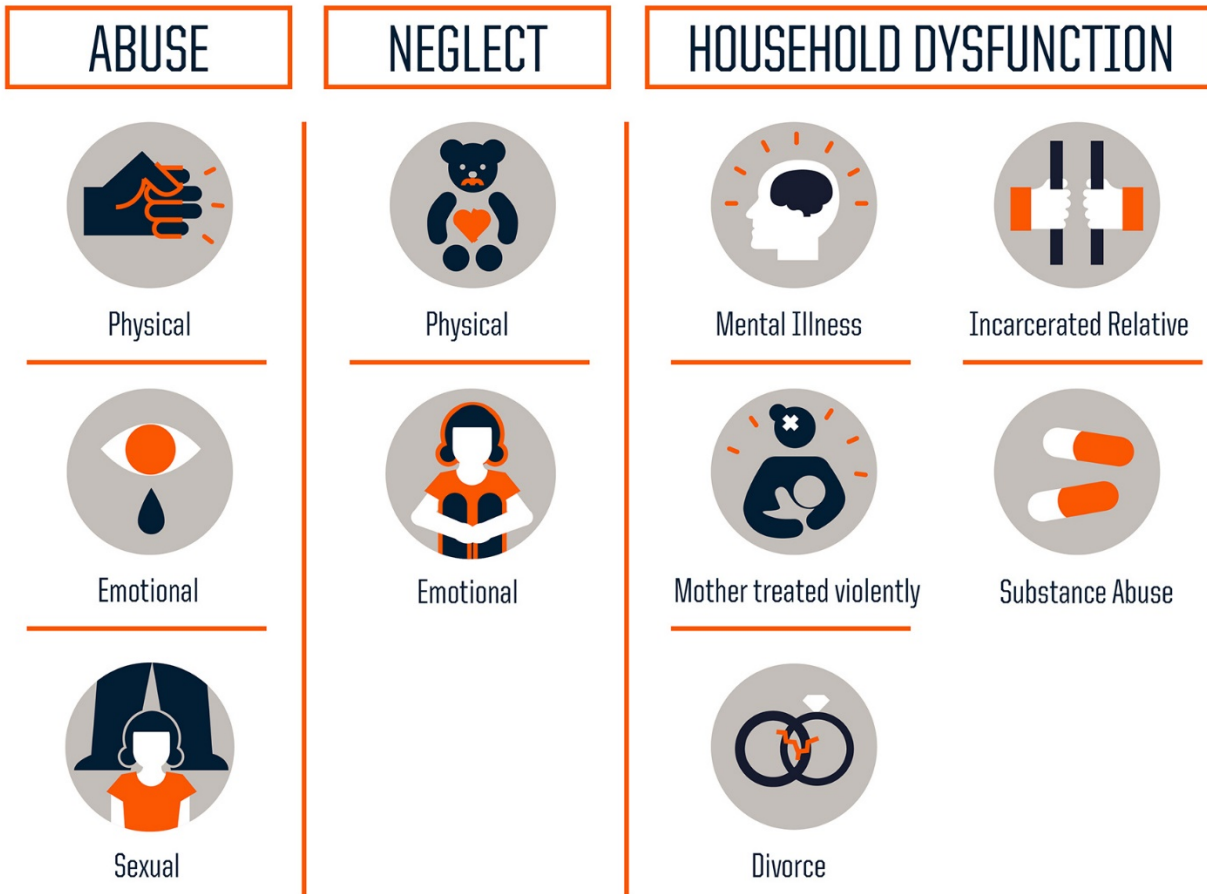
#### Kaiser-Permanente and the CDC's research on Adverse Childhood Experiences

Kaiser-Permanente, established in 1945, is one of the oldest and currently the largest integrated managed care health care providers in the United States. As part of its continuous health research activities, in 1995 it began a study that found significant associations between certain adverse childhood experiences and health outcomes reaching far into adulthood including mortality. The correlations were so strong that the organization contacted the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) about its findings and a joint CDC Kaiser-Permanente longitudinal study was then established.

“The CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and later-life health and well-being. The original ACE Study was conducted at Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with two waves of data collection. Over 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members from Southern California received physical exams and completed confidential surveys regarding their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors. The CDC continues ongoing surveillance of ACEs by assessing the medical status of the study participants via periodic updates of morbidity and mortality data.”

The ongoing study has established strong empirical associations between 10 kinds of childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction that are detrimental continuing throughout adulthood.

## Three Types of ACEs



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

### Scarcity and its Effects on the Child and Family

Another kind of adverse experience that affects both child and adult functioning is scarcity. In their groundbreaking book, Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means so Much, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir illuminate how scarcity, in and of itself and apart from personality and character issues, distorts and changes decision making and cognitive processes. According to their research “scarcity captures the mind in unconscious ways”. Important concepts they describe include:

Packing, usually involving “trade-off” thinking, is a process those facing scarcity often use to make decisions. The poor, metaphorically, have a small “suitcase” that must be carefully packed, leaving many helpful things out, in order

to make their way in life. One wrong choice can lead to disastrous consequences.

Slack is the quality, afforded the well-off, of not having to use trade-off thinking and thus having ample room to “pack” whatever they want to take with them along the road of life allowing them more resources and backup. When those with slack make poor choices they may not experience any negative consequences at all.

Bandwidth, is Mullainathan’s and Shafir’s term for cognitive capacity. “...scarcity reduces bandwidth...it makes us less insightful, less forward thinking, less controlled. And the effects are large. Being poor, for example, reduces a person’s cognitive capacity more than going one full night without sleep. It is not that the poor have less bandwidth as individuals. Rather, it is that the experience of poverty reduces one’s bandwidth.” (Scarcity, page 13)

Tunneling is the narrowing of our focus, due to scarcity, that causes us to neglect important, sometimes more important realities and issues than the current object of our concern and lack.

Fault Tolerance: understanding that the poor and other challenged populations need to have supportive social systems that take into account the cognitive and decision making effects of scarcity.

These distortions influence all people at times but are especially impactful for the poor. Their research provides a basis for understanding and potentially for designing the delivery of services for those most in need.

**Lumin’s Approach:            Play Therapy and Child Parent Relationship Therapy**  
**Professional consults for Parents and Teachers**  
**Understanding and Fault Tolerant systems**

On-campus Play Therapy and Child Parent Relationship Therapy Programs

Because many of our children face significant economic, social, and family challenges there have always been some who were in need of support in addition to their Montessori classroom experience. Initially, public or non-profit social service referrals were sought often with limited success. In 1993, a group of concerned citizens who were aware of my work as a counselor and play therapist approached me and generously offered to financially support my ongoing professional services for a year as a gift to the original Lumin East Dallas Community School campus. Though I consulted

on general issues like staff morale, organizational development, and parent education, I also had a keen interest in play therapy because of my training and background. It so happened that another staff member, Carol Wolfe, was completing her graduate work in play therapy at that time. We began a series of meetings and conversations about establishing on-campus play sessions to meet the children's needs for support and therapy.

From the humble beginnings of a makeshift playroom located in a storage area on campus, Lumin's play therapy program now consists of well-equipped playrooms on two campuses and 25 weekly sessions provided by two licensed therapists and one supervised, licensed intern. Lumin primarily utilizes a child centered approach pioneered by Virginia Axline in the United States. Because these sessions are on site, they are much easier on both parent and child and fully integrated into the educational flow of our schools.

Lumin has just begun specialized training and certification for our parent educators at Bachman in a program called Child Parent Relationship Therapy. This process teaches parents how they can utilize play therapy skills in the home with their own children.

"In CPRT, parents are taught specific skills grounded in the principles and procedures of Child Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) that focus on establishing or enhancing a secure attachment with their child and helping parents attune to and respond to their child's underlying needs rather than focus on symptoms. Parents also learn to effectively limit their child's misbehavior, while demonstrating empathy and respect for their child."

CPRT Overview

### Professional consults for Parents and Teachers

For many years, Jim Bennett, MD, a pediatric psychiatrist, and his wife, Sarah Bennett, LCSW, a clinical social worker, have donated their professional services to provide regular school consults for Lumin. These sessions, supervised and organized by Carol Wolfe, our student services manager, focus on a specific child of concern and can involve the child's teacher, the therapist if the child is in play sessions, the parents, and the director if warranted. Occurring monthly, these consultations have provided invaluable clinical insight and perspective in supporting our children.

### Understanding and Fault Tolerant Systems

Lumin has always had a compassionate view of our families and the challenges they face. We also understood, both from Montessori insights and psychological research, that providing too much of the wrong kind or un-needed support can actually lead to learned helplessness and be injurious to self-esteem and confidence. The research of Mullainathan and Shafir illustrate the issues that need to be considered when designing



and providing services to those experiencing scarcity in any of its pervasive forms. The concept of fault tolerance is important to their work and has interesting parallels to Montessori's idea of designing control of error within educational materials. Whether providing education or social services, beginning with the "deepest comprehension of the child himself" and the families served is the surest path to respectful and effective program design.

**Concepts: Lumin Child, Family, and Staff Traumatic Experiences**  
**Vicarious Trauma**

The Effects of Trauma and Vicarious Trauma

"A Parent educator was robbed at gun point on her way to meet families."

"One of our family advocates recently sobbed in reflective supervision because a client, a young undocumented mother from Honduras asked her, "What will happen to my baby if I am deported?" The truth is, no one knows."

"This same family advocate, recounted during our session that her own children, 11 and 15, had just called while visiting their grandfather in Mexico and shared tearfully that they passed the long lines of families waiting at the border in makeshift shelters of boxes and plastic tarp for their chance to enter the United States "unlawfully" to apply for asylum."

"She also shared her memories of an aunt she visited and stayed with as a child in a rickety two story house along a railroad in Monterrey that "The Beast" passed on a daily basis. She recalled with wonder how the whole house would shake violently as the train would pass. Aboard it, sometimes also called "the death train" dozens, sometime even hundreds of Central American migrants risked their lives daily to head toward the US border. Her aunt kept cold drinks and food ready to give to any migrants in need who stopped by their home. Now elderly, she has continued this act of kindness all these years."

"Another parent educator visited a client's residence and an unknown man answered the door with unconvincing details about why the woman wasn't available. During this brief moment of distraction, the client, who the stranger was sexually assaulting, was able to escape to freedom and safety through the bedroom window with her infant."

“The young undocumented mother had her infant taken by the child’s father to give to his new girlfriend. Taking him to court to get the child back, with the help of a Bachman family advocate, also put her in jeopardy of arrest and deportation.”

“The parent educator who has DACA status (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and who when hearing of the fears and experiences of her parent clients often has flash back memories of the heat, cold, bug bites, terror, and dangers experienced as a 14 year old when she and her parents made their way to the United States. Her reflective supervision is a crucial means of integrating and experiencing these emotional reactions in a productive way.”

“And the old, Anglo psychotherapist, who hears their stories, has had their stories become of part of his own, and who helps parent educators and family advocates learn how to live with these stories and experiences.”

### Conceptualizing Trauma

One way of thinking about human personality is that we are a story that we tell ourselves. All narratives have a plot and an emotional tone. Each of us have particular motivations that influence the plotline of our lives and the meaning that energizes those motivations is suffused with unique and particular emotional tonalities. Those of us drawn to serving others, especially people struggling with poverty, social challenges, mental health, or physical health issues are faced with a particular dilemma. Their stories inevitably become a part of our stories. That reality brings meaning and enrichment to our lives and also, potentially, can undermine our own psychological health. This process of becoming affected by the trauma experienced by others, vicarious trauma or secondary trauma, is inevitable and whether you are a Montessori guide, parent educator, social worker, counselor, psychologist, or physician, understanding its effects and how to manage them is paramount.

Especially for our endeavors in East and West Dallas that are focused on children and families with few advantages and many more obstacles than others, awareness of, and practices that are informed by an understanding of vicarious trauma are essential to sustaining our educational efforts. Our parent educators are mission driven people who care about and seek to connect deeply with their families. The families they serve often are facing poverty, depression, lack of documentation, domestic violence, incarceration or deportation of loved ones, and social isolation among other challenges. Because of the intimate connection generated by meeting in the home setting, the emotional impact of hearing about and seeing these experiences can be intense. The buildup of untreated trauma resulting from emotional connections to those we serve can lead to episodes of grief, anxiety, depression, decreased motivation, cynicism, and eventually burnout.

## **Lumin's Approach: Reflective Supervision**

All of our Bachman parent educators and family advocates, who have intensive contact with families in their home settings participate in individual, twice monthly, hour long reflective supervision sessions with licensed mental health professionals. This provides a vehicle for understanding and processing their own responses to the challenges the families they serve face and a place to learn coping skills for preventing the harmful effects of vicarious trauma. Besides giving them a place to share and experience the feelings generated by their connection to those in need, reflective supervision also provides the framework and support needed to grapple with and accept the limits of what caregivers can provide. We have something really beneficial to offer our children and families and we can't solve all of their problems. Accepting and fully integrating this reality allows our parent educators and family advocates to be open, authentically connected, and resilient in the face of scarcity and need.

## **Conclusion**

Working with children within the family context offers the Montessori community both substantial educational opportunities and inherent challenges. Montessori saw these realities clearly in her work. Though our shared humanity and our Montessori pedagogy are universal, each situation is unique and how we proceed should be based upon keen observation and a deep understanding of the children, their families, and the communities we serve.

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What Parents Need to Know About Children, by Stan Ferguson can be purchased in soft back or kindle version on Amazon.com

