

# MONTESSORI LEADERSHIP



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**May 2008**





# The Elementary Child:

## Teaching to the Spirit, Teaching for Peace – Part I

by Cathleen Haskins

**M**aria Montessori's enlightened and holistic view of educating children embraced, at its core, the idea that education must nurture not just the mind, but the whole child. Montessori developed a unique education curriculum. A central theme of her curriculum was her

understanding of human spiritual needs. She also believed that a peace education would lead adults—and children—to a new way of thinking. Those who follow her philosophy and methods today are beckoned by that same call to educate for peace through the spirit, as we acknowledge that the opportunity to reach and teach to the human spirit defines the highest order of teaching that we can bring to students, our communities, and ourselves. Our great work lies nowhere if not in our ability to call forth the child's inner light and say to her: this greatness lies within you. Be aware and nurture it, and know that it can be found in all others whose paths cross your own. Maria Montessori reminded us that we must first prepare ourselves spiritually if we are to provide spiritual nourishment to children. So then, we must seek our own light, as well.

Spiritual leader, author, and international lecturer Deepak Chopra describes it in this way: "We are, in our

essential state, pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is pure potentiality; it is the field of all possibilities and infinite creativity." In understanding our spiritual self, we will come to know the true meaning of our life. A child's potential is interwoven with this understanding of self. Our cosmic tasks are revealed through this knowing.

*"So in the child, besides the vital impulse to create himself or herself, there must be yet another purpose, a duty to fulfill in harmony with the universe, something to do in the service of the united whole. Therefore, nurturing the spirit is the route to the unveiling of human potential. The transformation of a peaceful world is obtained through realization of the human potential."*

— Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

A focus on peace is a common thread in the Montessori philosophy, embraced by many who have chosen to follow it as a profession and way of life. Montessori teachers hope for a better

world and believe they have found a better way to work with children. Followers of Montessori's philosophy strive to live in the beauty of each day, while harboring hope for better tomorrows, manifested through our work with children.

The Montessori teacher arrives in a unique learning environment, often after having been inspired by glimpses of the program in progress, perhaps observing children interacting in a finely prepared Montessori environment. How can this be, we have wondered in awe? What is this? An inner stirring becomes the impetus nudging the curious observer forward. We are pulled in, because we have borne witness to the unfolding of a child's potential.

The intent and heart of the elementary Montessori teacher is further clarified by a simple examination of the alternate teaching options available to individuals who have chosen teaching as a profession. The traditional core curriculum evolves only slowly and the necessary materials are purchased, not made by the teacher. The organization of the curriculum is established in the teacher manuals and guide books, complete with detailed lessons and activities, blackline masters, and more. By contrast, elementary Montessori classrooms are more time consuming to establish and maintain and take much more organizational effort throughout the year than most traditional elementary classrooms require. This work is done by the teacher, not a textbook or curriculum company.

The heart of an elementary Montessori teacher lies in his unfettered belief that the additional workload, time, and organizational effort is a worthy trade-off for the opportunity to witness the amazing development of a child growing in a beautifully prepared and meticulously organized Montessori environment. I hope we all choose Montessori education because we are inspired by the glimpses that reveal to us the power of a child's mind and spirit. We have witnessed what Maria Montessori alerted us to in her book, *Education and Peace*: "If education recognizes the intrinsic value of the

child's personality and provides an environment suited to spiritual growth, we have the revelation of an entirely new child whose characteristics can eventually contribute to the betterment of the world" (1972).

We can catch more than glimpses, however, if we explore closely Maria's call to educate for peace. What exactly does teaching for peace mean? How does peace education come alive in our classrooms? What does it look like, and how do we integrate it into our daily work with children? Teaching for peace can be more than an abstract idea, floundering about, popping up here and there. Teaching for peace is about reaching out to unveil and become conscious of the human spirit. One comprehensive framework for peace education includes these four components:

- Inner Peace
- Peace in a (Classroom) Community
- Global Peace (Peace for All Humanity)
- Peace in Nature

In order to contribute to the full development of our students, which will lead to the "betterment of the world," as Montessori suggested, each of these four elements must be brought into the curriculum and opened up for topics of discussion with the school community, including administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Within each of these four components are traits, ways of thinking, and behaviors that can be developed to work towards this end. Using well-developed ideas and incorporating thoughtful activities, each of these traits can be cultivated, collectively nurturing the full, peace-loving spirit of the child.

#### Inner Peace

Inner peace can be understood to be a peace within that is unaffected by externally changing conditions. All peace begins with individual peace, a state of calm amid external chaos, disagreement, or upheaval. We give children opportunities to build inner peace when we provide experiences

and lessons in the following areas: awareness of inner self or spirit; silence and stillness; concentration and attention; mindfulness; gratitude; and self-reliance. With these areas identified, plugging activities into each category is the next step.

#### Lesson: The Inner Self

In order to educate for the whole child, begin first of all by helping the elementary age child to be aware of and understand the concept of the inner self. From this sacred place, comes inner strength and wisdom. This is a place of reflection, respite, and creativity. And yet, this is not a topic usually broached with children. You can introduce this idea to your students using a simplified set of Russian *matryoshka* (nesting) dolls. Remove several of the dolls until three remain. With the dolls nested, tell your students that the outer doll represents the physical self. This is what the general public and most people see. Those who see the outer self see your gender, size, how you like to wear your hair or dress, for example. Viewing the outer self, others might see that you enjoy bicycling or have beautiful handwriting. Remove the outer doll, revealing the middle doll. Explain that this is the part of themselves that only a few special people see, such as a parent, a special relative, a brother or sister, or perhaps a very close friend. These special people may know what makes you sad or angry. They may know your sensitivities; they understand you better than most people. These are people you trust. Not everyone gets to know this part of you, just a few people whom you love deeply. Finally, remove this doll and reveal the smallest doll. Holding it out with care and awe, suggest to the children that this doll represents the inner self, the part of you that others can't see, and that only you can access. Share with them that this sacred place is a place of wisdom and creativity, a resource for making good decisions and for coming up with creative ideas. When you feel sad or mad or frustrated or overwhelmed, as we all do sometimes, you can go inward to find calm and quiet. Pay attention to your breathing, listen to your breath, or just say a loving word

...over. Communicate and help them to understand that the inner self is a place of peace.

### Lessons: Stillness and Silence

It is difficult, if not impossible, for adults, as well as children, to hear their inner voice when external noise is present. Children need prepared activities to provide opportunities to experience stillness and silence. Engaging in various versions of the group silence game involves no tangible material and can be implemented when only a few minutes of time are available. But, an Individual Silence Game, made up of a pretty small rug for the student to sit upon, a sand hour glass (for the child to focus on), and a handmade sign that says *Silence*, encourages children to take individual moments of individual silence throughout the day. A tabletop zen garden, the Japanese brush painting material, a sand pendulum, and a mandala peace ring are other materials that can be set out throughout the year in the peace area. I purchased a triple sand timer that marks 1-, 2-, and 5-minute increments, each in a different colored sand, and found this an inexpensive material that gives children a focal point during their quiet time. We can also teach children simple breathing exercises they can do anywhere and anytime. The positive side effects of attentive and deep breathing include increased awareness, improved concentration, and a more calm, relaxed state of being.

Teachers can also incorporate an Inner Peace time into the school day. During this time, children can choose to close their eyes, lie down, draw, sketch, color, or journal, or do nothing at all. I limit the drawing materials to a few colored pencils or crayons. This is an individual time, not a friendship time, and children are helped to understand the value of alone time. Betsy Coe shared this idea with me at a peace retreat last year, and I immediately incorporated it into each school day. The children loved it, and parents responded with interest and enthusiasm at this daily time devoted to peaceful introspection. We can help

children know stillness and silence in a new way, moving from, *Be Quiet*, to *Quietly Be*.

### Concentration and Attention

Charles Dickens once said, "I never could have done what I have done without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one subject at a time." Concentration helps students to do their best work, to make good use of work time, and to understand more fully what is being read, studied, created, or observed. Ideally, pure concentration on a task results in a joyful, innate satisfaction, described as optimal experience and labeled, *flow*, by renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The following activities nurture inner peace through the development of concentration and attention.

The practical life activities so prevalent in the Children's House are some of the first and most beneficial works for helping children to develop the habits of concentration and attention. The intense concentration required from a child in order to successfully manipulate such tools as the tweezers, tongs, graters, etc. reminds the observer that the Montessori practical life activities serve far more than simply developing fine-motor skills. Handwork such as sewing, latch hooking, and embroidery, serve the elementary child in the same way. In her book, *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful*, Donna Goertz recounts the benefits of finger crocheting (and later knitting and hook crocheting) as a tool for fostering concentration in the elementary-aged child.

The effects of yoga as a tool for cultivating concentration are widely known. Keep a set of yoga cards (displayed in a basket and available as an individual or partner work) on your peace shelf. I recommend Yoga Kit for Kids, published by IMAGINAZIUM, because the large 5x7 cards show photos of children modeling each pose with a short, accompanying verse on the back. Even the youngest child can copy the photo poses, and older children will enjoy the poem related to each pose.

### Mindfulness

The ancient process of mindfulness has been a part of many eastern religions for centuries. Concentration and mindfulness are different actions, although under the best situations, these two work together. Mindfulness is not trying to achieve anything. It is just observing. Mindfulness is a broader and larger function than concentration. Concentration specifically focuses on one item and ignores everything else. Mindfulness is inclusive, standing back from the focus of attention and watches with a larger focus, quick to notice any change that occurs.

Try mindfulness walking with your students. Give the children a few simple words or a phrase to say as they walk. (*I feel my feet upon the ground, I go walking, or here I am.*) Explain that as they walk along they are going to say those words to the rhythm of their walking. Say the words aloud softly. Tell them to empty their mind of everything except these words and to be aware when their mind starts to wander. Place attention lightly on the flow of the breath. At the same time, notice how the body moves, how the weight shifts from one foot to the other.

Eating a Dried Cherry Mindfully is a mindfulness activity that can easily be presented to a whole group. Give each student one cherry. [Note: Remind them not to swallow the pit.] Ask them to examine (slowly) the texture of the fruit, to feel it and turn it in their hand as part of the examination. Next, ask the children to explore the shape and then the size of the fruit, noting the color, as well. Tell them to smell the cherry. Then have the children reflect upon how that one small cherry grew into something they could eat. Direct the students to place it in their mouth and let it rest on their tongue, noticing any changes in how it tastes and feels in their mouth. Have them bite into it so that they have two pieces of cherry in their mouth. Lastly, instruct them to eat the fruit as slowly as they can, paying attention when they swallow, noticing how the cherry feels going down their throat. Certainly we can only gain by practicing mindfulness with our eating habits.

## Gratitude

Gratitude may well be the single greatest trait contributing to inner peace and contentment. Deliberately attending to what is good and beautiful in life fosters gratitude, producing happiness and satisfaction. This is much needed in a culture that daily directs messages, telling children that they need more things in order to be happy and popular. This flood of media messages gives children the impression that name brands and new products are 'must haves' and, yet, in the end, they leave children confused and dissatisfied.

Therefore, we must create activities to help children become grateful, and we should focus and embrace dialogue that fosters an attitude of gratitude. I created a set of gratitude journal cards that allow students to reflect upon and write about topics, such as a beloved pet, someone with a sense of humor, a place in nature, a time of day, or a favorite season.

Another useful card work is called *Wants and Needs*. On about 25 cards I put pictures and labels of things such as a new bike, a cell phone, a piece of art, a bowl of healthy food, and a fast food meal. Other pictures represent a place of rest, medical care, music, and the right to practice your own religion. Working with a partner, students are given the task of placing each card under the heading, *I Want*, or *I Need*. This is particularly effective as a partner work, because each child has her own ideas about what is needed and what is wanted. While two students may easily agree to place a picture of a boombox under the *I Want* heading, deciding where to place the *Music* or a *Place to Rest* card elicits valuable discussion.

Cultivating the trait of gratitude teaches children to look at the richness of life from a wide and varied perspective. Nurturing gratefulness on a daily basis reminds all of us our world is beautiful, and our lives are filled with goodness. Once a deep-felt gratitude is established, an ethic of service and giving follows naturally.

## Peace In a (Classroom) Community

The skills and traits needed in the adult world, social, education, business, and religious organizations, are the same skills we nurture in our classrooms. Compassion, affirmation of others, and genuine listening skills are proactive attributes that foster respectful and caring relationships. The ability to look at conflict without anger or resentment, the willingness to admit error and to offer forgiveness are skills that we will call upon throughout our lives and can be taught at a very young age. If conflict resolution and anti-bullying programs could, alone, make schools warmer and kinder places for children, we would see this change in schools all over the country, but we do not. This is because peace is obtained not just by the absence of violence, but by the presence of loving kindness. Creating peace is more than the eradication of violence. It must involve a proactive approach to teaching skills of compassion, patience, forgiveness, and community building.

Creating peaceful classroom communities involve teaching respectful and compassionate language to build stronger, more loving relationships through enhanced communication; implementing simple conflict resolution processes, participating in service and other whole group projects, and integrating music such as the work of Gemini (San and Laz Slomovitz) and Peter, Paul and Mary songs, that call children to a human experience. Two of the most important ways in which we can build compassionate and caring environments are by integrating tradition and classroom rituals and by teaching children how to be seekers of goodness, affirming the goodness they observe in each other.

### Building Community through Tradition and Ritual

Just as shared tradition and rituals bring and bind families together, they serve the same purpose in our work with children. Montessori teachers are fortunate to be able to work with children for three years, as this provides wonderful, longer opportunities to

incorporate traditions and rituals into the lives of children. One such event in my classroom was making a tabletop (banquet sized) model of the first harvest feast shared by the pilgrims and Wampanoag tribe. During the first two weeks of November we diligently studied the history of the pilgrims' voyage to America, their early struggles that first harsh winter, and their celebration with the Wampanoags. The children made pilgrim and Wampanoag dolls from clothespins, and the week before Thanksgiving they decided what to include in the model and then chose who will be responsible for building each part of the model. The model was created with all kinds of materials, including cardboard, clay, tissue paper, straw, twigs, cloth (just to name a few), and the finished product was slowly and carefully carried out into the entry way for all school families to enjoy. Hearing the children talk excitedly with anticipation and then reflect with joy and satisfaction at the completion of this annual project reminded me of the significance of this type of whole-class enterprise, with all of its planning, discussion, and sharing of ideas. Creating something together builds friendships and shared memories.

Rituals and traditions take many forms, but the value remains the same: shared experiences bring people together. Consider the benefits of a morning ceremony in which the children gather to begin a new day together. With a peace pledge, a song, and a poetry reading, a simple morning ceremony brings children together on a daily basis. Byrd Baylor's book, *The Way to Start the Day* is a perfect morning reading when the morning gathering time can be started outside. Songs by Gemini, such as *Give the Best*, *Who Will Love*, and *Sing a Little Song for Peace*, are excellent morning ceremony songs loved by children of this age. Whether it's an annual, daily, seasonal or an end-of-the-week ritual, all contribute to building community in the classroom.

### Goodness Seeking and Affirmations

There may be no greater relationship and community building activity than



Children to affirm one another by providing the time and encouragement for them to do so. During a group time, and using a special book, such as one with hand-made paper or a decorative cover, record the affirmations as shared by the children. For example, Madeline says, "I was lonely on the playground and Sarah asked me if I wanted to join with her and her friends. It made me feel really good." The language a teacher uses while sharing affirmations can contribute to the overall tone of the discussion. "What acts of kindness have you witnessed today?" or "Did you observe anyone being of service to others, any helpfulness, or good deeds?"

An affirmation ceremony is another opportunity for children to affirm each other aloud. Place a battery operated candle on a table, and encourage students to come up (one at a time) to share their affirmation. A child comes to the table and asks the child to be affirmed to join him. With both children holding onto the candle, the affirmation is shared, with the symbolic flame reinforcing the idea that each person has a light of goodness and love inside them. Encouraging children to be seekers of goodness and helping them to understand the importance of affirming others cultivates peaceful feelings both in the giver of affirmations and the recipient.

**This is Part I of a two-part article. Part II will appear in the next issue of *Montessori Leadership*.**

*Inspired by over 30 years of working with children of all ages in many settings, Cathleen Haskins advocates and educates for peace and spiritual awareness in education. With experience in both public and private Montessori schools, as well as traditional education, she has worked with children in all grades K-8. Cathleen holds undergraduate and Master of Science degrees in education, and Montessori certification from Midwest Montessori Teacher Training Center. She was the founding teacher for the 2nd public school Montessori Program in the state of Wisconsin (Burlington). Cathleen works with public and private school educators, caregivers, and parents offering a framework as well as concrete ideas and activities to cultivate a consciousness of peace in children. Cathleen resides in Door County, Wisconsin.*

## Let Them Be

by Paul Czaja, Ph.D.

As a philosopher who became a Montessorian, I have always tried to bring my basic Montessori principles up away from armchair musing into the reality of my actual relations with each child. Sartre, the French existentialist of my youth, got me into this way of behaving by putting before my mind/heart/soul the challenge that there is no such thing as love—only proofs of love. It is not what I think or say but what I do that counts.

It will always be my actions toward the child, not my words of declaration, that will reveal the actuality of my true respect and caring. For example, although I offer my hand in greeting each child upon arrival in the morning, in my sincere honoring of the personal dignity of a child, I would not presume to ruffle his hair or give him a slap on the back, as if I were his chum. There is a wide space between presumption and respect—and the child, as would be any other person, is worthy of my real respect.

Likewise, knowing the predominant goodness that is developing within every young person, I try never to focus on the faults of a child. My work is to encourage the child—to concentrate on the strength and positive qualities already possessed so that, in thriving, the good that is truly there will soon overwhelm the bad naturally. The great scientists had the realism to recognize that they always gained wisdom and new ideas from taking hold of their mistakes and shaking them a bit until the good came out. Each child needs me to celebrate their goodness. Rather than bewailing or abhorring their occasional errors, I try to help them learn right out of the wrong and gain by accentuating that which is positive in the experience.

The poet Charles Peguy celebrated the necessity of wholeheartedly accepting and valuing a good night's sleep. He found so many of his contemporaries in their vanity wanted to work around the clock, as if they were pure spirits and did not need to take some time out of their busy lives. Personal life is not meant to be go, go, go all the time. A bird's life is made up of flights and perching, and everything growing in our gardens grows in spurts. And so, as an educator I must respect the organic fact that a child, too, requires time to rest and to ponder. What wonders have come out of daydreaming! What insights from just laying back for a while to watch others at their work. What great, new ideas from looking out of the window at the world.

As an existentialist philosopher committed to acts of kindness—and as a Montessorian devoted to serving the child given to my care, I know by now the wonders that can occur when I prove my humble love within this garden of the human potential that is a Montessori learning environment. Dear friends, come join with me and match me measure for measure in this wonderful responsibility of respecting children, as they grow from the inside out. You will then discover more and more in so many ways that: children are phenomenal! We are blessed to be called to become the "gardeners" of children. We must be caring but indirect. Don't meddle. Let them be. Let them become.

*Dr. Paul Clement Czaja has been involved in the Montessori movement for over 47 years. He received his Masters degree in Philosophy and his Doctorate in Education from Fordham University. For the first nineteen years of his career, Dr. Czaja was on the founding faculty (1960) and became headmaster (1972-1979) of the Whitby School in Greenwich, Connecticut. Since then he has been involved in Montessori teacher training for many years, and has worked administratively with Montessori public and independent Montessori schools nationally and internationally.*



# MONTESSORI LEADERSHIP



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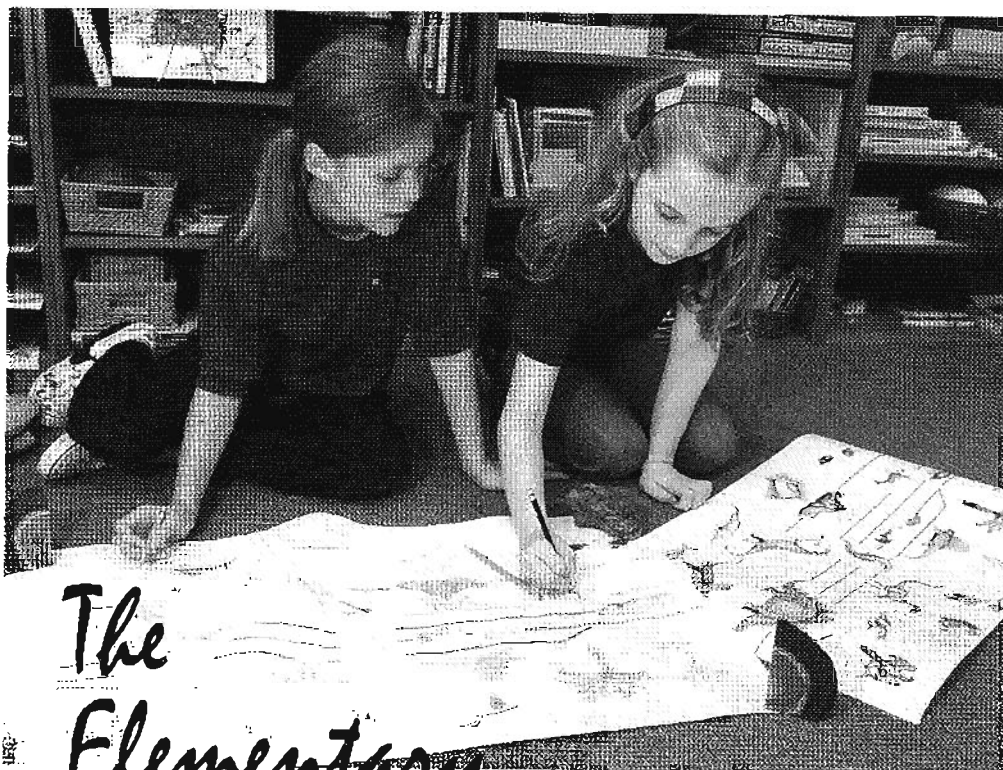
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# The Elementary Child:

## Teaching to the Spirit, Teaching for Peace – Part 2 Global Peace for Humanity

by Cathleen Haskins

*"Let us give the child a vision of the whole universe . . . for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity."*

– Maria Montessori

In referring to our preoccupation with the self, Aline Wolf suggests in the introduction to the book, *Children of the Universe*, that what is needed to counter such self-cen-

teredness is a change of heart. "Such a radical change of heart can come only through an education that proclaims to children in their most impressionable years that the universe is a web of relationships." And, she adds, "If we are to survive, self interest must give way to the common good, over-consumption must give way to moderation, and businesses and governments must operate with universal values rather than self-serving principles."

The cosmic view that orients the Montessori Elementary curriculum helps students to grasp the big idea that they are intimately linked to forces larger than themselves.

Besides using Aline Wolf's little book, *I Live in the Universe*, teachers can use a set of nesting containers (you can make a set of your own using baskets, paper boxes, or tins) to demonstrate this concept. Line the baskets up from smallest to largest and place the very smallest basket inside the next smallest basket, telling the children they live in a home with their family on such-and-such street. Place those small baskets inside the next sized basket, and say they also live in a community. Using the fourth basket, explain that they also live in a state, and then with the next basket, say they also are a citizen

of a country. Continue on in this manner, explaining with each basket that they are also a part of a continent, Planet Earth, The Milky Way Galaxy, and finally the whole universe.

Deepak Chopra (1994) asserts, "Underlying the infinite diversity of life is the unity of one all-pervasive spirit." How shall we help children to recognize and appreciate the connectedness of all human beings? What tools can we bring for them to construct an understanding of the common thread that unites all human beings?"

### Fundamental Needs of All Humans

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and our Montessori lessons on the Needs of Humans can be used to help children understand how groups of people throughout the world and throughout time share common needs. Children see through a historic and global lens that all human beings strive to satisfy certain material and non-material needs. Food, shelter, transportation, communication and defense form a universal structure of material human needs. But, just as important, are the non-material needs, such as the need for a sense of security and safety, love and friendship, autonomy, self-confidence, and self-actualization. As teachers, we can guide children to appreciate that personal growth in creativity (art, music, literature) and spirituality (morality, philosophy and religion) are also a part of being fully human. The experiences we provide and prepare for our students in which they can know and celebrate the diversity of expression in art and music by people of different cultures, for example, are deepened when there is a dual emphasis on the shared need to create as well as on the diversity of creation.

### Basic Rights of All Humans

In 1948, the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Using materials published by the United Nations, Montessori students can explore these invaluable rights of all human beings. The children's book, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An Adaptation for Children*, is an excellent resource. When paired with



*Pepito's Journey, Pepito's Speech at the United Nations* and *Pepito's World* these books serve as tools that aid young students in understanding the importance of human rights. Forty-one years later in 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, consisting of fifty-four principles that, in abbreviated and simplified form, can be used as a tool to foster compassion and encourage global outreach through school projects. Published by UNICEF, *For Every Child* is a beautiful picture book that incorporates simple text and stunning illustrations by some of the world's most acclaimed artists to convey to young children fourteen of the most important rights.

*"Allow us to say our own prayers in our own words, whether in churches or temples, synagogues or mosques, chapels or shrines, or any other place a prayer may be said to our own God. And let us sing and dance and dress in the ways of our own people."*

Text such as this opens up discussion opportunities about a variety of important topics, such as the many places of worship, ways people pray or meditate, or different forms of dance and costumes around the world. Teachers can purchase school kits on the United Nations—resource books that contain stories and activities that teach about the purpose and principles of the

United Nations. Some of the activities in this book can be copied, laminated, and set out as shelf work. Others, such as the *Rainbow People* are whole-group activities. The activity on the UN Charter is a perfect complement to establishing classroom groundrules. Furthermore, accessing the UNICEF Canada site will provide educators with age-appropriate curriculum activities and lessons written to provide educators with quality ideas for introducing children to such concepts as interdependence, diversity, children's rights, global citizenship, and peace and conflict resolution.

### Universal Values

Rushworth M. Kidder, President of the Institute for Global Ethics, believes there is a set of human values that are universally accepted. These values include compassion, fairness, honesty, respect, and responsibility. It is worthwhile that children are given opportunities to consider and reflect upon these particular values. We can help them by exploring situations in which we might need to call forth these values. By establishing the golden thread of shared values held by people all over the globe, we are reinforcing the underlying idea that people are more alike than they are different.

When we help children to understand their own spiritual nature and teach them to become seekers of good in others in their communities (classroom, school, neighborhood, family), they will also begin to contemplate that they have a role to play in the advancement of world peace. A teacher that presents this concept to students with sincerity and a profound belief in the potential of the child to contribute to the construction of a more peaceful world will find the children eager to know, and the children will participate immediately in any activity in which they feel they are working for world peace.

As Montessori educators, we can inform our students about Maria Montessori's belief that children have the power to change the world. When I have shared with children the story of this brilliant woman who could have been an engineer or a doctor, but, instead, became a teacher because she knew, she believed deeply in the power of the child to transform the world, my students have always responded with that all-understanding silence that whispers, "I know what you say is true. Tell me more."

### Peace in Nature

*"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."*

— John Muir

Edward Hoffman, New York psychiatrist and lecturer on spiritual psychology, author of *Visions of Innocence: Spiritual and Inspirational Experiences of Children* (1992) interviewed adults about spiritual experiences they had as children and has concluded through his research that most transcendent childhood experiences happen in nature. There is not a great amount of research on the connection between spirituality and nature. This may in part be due to a rejection by some religious institutions and belief systems of the idea of nature as a source of spiritual experience.



There are those, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, arguably, the most revered Jewish theologian of the 20th century, who have suggested that to be fully human is to be deeply and completely amazed by the wonders of the universe. For Heschel and others such as Whitman, Thoreau, Muir and Carson, nature provides human beings with a peace and calm that cannot be accessed in any other way.

With the rise of environmental education, programs and curricula that promote careful use of the earth, recycling and stewardship of the environment are not difficult for teachers to find and incorporate into the classroom. We should consider our task at a more fundamental level, however. That is, to assist children and their families in understanding the critical bond that must be established between our young people and the natural world. For, as Richard Louv writes in *Last Child in the Woods* (2006), doing so, "is in our self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depends on it."

Consider the following as possible topics for exploration and discussion among your school community:

- Are children's activities so structured that they are denied free, unstructured opportunities to create their own play and to explore nature?
- If, as Montessori and Dewey claimed, humans learn by interacting sensorially with their environment, is there any environment more stimulating for a child than nature?
- Has our fear of nature resulted in the loss of childhood experiences in nature's solitude?
- Are we denying children opportunities to experience the wonders and amazements of the natural world when they are overloaded with gadgets, gizmos, and material goods that keep them indoors?
- Is it possible that the wonders of nature that leave a child in

captivated attention might actually provide a potential tool for dealing with attention deficit disorders?

- How can we rethink summertime to nurture the child/nature connection?
- Engage your school community in the reading and discussion of Richard Louv's recent book, *Last Child in the Woods*.

Assisting parents to understand the vital role that nature plays in helping children find refuge from life's pressures and stress may well be the best manner to address the issue of children and nature. But classroom discussions, writing activities and thoughtful outdoor activities that focus on nature's peace, are all important. The study of Aldo Leopold, John James Audubon, Rachel Carson, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau allows children a peek at the great naturalists, and there is an increasing number of picture book and biographies for children available today.

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The human connection with nature grounds us in an awareness of our oneness with the world of which we are a part; at the same time it beckons us to go inward and to seek our inner selves which gives birth to our innate wisdom, creativity and peace.

### Conclusion

At its center, peace education or teaching for peace in the Montessori elementary classroom is really about informing and exploring with our students that part of themselves, which is rarely spoken of or acknowledged—the spirit. Our great task as educators lie in the responsibility and opportunities we hold to nurture the spiritual lives of children. By exploring activities and language in metaphors and analogies that allow us to comfortably communicate the spiritual element of our humanity, we will be providing our children with the resources they will need to find their own potentiality in life. The hopes for achieving a world where creativity and peace reign await there for us.

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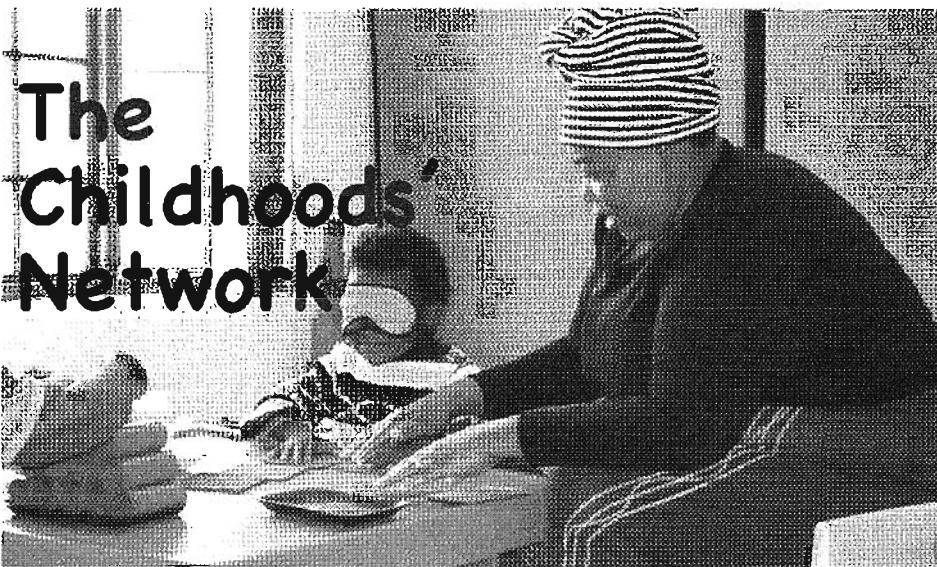
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# The Childhoods' Network



## The Southern African Montessori Association/ International Montessori Council Conference

A Report by Matthew Rich

During the April 2008 Southern African Montessori Association/International Montessori Council Conference in South Africa, many participants were moved by the presentation made by a group of Montessori development and training organizations. These organizations, called Operation Upgrade, Wonderkids, *Woza'bona* (meaning "come and see" in Zulu) and the Sustainability Institute, have united under the umbrella of the Childhoods' Network. This organization has the stated aim of giving children back their childhoods.

The Childhoods' Network grew out of a shared (and constantly evolving) teacher training curriculum, which has been developed over many years, with input by many distinguished South African Montessorians (including Pru Ramsey, Eve Arnecke, Shiela Drew, Claire Collocot, and Bukelwa Seléma). There are a number of things that make this organization particularly exciting.

The main goal of the Childhoods' Network is to empower women and children and alleviate poverty in poor areas, where women are often marginalized and abused. To this end, it incorporates a range of healing modalities for use in one's own spiritual preparation, as well as in the classroom and as a catalyst for healing in the community by including sustainability practices into every aspect of development. Promoting sustainable business contributes to renewing communities and empowering children to play a role in creating ecologically sustainable futures.

This has, incidentally, resulted in making Montessori—which is often considered to be elitist—a great deal more accessible, even to the point of creating didactic apparatus from found materials (which may otherwise be considered trash). Montessori has, thus, become a vehicle to promote social change in a number of disadvantaged communities.

The Childhoods' Network curriculum was developed under the knowledgeable guidance of Pru Ramsey (AMI 3-6). It is one of only three Montessori-based teacher trainings to be recognized by South Africa's National Qualification Framework (NQF), which effectively means that graduates receive an internationally recognized and entirely transferable Early Childhood Development qualification at three different levels (Certificate, Higher Certificate, and Diploma).

I have had the joy of being involved with the Sustainability Institute (and the Network) as both a student and as a consultant, helping to rewrite the latest iteration of the curriculum. It is an absolute delight to observe the personal transformation that takes place in the lives of students as well as the transformation which is taking place in previously disadvantaged communities across the country.

The Network is in the process of incorporating itself and formalizing its structure, including a discussion around the creation of a formal partnership between the International Montessori Council and this organization.