

COMMUNITY: A HALLMARK OF OUR APPROACH

by Connie Black

All the basics of the Montessori prepared environment are put into an extraordinary context of community and nurturing through personal encounter. The article emphasizes the longitudinal impact of an intentional community that results in character and concentration and looks to the spiritual attributes of the child in relation to the tangible parts of the prepared environment. Connie Black advises us that spiritual development entails appropriate love, respect, security, and generosity. Correlating achievement with the teacher's understanding of community and the prepared environment, the harmony of the Children's House is the point of origin for social and moral development.

I would like to open with this meditation describing community from the *365 Tao Daily Meditations* of Deng Ming-Dao.

Everyone understands that burning wood produces fire. But when fire feeds on fire, that is a rare condition that yields the greatest illumination. Two flames come together and yield light more magnificent than either could have given forth alone. In the case of community activity, this means that when one cooperates with others, the accomplishments are greater than what the individuals can do on their own. Such a situation requires a harmony that will generate ideas, inspiration, as well as momentum for growth and action. If the combinations occur properly, the results will be like fire feeding upon fire and will illuminate the world. (69)

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This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled The Montessori Oasis: Prepared Pathways for a Sustainable School Community, Columbia, MD, October 3-6, 2013.

Dr. Montessori understood and appreciated the importance of community in a way that guided her work to be as much about social justice as it was about human development. Her work has illuminated the world for over a hundred years now. The title of this conference guides our focus this weekend: *The Montessori Oasis: Preparing Pathways to a Sustainable Community*. We're here to reflect on community and its role in supporting development and to reflect on our preparations that result in the community that serves as an oasis for the developing child. We know our Montessori environments differ most markedly from other conventional educational methods in that they are strongly rooted with a sense of community. It can be observed and felt by visitors, who can't always even identify what the difference is. But they are usually delighted with this new and unexpected feeling found in a learning environment. Dr. Montessori saw it, and through her scientific approach she was able to describe all the characteristics and give it a name. She called it *social cohesion*. It truly is one of the fundamental principles of the Montessori approach.

Let's look at the etymology of the word *community*. The first known use of the word came late in the fourteenth century from France. There are two major aspects of the notion of community. One is a territorial or geographical notion usually referring to a specific city or neighborhood as in the *community of Columbia*, or *East St. Paul*. The second is relational, concerned with human relationships without regard to locale as in *a community of nuns*.

Other definitions of community might include:

- a unified body of individuals who may be bound together by common interests or practices;
- a group linked by a common policy;
- a body of persons having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests; or
- a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society; that describes our Montessori community.

I have an affinity for the definition offered by David McMillan and David Chavis:

Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. (9)

If you're smiling to yourself, it may be because you recognize this definition lived out in your daily existence with young children in a Children's House.

A sense of community has been a distinguishing hallmark of the Montessori Children's House since the first one opened in San Lorenzo, Italy in 1907. Dr. Montessori once asked students during a lecture, "What is social life if not the solving of problems, behaving properly and making plans acceptable to all?" (*Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory* 93). Isn't that exactly what we observe happening in a highly functioning Children's House?

A community is where one feels that he or she *belongs*. It is home. It is where we live: where we work, play, eat, laugh, cry, share stories, rest, celebrate, and encourage those that are in community with us. Many of us experience this sense of community in our families, our workplaces, in our places of worship, in and through the places and activities where we pursue our hobbies and our dreams. It is a safe place. Not only do we feel physically safe in our communities, we are emotionally safe. We are respected and valued by other members of the community. We honor each other by protecting each other's dignity. We are there for each other, ready to raise each other up. We are free to make mistakes without having to worry about being laughed at or ridiculed. We are filled with the confidence to express our hopes, dreams and even our discontent without the fear of being belittled, secure in the knowledge that we will be listened to and responded to. We find comfort in never being expected to do more than

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that of which we are fully capable. We often experience intense joy in finding that we are capable of more than we ever dreamed.

These are precisely the characteristics of a Montessori Children's House. It is a community of children and a prepared adult who live together, even if but for a few hours each day. It is a beautiful place, carefully prepared for the children who reside in it. It's very physical appearance says, "This is a place for children. Children are valued here." It is prepared with purposeful activities that engage the child and give avenues to develop to the fullest potential. In it the child can find all the tools she needs to continue her self-construction, which began at birth. The child will reach out and explore when she feels safe, and this sense of safety comes from a nurturing, predictable, calm environment, where adults are attentive and attuned to the child's bids for attention. The child feels safe when basic needs for shelter, warmth, comfort, and love are met. Isn't this what we provide the young child of three to six in a Children's House environment?

Just as in a family, there is a mixed-age range. Dr. Montessori nodded to the obvious reasons for having a three-year mixed-age range such as younger children learning from older children, and older children deepening their own learning by guiding the discoveries of younger children. Of course, she said, this mixed-age



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grouping allows each of the children to work at their own pace and rhythm, eliminating the bane of competition seen in other approaches. But even more important than these more obvious reasons to have a large, mixed-age group, she said, is the matter of order and discipline, and how a sense of community is formed. It was surprising to those first witnesses at the turn of the twentieth century, and it continues to surprise observers even today that this large group of children could maintain such a high level of order and self-discipline under the guidance of only one adult. Those of us who have studied Dr. Montessori's work and practiced these principles with real children know that this is possible through the sophisticated balance between liberty and discipline prevalent in our environments. In *The Montessori Method* she wrote,

Children, who have acquired the fine art of working freely in a structured environment, joyfully assume responsibility for upholding this structure, contributing to the cohesion of their social unit. (81)

Beyond the mixed-age range, Dr. Montessori also called for a larger group than most conventional educational methods before or since her introduction of the miracle children to the world. In *The Child, Society and the World* (64-65) she states that in its best condition, the Children's House community would be comprised of between thirty and forty children. She allowed that even more are possible, depending on the capacity of the guide. She maintained that it took that many children to really establish all the characteristics of a community and to see children rise to such a high standard of discipline within the freedoms allowed.

This design of a multi-year age mix allows for both individual and social development. Children become not only independent, but also interdependent. A sturdy spiral of competence and confidence is created, as they not only learn to care for themselves, they became more fully capable of living in the world in harmony among others.

The child stays in this community for three to four years, developing strong relationships and trust levels not only with the other children, but the adults as well. They really come to know each other. The adult knows each and every child not only by name and their expressed interests in this prepared environment but also by

the child's family, including all their names, the child's birth order in the family, and which neighborhood they live in. The adult comes to know all the strengths of each child, some of which are in the academic realm of a particular affinity for math or language. Some children hold strengths in the creative realm of art or music. Still others show strengths in the social realm of easily making friends and mediating conflicts among peers. Knowledge of these individual strengths and interests becomes the foundation for the adult's artful guidance of the child through all the various activities in the prepared environment.

Each child comes to know the adult not only through the shared experiences of daily life with one another in this community, but through the many stories that the adult shares with the child. These stories, many of which are autobiographical, cement an authentic relationship. The child hears about the adult's own joys, fears, hopes, and dreams from childhood. There is not only a shared history of real-time experiences, but a shared history of the adult's own developing years, providing the child a template for *becoming*.

If you do a survey of current literature in education, it seems to be a new discovery among those in conventional education methods that the best learning happens in nurturing relationships. We've seen this principle manifested for over a hundred years now in our environments. This community of children and adults establish a shared history of significant, deep, authentic relationships. Indeed, by the time they leave us at the age of six, they have been with us for half their lives! That's a lot of living together.

The fruits of careful nurturing come to bear during that third (or sometimes fourth) year in a Montessori Children's House. That's when the child has the opportunity to use all the skills she has perfected to become not only an active participant, but also a leader in the community. Just as she looked up to and followed the example of older children during her first years in the Children's House, she now has younger ones coming to her for help in tying their aprons and shoes or for advice on how to best achieve some little task. This ability to creatively solve problems, to collaborate and participate in a group, even to lead a group, and to care about

and nurture others is all education for life. This is the education for life that occurs while being in a Montessori Children's House community during the years from three to six.

This strong sense of community within a Montessori Children's House has long-term implications for the future. Many elementary, even high school, teachers will tell us anecdotally that they see a direct correlation between the heights of student achievement and the strength of community within the classroom. Children who have practiced living and learning in community from such an early age become important leaders in the establishment of community in later learning environments.

Beyond their educational careers, young adults who have experienced a strong sense of community during their educational experiences are more likely to advocate for public policy centered on the values of human development and community. Again, Mc-Millan and Chavis suggest that a "clear and empirically validated understanding of sense of community can provide the foundation for lawmakers and planners to develop programs that meet their stated goals by strengthening and preserving community" (14). Aren't we also talking then, about education for peace?

Each of us has chosen to continue Dr. Montessori's work in search of ways to strengthen the social fabric, working to provide young children with intentionally prepared environments that support the development of sense of community. In the preface to *Education and Peace* Dr. Montessori lamented that "society at present does not adequately prepare man for civic life; there is not moral organization of the masses" (xi). Here we are these many years later, and all one has to do is to watch the evening news to wonder if we haven't really made much progress. We still see human beings who seem to regard themselves as isolated individuals who must satisfy their immediate needs through competition with others. Dr. Montessori spoke of a "powerful campaign of organization...to enable men to understand and structure social phenomena, to propose and pursue collective ends, and thus to bring about orderly social progress" (xi). Just what does that powerful campaign look like?

This, she told us, is the task of education. She told us that education couldn't be thought of as something insignificant in people's lives. "It is not merely a means of furnishing a few rudiments of culture to young people" (*Education and Peace* xii). Dr. Montessori maintained

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that education must be viewed from the perspective of human development, and that we must be concerned with the development of moral values in the individual. The second significant factor of education, she said, is the point of view that individuals possessed of these enhanced values can organize themselves into a society consciously aware of its destiny. She goes on to say,

A new form of morality must accompany this new form of civilization. Order and discipline must be aimed at the attainment of human harmony, and any act that hinders the establishment of a genuine community of all mankind must be regarded as immoral and a threat to the life of society. (xiii)

She is telling us that we must not neglect the education of the character. She reminds us that this period of development in the first six years of life is the most important in one's life. If we are to see a strong social fabric, then we must support optimal healthy development during these first, critical years when character is developed.

Near the age of three (sometimes even younger, especially for those more fully developed beings that come to us from toddler communities) the child is ready to enter the prepared environment of the Children's House. This well-prepared environment becomes the bridge for the child from the home to the world at large. Note that Dr. Montessori did not call it a school. Indeed, she tells us,

We do not say that we want to prepare a school for the [child]; we wish to prepare an environment for life, where

the child can develop a life. That is why we call this institution a House of Children. The idea is to give the children a house of their own, a house in which they are the masters of themselves. (*Creative Development in the Child* 52-53)

We know that this notion of preparing a Children's House rather than a school was pretty important to her approach to the child. She wrote about it in several places. In *Discovery of the Child* she tells us,

We Italians have elevated our word 'casa' to the almost sacred significance of the English word 'home,' the enclosed temple of domestic affection, accessible only to dear ones. (37)

Dr. Montessori is very specific about the conditions needed for optimal development during this stage. She tells us "the first essential for the child's development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior" (*The Absorbent Mind* 202). She has left us a legacy of developmentally supportive materials and developmentally responsive activities that provide the child the opportunity to find work that supports concentration. So we carefully prepare an environment full of objects and purpose-



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ful activity upon which the child can focus her concentration. This is what makes them so very important to the child’s development. “Our environments offer the young child sheltering refuge in which the first elements of character can take shape” (202).

One of our utmost responsibilities is to give intentional, reflective mindfulness to the ways we can help to support the establishment and the ongoing maintenance of a sense of community in our environments. The important word here is *intentional*. Just as we prepare the physical aspects of the prepared environment, we also give intentional thought to the preparation of the spiritual aspects of the environment, leaving nothing to chance. It is not enough to know all the purposes, prerequisites, and indirect preparations of all our presentations as represented in our carefully crafted albums. It’s not



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enough to know all the steps by heart and exactly what comes next. We have to do more than give exquisite presentations and tick them off on a checklist. We are not “teaching lessons” we are “inspiring children to learn,” and they are inspired in part by their fellow members of the community. We must, then, understand this critical idea of the importance of a sense of community. We must know how to observe for its manifestation, to remove obstacles to its blossoming, and to nurture its optimal growth and development, just as we do for each individual child in our Children’s House community.

We carefully prepare an environment that has at the same time a *physical aspect* and a *spiritual aspect*. The physical aspect is all those tangible pieces of furniture and developmental materials that we spend hours designing a layout for when we set up the environment for the first time. But there is also that spiritual aspect, all the intangibles. In addition to the physical objects of the environment there is an attitude on the part of the adults that cannot be held in the hand but is most assuredly absorbed by the children. This is the spiritual aspect of the environment, or the intangibles of appropriate love, respect, and generosity. Dr. Montessori said, “This is the age in which social or antisocial qualities are going to be evolved according to the nature of the child’s surroundings. This is their point of origin” (*The Absorbent Mind* 206-207).

So we constantly check the emotional landscape of the environment, taking care that we bring to it only the best and most generous of ourselves. We are the light. In order to see the miracles that Dr. Montessori and many others around the world saw then and we continue to see today, we must provide the children the warm, loving environment they need and refrain from constantly intervening. This social unity that can be seen, she said, is “really due only to the working of natural laws” (*The Absorbent Mind* 208). We can’t enforce it. We can’t make it happen. Within the scaffold of the developmental materials and activities we provide a framework of freedom and discipline in which the children flourish and continue to develop for themselves through the many opportunities for daily practice.

Given some basic tools and allowed to develop naturally, children solve their own problems. We offer the simple little dramas

of grace and courtesy to give the children the movements and language necessary to specific situations. Thus the child has all the tools that are needed to be responsive to the needs of other people, as well as to respectfully express his own needs. This is the beginning of the cohesion of the social unit represented in the Children's House.

Responsibility is related to social response. There is a communal response to the maintenance and beautification of the prepared environment. The children start to independently notice things that need their attention, such as plants to be watered or shelves to be dusted. They come to truly value objects of the community rather than merely possessing them. Keeping everything in the environment in beautiful condition is a communal response. We find it unnecessary to impose a job chart.

In her early years, the child must be allowed freedom of movement in order to focus her attention. In other words, purposeful movement sustains her concentration. Herein lies the importance of the Children's House community with its prepared environment. It is rich with nourishing opportunities for the social embryo. It provides the child with repeated opportunities for purposeful movement, which in turn serves to help the child to develop social virtues.

We cannot teach the child social virtues. They are only developed through real life experiences and frequent practice. There are several aspects of the Children's House environment that lend themselves to experiences for practicing social virtues. The limitation of materials offers the child daily and frequent opportunities to develop his budding will, and to exercise the necessary patience and respect for others to wait for an activity or material that is being used by another. Because we live this with the child as a way of being together in the Children's House, day in and day out, this becomes a part of the child's life, and this is how he relates to others on a regular basis. Dr. Montessori tells us in *The Absorbent Mind*, "out of this comes a change, and adaptation, which is nothing if not the birth of social life itself" (204).

The mixed age range offers the opportunity for younger children to become admirers of their elder peers. They show *respect* for and genuine *interest* in each other, respectfully watching activity they know that they, too, will soon be able to master. When a child successfully completes some

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difficult task for the first time, such as writing on the chalkboard, or successfully implementing the discovery of a relationship between two sensorial materials, another in the group will go and genuinely admire his work. There is *admiration* between the children and not *envy*, as they stand ready to help each other with pride in each other's work. When a younger child asks for an explanation from an older child, there is a kind of communication not often seen between the adult and the small child. We have often seen a child of three comforted, guided, even instructed or admonished by a child of five in a way that as an adult we could not have offered so well (*The Absorbent Mind* 206).

In addition to older ones helping younger ones, more able ones of any age can be seen offering aid to less able ones. This is sometimes seen as a younger child helping an older one. It can also mean that a child less able physically or mentally, one with physical or mental challenges, offers help to a more able peer. Nothing that challenges a child in the way of physical or mental limitations prevents that child from responding as a whole human being. Growing during these formative years in an environment that values not only children of various ages but also children of varying abilities, aids in growing foundational social attitudes of acceptance. These children will become adults who will embrace the work of supporting the developmental needs of all children not giving a second thought to offering the same opportunities to a child with challenges as to the typically developing child. Two young men were each in Children's House with me, but several years apart. Their paths have crossed as young adults now in the community where they live, with the more



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able young man serving as a mentor and companion to the young man with challenges, providing him with a level of independence that he was used to as a member of our Children’s House community. Both are greater individuals for their friendship, each capable of so much more than either ever imagined in what their friendship has meant to each other.

A generous reciprocal help spontaneously develops as the children come to one another’s aid, selflessly offering just the right amount of aid to another that leaves dignity intact. We can see this as the children come to one another’s aid and help in cleaning up a spill for instance. They will not rush to the rescue, but wait until it is apparent that help is really needed. And then they will offer only as much help as is needed. “It means they respect intuitively the essential need of childhood, which is not to be helped unnecessarily” (*The Absorbent Mind* 208).

Dr. Montessori said, "Cooperation is the consequence of a free life with free activity" (*The 1946 London Lectures* 235). We can see that the children become orderly and have a harmonious discipline. Different from the discipline that manifests in the forced obedience when everyone must do the same thing at the same moment, "this is a social discipline and it brings people into harmony with each other" (235).

The children start to become supports for each other, offering guidance for appropriate behavior. Dr. Montessori describes a child approaching another child who is disturbing work and whom no one has corrected, going up to the offending child and saying, "You are a little naughty, but never mind. We were all naughty once and now we are good. You must become good, too" (*The Absorbent Mind* 209). Who but a fellow child could so effectively console and support a child through misbehavior?

"Society does not rest on personal wishes, but on a combination of activities which have to be harmonized" (*The Absorbent Mind* 204). A question that continues to be frequently raised about the Montessori philosophy is how children are developing socially if they are being given individual presentations and working alone as individuals. But what we see in the Children's House is a *social life*, which includes solving problems and pursuing aims acceptable by all. This carefully prepared environment and the freedom found in it offer the children the opportunity to develop self-discipline. Dr. Montessori tells us, "So the character traits that we call virtues spring up spontaneously. We cannot teach this kind of morality to children of three, but experience can" (204). We have to ensure the children have the experiences.

To Dr. Montessori it became quite clear that "nature lays down a plan for the construction both of personality and of social life" (*The Absorbent Mind* 213). She has left us with a legacy of providing an environment to the developing child, which embodies favorable conditions for the fulfillment of this plan. We cannot teach this; it comes only through the child's own activity within these optimal circumstances. So we must prepare and vigilantly maintain the conditions necessary for this natural phenomenon to manifest itself.

Dr. Montessori saw the failure of civilization (remember she lived through two world wars) in part due to a lacking education system. She saw the child, then, as the hope for the future and worked her entire adult life to advocate for the child and for the conditions that would lead to the healthy development of a whole person, unified in mind, body, and spirit. Only with whole and healthy individuals is it possible to see a productive, peaceful society.

Dr. Montessori referred to the child as this *hope for the future*. It is through the child that we will build communities that are based on faith, hope, and tolerance rather than on fear, hatred, and rigidity. As Montessori practitioners we see the immense potential within every child. Dr. Montessori helped us to see the child's ability to *become*, to treasure the nebulae of potential with which each child is endowed. We work to help others to see and appreciate what we have learned in our understanding of sense of community, to see it as a tool for fostering understanding and cooperation. Through our work with the child, we can touch the future. Through our work to establish a strong fabric of community we weave hope for the future. It is our responsibility to reflect not only on the ways we contribute to the weaving of this fabric, but to continually see to its strengthening, and to keep it in good repair.

I leave you with a bit of poetry from Mary Oliver (33), portions of her poem titled "The Buddha's Last Instruction":

Make of yourself a light,
said the Buddha,
before he died.
I think of this every morning
as the east begins to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal – a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green . . .
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire –
clearly I'm not needed,
yet I feel myself turning into something of inexplicable
value.

May you make of yourself a light, inspiring awe and wonder in each of the lives you touch everyday in your community, bringing peace and illumination to the world.

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