

THE REVELATION OF THE UNIVERSAL CHILD

by Lynne Lawrence

Lynne Lawrence puts forward the solemn belief that each child is fulfilling the destiny of every human being. As children make their own contributions to their unique family, society, and global life, they are putting the common good above their own needs. Lawrence begins her case for universality with a moving statement from an African teacher in a Montessori training course. She then goes on to observe the human tendencies and constructive energies that every child carries across the planes of development. Lawrence's solid global framework stands as the preface for this journal.

“Our appeal to the world is to realize the importance of the child in the spiritual development of mankind,” said Dr. Montessori in her address to the sixth Montessori International Congress (*Education and Peace* 37).

We are all a single organism, one nation. By becoming a single nation we have finally realized the unconscious spiritual and religious aspiration of the human soul, and this we can proclaim to every corner of the earth. We are living this reality. We have proof of it in the almost miraculous powers that today are enabling man to rise above his natural condition. Man now flies higher and more confidently through the heavens than the eagle; he has massed the invisible secrets of the energy of the universe; he can look up into the skies and the infinite; his voice can cross the world's seas, and he can hear the echoes of all the world's music; he now possesses the secret powers of transforming matter. In a word, contemporary man has citizenship in the great nation of humanity. (*Education and Peace* 25)

Lynne Lawrence has been executive director of AMI since 2007. Her background in Montessori education spans over thirty-five years and includes being director of training and schools at the Maria Montessori Institute (former MMTO) in London. Lynne has supported and initiated projects in Tanzania and Kenya and was integral in initiating the Corner of Hope project to rebuild communities for internally displaced persons in Kenya. This chapter is adapted from the talk that was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Fostering Montessori Preparedness for Global Citizenship in Seattle, WA, November 13-16, 2014.

The task that we have set ourselves as Montessorians, the task that we have accepted (our cosmic task), is that of helping each child become a fully realized individual (one that has the opportunity to develop their unique and particular talents) so that they may live a fulfilled and happy life, and so that (knowingly or unknowingly) they may make a meaningful and significant contribution not only to their families, but also to their communities, to the society that they live in, and ultimately as “citizens in the great nation of humanity.” I say knowingly or unknowingly because as Montessori says, “All humanity that works for the common good, even though it may be unaware of it, is creating the new world that must be the world of peace” (*Education and Peace* 115).

For whilst human beings must construct themselves in circumstances not of their own choosing, they have an energy or power within them that enables them to adapt to any environment. This force, this energy, this power allows humans to act in the world in a particular way in order to meet their various physical and spiritual needs.

The concept of global citizenship is enshrined in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and human rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

So what defines a citizen in the great nation of humanity in this spirit of brotherhood? To become conscious of what it means to be a global citizen requires a specially prepared environment, real-life experience, a strong moral compass, knowledge and appreciation of the world we live in. Knowledge of the power of right action, even when those who will benefit are unknown to the actor.

It requires each citizen to understand their role in contributing to the whole exuberant symphony (even cacophony) of:

[the] present day products of some four billion years of evolution, of the continued working-out of the great natural experiments that the physical and chemical conditions of planet earth have made possible the profound significance

of their place in the universe, of the sheer scale and diversity and volume of life, all making their individual and collective ways in the world, interdependently cooperating, competing, avoiding, living with and living off one another. (Rose 2)

So we must have some kind of guide, something universal. Something so essential to human development that allows you as a Montessori teacher to apply what you learn to children in Seattle or Portland or Dallas or San Diego or, in fact, to children in London or Sydney or Kiwirrkurra or Delhi or Nakuru. Something that worked in the past, is current and applicable now, and will be fit for purpose in the future. Something that is applicable within school or elsewhere, that can apply to the sick and the healthy, to the poor and wealthy, to the disadvantaged, and to the marginalized.

I would like to introduce you to Matesha Sembuche from Tanzania. Matesha and I have known each other since last week when I was in Kenya. Matesha joined a very unusual Montessori course. She is Tanzanian and has been a traditional teacher in Tanzania. She has some knowledge of Montessori and was sent some general knowledge research to do before joining the course. This is what she said four days into the course:

This is the beautiful thing that a person should learn at the very beginning. Because (the way it was put to us), it shows that as a human being we have to respect what we have, because everything (when you look at it from a Montessori perspective) from the ground, from the sky, from the air we breathe, from the plants, is quite beautiful. That every individual, if they could learn that, would be able to respect what we have, to respect the environment, to respect nature and keep ourselves happily, to respect one another.

Because of the materials they are using, because of the philosophy—that each and every thing in the world has an importance—people could be taught at an early age that we could have peace in the world because each and everybody could respect the environment, could respect what he or she has as a human being, could respect animals, we could respect the nature. Nobody could cut down the trees; nobody could destroy or make wars. In Montessori, what I have come to discover is that we are talking of the

nature as of the environment and there is a reason inside it. So when you come to talk of Montessori philosophy and the way it is presented using the materials, it is quite interesting you see all the connections: from what we have, from what God has given us as human beings. So to me it is something that is very interesting for a child or for people to learn—so that they can understand the beautiful thing that we have as our universe or as our world.

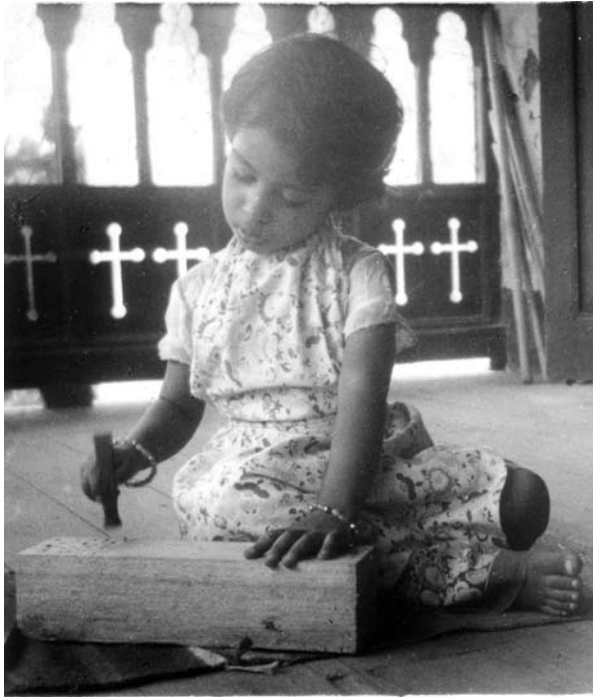
How is that possible after only four days of a course? What was given in those four days to create such a vision of what education should be?

As Montessori said,

Our principle concern must be to educate humanity—the human beings of all nations—in order to guide it toward seeking common goals. We must turn back and make the child our principal concern. The efforts of science must be concentrated on him, because he is the source of and the key to the riddles of humanity.

The child is richly endowed with powers, sensitivities and constructive instincts that as yet have neither been recognized or put to use. (*Education and Peace* 27)

Steven Rose wrote, “It is in the nature of living systems” and therefore the human being “to continually construct themselves, albeit in circumstances not of their own choosing” (2). We know that it is the nature of living things and of living systems to continuously construct themselves. This is true of all life and is a universal law. All things need to continuously construct themselves. Albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing, so it is to us the nature of this instruction that Montessori proposed our attention. She believed, as do we, that humans beings have given themselves the paths of their own self-construction through a stunning use of these powers that contain vital information. It is to the nature of this construction that Montessori proposed our attention should be given in order to educate humanity. Human beings contain within themselves the powers of their own self-construction, and it is our study of these powers that will give us the vital information we need to create an environment that supports those laws of nature that exist within the human being. For whilst human beings must construct



Montessori child, Sophia College, Bombay, around 1942

themselves in circumstances not of their own choosing, they have an energy or power within them that enables them to adapt to any environment. This force, this energy, this power allows humans to act in the world in a particular way in order to meet their various physical and spiritual needs.

So what did we talk about in the four days of the Kenyan course? We talked about the *constructive instincts* of human beings (what Montessori called the *human tendencies*) and we placed these within the context of a beautiful *constructive rhythm* of life that we call the *four planes of development*. These are two of the major pillars on which Montessorians base their study of the human being. They are central to our study of human development because they focus on fundamental and universal characteristics of the human being. These two pillars are the lens through which every Montessori course begins because they are foundational and provide the framework

upon which everything else relies. They are the touchstones that we return to time after time. An understanding of both of these concepts will guide us in all that we do as we interact with children and other human beings.

Let us explore these two pillars beginning with the human tendencies. What are these tendencies? As Montessori describes them, they are the basis for her philosophy: “[When] the right conditions were established, the result was the spontaneous appearance of characteristics which revealed not a portion of, but a whole personality. [What] is called the Montessori Method resulted from the discovery of tendencies that previously had no possibility of permanent manifestation” (*The Two Natures of the Child*). They are inner guides and its energy urges the individual to act in a particular way in order to get to know the environment. From those experiences, we build ourselves and adapt to our environments. According to Margaret Stephenson,

They are the characteristics, the propensities, which allowed human beings, from their first inception of earth, to become aware of their environment, to learn and understand it, to conquer it for their use, and to rise above it. This environment for the human beings who first entered it was an unknown. These first human beings, therefore, had to be given powers which would allow them to know the unknown. These powers were the human tendencies, given to all human beings. Each child as he is born, enters as the first human being, an environment, created for him but unknown to him. (10)

The human tendencies urge us to

- engage in *exploration*,
- seek to *orientate* ourselves,
- *extract order and meaning* from our surroundings,
- strive to become *independent*,
- *seek out* others (to be gregarious),
- *engage* in meaningful activity/work,

- *communicate and express ourselves,*
- *give our full attention (concentration),*
- *imitate* what we see around us in “our” way,
- use our creative *imagination,*
- develop our *capacities* (self-perfection),
- *exactness,*
- *curiosity,*
- *repetition,* and
- *calculation.*

Montessori also observed that human beings develop according to universal laws. As Margaret Stephenson describes,

The child, from the moment of conception, is guided by an unseen force directed toward the attainment of an end, that of the fully realized human being. This force cannot help but enable the human being to arrive at full potential, unless it is stopped in its path by obstacles that impede its functioning or by lack of facilities to attain its end. (10)

We can see the universality of the child’s development quite easily in their physical maturation. As Montessori mentions, all children shed their first teeth at a similar age and learn to walk around the same time, and because of these universal laws, we find it easy to judge a child’s age from their physical development. Yet we find it so much more difficult to recognize that human beings have the same universal laws that guide their intellectual and social development. These universal laws exist and we must become as adept at recognizing their importance and creating environments to support them as we are at recognizing the age of children losing their first teeth.

Montessori divided the development of the child into four planes: infancy (birth-to-six), childhood (6–12), adolescence (12–18), and

maturity (18–24). Beyond the basic needs of all human beings—food, shelter, clothing, love, and security—each plane has its own needs and characteristics that affect the ways in which the human tendencies need to be satisfied. Montessori practice changes in scope and manner to embrace the child’s changing characteristics and interests within and across each plane, each stage of development and corresponding educational environment building on the proceeding one. Development does not occur in a linear fashion and learning must proceed at its own pace through periods of creativity (transformation) followed by periods of consolidation. In the first plane, we observe the birth of the individual, the sensorial explorer; in the second the social man or intellectual and moral explorer; in the third the individual in society, or societal/humanistic explorer; and finally in the fourth, the human being as contributor. The prepared environment and the child’s relationship to adults change according to the plane of development and the way that the human tendencies need to be satisfied.

INDEPENDENCE

Life is one continuous conquest of independence as we move from relying on others to being relied upon. Our life is mapped by our personal achievements. Independence allows children to act and think for themselves, to make their own discoveries (therefore related to what has gone before, known to the child not taken on trust from others), to lay firm foundations for further discoveries, and to profit from their mistakes.

In the Montessori supportive environment we focus on the development of independence on many levels. The self-reliant, confident

With the idea of communication, we know that we pass our cultural heritage down through the generations. Heartbeat to heartbeat, the song, the dance, the story. Everything we do, on way of communicating is also part of what we leave behind.

individual builds the capacity to help others, to do what is right, to join in, to work to build their own capability and that of others. When children engage in activities of choice and with material that helps the child to judge how they are doing, they need not seek approval from an adult. Children are

intrinsically motivated and can develop self-judgment that allows their activities to lead to internal satisfaction not a dependence on the adult's praise.

The most important support the adult can provide is to avoid what is termed "useless help." The adult should try to avoid

- doing for the child what they can already do for themselves,
- giving answers rather than ask questions,
- acting rather than observing,
- talking rather than listening,
- correcting so that children get it right, and
- praising rather than encouraging.

GREGARIOUSNESS AND BELONGING

Man is not born a member of his group or society but an individual. The group is therefore what he requires to orient himself and adapt. The group therefore influences the personality of the individual and their identity. The initial model that the group provides later becomes a myriad of reflections from which the child can measure their progress as an individual and experience how groups cooperate and are interdependent. To support the child's gregariousness, the environment must

- be a community where it is possible to contribute to the well-being of the whole;
- provide cultural identity, which helps develop individual identity;
- allow each child to participate to the extent that they are able (the children help to weave a social fabric that leads spontaneously to what Montessori called "society by cohesion"); and

- allow children to help one another through the sharing of knowledge, skills, and tasks.

A group of mixed age and ability creates a social group that evolves without competition and in which the children function collaboratively. They are intrinsically motivated to do what others are doing. They learn from each other and from the appreciation of others, and kindness and helpfulness deepens their self-knowledge.

EXPLORATION, CURIOSITY, ORIENTATION, ORDER

Fear of the unknown is overcome through curiosity and the freedom to explore. It is essential for us to explore our world and ourselves, and as the child develops, their exploration stretches beyond the boundaries of the immediate environment. As we explore, we orientate ourselves to find our way about, and this exploration leads us to discover; that is, to go beyond what we know to satisfy our curiosity. Exploration takes place physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally, and the more I explore the better I am able to orientate myself to the world around me. As I explore, I ask myself, Do I know this? Do I need to know it? Do I believe it? What more is there, how does this relate to what I already understand and know? Do I know more about myself, my surroundings? By exploring these questions, the child comes to understand the patterns that exist in their world and expand upon them as they build their intellect.

Mario Montessori wrote, "If the security given by the sense of orientation is removed, it is not that one feels lost in a city, one feels lost in one's own mind" (16). Order plays an important role in our sense of security. Order helps us begin to know what we can predict, and when our expectations are challenged, our sense of the order promotes tolerance and adaptability. It is order that allows the child to orientate to new situations, new circumstances, new ideas, new values, and that gives them the freedom to explore.

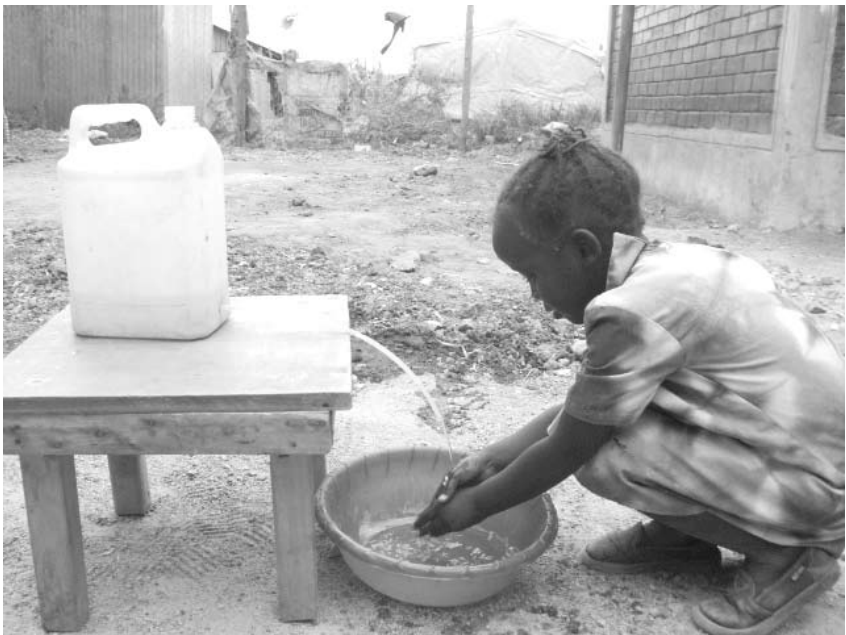
COMMUNICATION

All contact with the world outside of ourselves requires communication. We seek to put ourselves in touch with one another and to find ways to convey our feelings and ideas. We express our knowledge and facts through many avenues: through touch, through

spoken and written language (which is vitally important to building thought), through poetry, song, dance, music, visual art, and religion. Our own cultural heritage has evolved through the passing down of communication, and by communicating we contribute to and enjoy the cultural richness and variety that reflects our global community. With the idea of communication, we know that we pass our cultural heritage down through the generations. Heartbeat to heartbeat, the song, the dance, the story. Everything we do, by way of communicating is also part of what we leave behind.

MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY/WORK

All that has been achieved both in personal and world terms is the result of humankind's work upon the environment. It is recognized worldwide that each human has the right to work, and the effect on those that cannot is profound. Each human being expresses their personality through work done in and on the environment. It is through work with my hands that I bring my thoughts into reality. All creative thought becomes reality through the work of the hands



Courtesy of New Canaan Montessori School, Corner of Hope, AMI, New Canaan Community, Nakuru, Kenya

and allows us to understand reality more precisely (“the hand is the tool of the mind”). By working alongside others, we contribute to the work of humankind.

Montessori wrote, “Not in the service of any political or social creed should the teacher work, but in the service of the complete human being, able to exercise in freedom self-discipline, will, and judgement—unperverted by prejudice and undistorted by fear” (*To Educate the Human Potential* 3). It is in service of the complete human being that we adhere to these pillars, that we support each human tendency as it manifests in each plane of development. It is in service of the cultivation of global citizenship that we must share them throughout the world.

“It is absurd to believe that such a man, endowed with powers superior to those of nature, should be a Dutchman or a Frenchman or an Englishman or an Italian. He is the new citizen of the new world—a citizen of the universe” (*Education and Peace* 26). Montessori’s global identity is implicit in much of her writing. A world traveler, she observed children in many settings throughout a great variety of cultures and countries. Through her vignette of the universal child, the inevitable conclusion was to be that humans are different but the same as our human tendencies transcend any particular nation or place. Through a global Montessori community, our great work is unified by and for the sake of all children.

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