

# THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

by Polli Soholt

*Polli Soholt points to normalization in the first plane as leading to the successful realization of the human personality, which is the basis of social development. Children who have cultivated concentration and purposeful work at an early age develop the virtues to become world citizens. Normalization can be assisted by certain practices: 1) interesting and purposeful presentations; 2) small group discussions and conversation; 3) group singing, finger plays, games, poetry, and true stories; and 4) group movement and demonstrations through acting out right actions. Normalization, according to Soholt, is an integral result of classroom group activities and is influenced by the teacher's self-presentation of respect, clarity, and consistency.*

Today it is obvious that it is important for the citizens of the world to have a community perspective when thinking globally. In fact, in Maria Montessori's view, it was the same in her time. As in the past, we consider the important role the adults play in this endeavor as Dr. Montessori pointed out. But the adults who are making decisions in many cases have already formed their opinions and attitudes about people from outside their own culture. These attitudes and opinions are based on their education and experiences that began early in life. It was clear to Montessori that education played an important role in this quest for greater understanding between cultures. At the time, education usually only concerned itself

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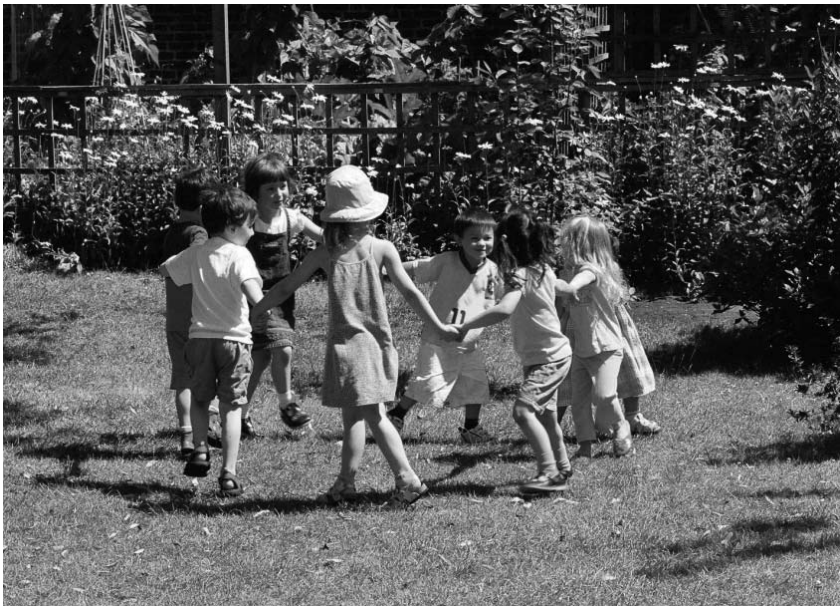
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with academic information. Dr. Montessori envisioned a different kind of education, which she described in *Education and Peace*:

Education is indispensable not to foster material progress but to save humanity, and all our efforts must be directed toward helping the inner man form himself rather than fighting against the outside world...The aim of education should not be to teach how to use the human energies to improve the environment, for we are finally beginning to realize that the cornerstone of education is the development of the human personality, and that in this regard education is of immediate importance for the salvation of mankind. (163)

It is apparent that if we are to aid in the development of the human personality, this type of education needs to begin early. One of the important aspects of this development is the unfolding of the social life of the young child. For some of the children, the first time they join the Children's House is the first time they have experienced a community of children outside their homes. Because of the importance of social development, we focus on the development of the individual as well as the development of the social group as a whole. In terms of the individual, we know that the child who is



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able to develop along her natural path without obstacles will reach a level which Dr. Montessori referred to as normalization. In *The Absorbent Mind*, she indicated that this development was “the most important single result of our work” (213). If we examine the characteristics of the normalized child, it will help to understand why this concept is so important in our work with the children.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NORMALIZED CHILD

The normalized child loves to work. He finds his freely chosen work interesting and exciting as it is aiding him in his self-construction. This love of work leads to repetition of that work. The children thrive on repetition of fulfilling work, and this repetition leads to competency and later mastery of the task at hand. In addition, the repetition leads to concentration, which allows the child to be submersed in activities that are interesting and meaningful.

The normalized child also has a secure relationship with reality. Part of the child’s quest is to understand the world, so reality is quite important to a child of this age. This interest in reality is aided by the child’s ability to absorb language and his innate interest in understanding and producing his native language. This is the reason why these young children are so interested in the names of things that they encounter. This interest in

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reality is also demonstrated by the rapt attention the young children pay to the true stories that are offered to them. These true stories also foster a genuine interest in others’ lives and a desire to share their own true stories. In addition, we offer them literature that is based on reality so that they can understand the world through culture, science, history, and realistic fiction. The secure relationship they develop with reality comes from all of these experiences, and it gives them an understanding of the world that helps them to feel secure. This basis in reality also supports their imagination, which is present and will continue to develop to become an important part of their lives in the second plane.

The normalized child loves order. We know that these children have a sensitive period for order, and this is used as a basis for all of the order they will create in the future. When the young child receives a presentation, we provide the order that the child can understand and use when she does the work. Over time, the child incarnates the concept of order and becomes conscious of order for its own sake. This is the time we see the children begin to create their own order in their work.

The normalized child has control of her movements and exhibits self-control. Through the repetition of work, the child has perfected the particular muscular systems required to do that work and has complete control over her movements. This includes the movements of her hands as well as the large motor movements required to move around the environment carefully and move furniture and large pieces of material with skill and precision. This child is also able to follow the directions of the adult and has the ability to wait for what she wants. She is self-disciplined. The self-control and self-discipline that these children display are a result of elements in the environment that promote this development. The adult's knowledge of the three levels of obedience assists the child in developing self-discipline over time. The control that the child acquires over her movements aids in this process as it also supports the development of her will. Once the child has control over her own will, she can follow the will of another.

The normalized child becomes aware of his strengths and weaknesses through the repetition of interesting work. Many times these children will exhibit a great deal of effort to gain mastery over something on which they think they need more skill. It is apparent that the reason for this willingness to correct errors and increase skill level is directly related to the view of error in the Children's House. From the very beginning, they are allowed to be independent in correcting their own errors. The knowledge of the error made comes from the children's own observations, and over time they are shown or figure out how to correct these errors. This means that the child is not relying on the adult to point out errors, and this freedom makes errors simply a part of life and not something to be feared. In addition to the self-awareness this provides, the normalized child comes to appreciate the strengths of the other children

as well as noticing the efforts the others make to fine tune the skills that still need work.

### HOW CAN WE ASSIST IN THE PROCESS OF NORMALIZATION?

It is obvious that the characteristics of the normalized child are important when we think about them participating in various small and large communities as they mature. Children who have had these kinds of experiences become adults who possess the virtues necessary to become contributing global citizens. The challenge in the community of the Children's House is not the children who are normalized, but the children who have not completed the process of normalization. Each child will have a unique path to normalization, but if we understand what needs to take place, we can assist each child in a way that engages him, which removes obstacles to development.

It is clear that concentration is a key factor in normalization. The onset of concentration comes when the child is involved with something that piques her interest. For that reason, it is necessary for the adults to become familiar with each individual child's areas of interest. We can do this by noticing the things that interest the child both in the prepared environment and at home. One of the ways we can become aware of this is through conversations with the children. Very often as soon as a child comes in the environment in the morning, she will have something that she wants to tell the adults. It might be about her puppy, her baby brother, or a trip she will take with her family. If the adult engages her in conversation that focuses on the topic of interest, then that information will help when choosing which presentations to give to this child. In addition, when the adult speaks to the child about her interests, it demonstrates that the adult is interested in the child. This goes a long way in forming a meaningful relationship with the child, which helps the child feel like she is appreciated and belongs to this little community. This sense of belonging, along with the clear limits, helps the child to feel safe. When the children feel safe they are more willing to try new things and trust that the adult will provide interesting experiences for them.

Naturally, when the children are new to the environment, they will be introduced to work that is interesting and purposeful. For some new children, these presentations are interesting but do not

engage them beyond a few moments. If that is the case, we need to think of other ways we can give them interesting and purposeful activities that will engage them. This can be done by inviting a child to come along to the store room to help carry packages of paper napkins, by inviting a child to help bring in the groceries that have just been delivered, by inviting a child to help put away the clean laundry from the laundry basket, by inviting a child to help carry the trash out to the trashcan, or by inviting a child to help sweep the walkway littered with leaves. This way the child is engaged in an activity that is obviously purposeful and therefore interesting. Accompanying or working with the adult will help to maintain his attention until the task is finished and gives another opportunity for actively participating in a complete cycle of activity.

There are many other ways that we can help the children who can barely focus let alone concentrate. Some of these suggestions can be done with individual children or groups of children. We cannot expect them to be able to do much individual work if they cannot focus. We can use other techniques to help them get to the point where we know what their interests are and they are ready to work individually on something in which they find interest.

- Invite a single child to walk around the environment and casually name some aspects of the environment that will interest the child. Most native speakers know commonly used words that pertain to the environment such as *window* and *door* but do not know the terms *window sill* or *threshold*. If we offer four to six of these vocabulary words each time we take this little tour, the child will become more familiar with the environment and will be building a relationship with the adult. The children are equally interested in the names of the items in the outdoor environment, and this same technique can be used to introduce them to the names of the plants and animals as well as the names of the outside parts of the building, the outbuildings, and fence parts. This can be done when all of the children are outside, or if there are enough adults, when the children are working inside. It should be noted that this type of vocabulary enrich-

ment is very valuable to the children just learning English. These children know some of these words in their native language, but are quite interested in the terms in their new language.

- A single child or a small group of children can be invited to take part in a conversation on a subject for which there is interest. Because these children are new to the environment, these conversations need to be kept short and interesting.
- A single child or a group of children can be invited any time of the day to join a group for songs, finger plays, games, poetry (both recited and read from a book), true stories, picture discussion, or very short story books. This gathering works best if the focus is on one of these activities and the gathering is kept short. It is clear that spoken language draws the child and if we can offer activities that are of interest to the child and provide rich, interesting language, the child will be able to attend for short periods of time.
- There are also some movement activities that are usually attractive to these new children. They tend to be very interested in rolling rugs, carrying chairs, and moving tables. If a few of them are invited to tidy the rug basket and the adult works with them, they are usually able to finish the task and have the sense that they have helped maintain the environment. A small group of children who know how to carry a chair can be invited to each get a chair (one at a time) and place them in a line. Once the line is formed, the chairs can be carried back to their original places. If two tables are placed about five feet apart, a simple water carrying exercise can be demonstrated. A small bowl filled  $\frac{2}{3}$  full of water is necessary for this activity. The group can sit off to one side while the adult demonstrates how to carefully carry the bowl of water from one table to

the other. Then, each of the children can take a turn. The children tend to get very interested in this as it requires careful movements to move the bowl without spilling a drop. Even the liveliest children will attempt to control their bodies to do this.

Maria Montessori was familiar with unruly behavior of the children who were not yet normalized, and she wrote about the adult's role in assisting the children to become more controlled. She advised us to use our knowledge of the theory and child's development to assist us in helping them at this time. She was quite clear on the direction that she gave teachers in these situations. The guidance she gives us is to use our own judgment when working with these children, and that each of us may choose a different path in our assistance in bringing about discipline and focus. In *The Absorbent Mind* she writes,

The teacher knows the fundamental symptoms and the certain remedies; she knows the theory of the treatment. All the rest depends on her. The good doctor, like the good teacher, is a person. Neither of them are machines, merely prescribing drugs, or applying pedagogical methods. The details must be left to the judgment of the teacher, who is just starting on a new path. It is for her to judge whether it is better for her to raise her voice amid the general hubbub, or to whisper to a few children, so that the others become curious to hear, and peace is restored again. (279)

However, she does give us landmarks in *The Absorbent Mind* that allow us to see the progress of the individuals in the group:

**The Child in Chaos.** This is the period when a child has not gained control of her movements and appears disorderly as she moves about the environment. This child has difficulty focusing on real objects and may escape into excessive fantasy. This child also has a tendency to imitate, so will gleefully join into the chaotic activities of other children.

**The Call.** This refers to the adult who wakes up the child to other possibilities with voice and thought. The decisions the adult makes are based on reasoned thought using the theory and knowledge of child development.



Apparent Order. This is a transitory stage, where it sometimes appears that all of the children are engaged, but there are eruptions in this peace that signal that it is still a work in progress. At this time, the adult can be offering group experiences as well as giving simple Practical Life presentations. Because of the transitory nature of this period, the adult is supervising the group as well as giving individual lessons.

Discipline. This is the period when concentration begins and the child becomes immersed in his work. At the same time, the child becomes socially aware of the adult and understands that he or she is offering experiences which will interest the child. (275-286)

Once again, we can see how concentration plays an important role in this development. If we examine the development of the ability to concentrate, we can understand more clearly what role we can play in assisting the child. In the beginning, the child finds some aspect of the environment that sparks his interest. This interest promotes the child's ability to focus on some activity, even if it is only for a short time. This

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interesting work leads the child to the repetition of the work that promotes muscular control and development of the will. As this process continues, concentration will be the result. Once the child begins to concentrate, normalization is possible.

We know that before the child reaches normalization, our role is varied and many options are available to us. We can play games with the children, sing songs with the children, or engage them in interesting ways to maintain and sustain the environment. We also have an important role after the child reaches normalization. First, it is our role to protect concentration. Even though these children are totally engaged in their work, some kinds of disruptions can shatter their concentration. Another aspect of our role with the normalized child is that we must remember that this child still needs our sup-

port in order to progress. This may mean that the normalized child wants to have a conversation about her work when she finishes. It may mean that the child is ready for a new challenge with a particular piece of material. Or it may mean that we must be aware of the difficulties a child experiences with some aspect of the work and make a plan to help the child with those issues. While these aspects of our work seem simple, it is important for us to develop our observation skills to the point where we can understand what these concentrating children need and not simply dismiss them in our minds because they are always completely engaged.

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE ADULT

As we consider all of the variables in the Children's House that help the children develop in a way that they can be participating individuals in the larger community, we cannot ignore the influence of the adults in the environment. We know that these young children have absorbent minds and incarnate all impressions of their environment. For that reason, everything we do and say in the presence of the children is a presentation. They absorb every word and every nuance.

When the adults show genuine interest in each child, the children absorb that too. It leads them to develop interest in each other and the adults with whom they spend their time. Through this interest in each child, the adults are demonstrating the faith in the child who has not yet revealed herself. This demonstration of faith in the child's development sustains the adults and helps the child feel that she is an integral part of the community.

All this time, the adults are interacting with the children with respect, clarity, and consistency. Many children may not have experienced adults who behave in this manner toward children. The respect demonstrates to the children how worthy they are; the clarity and consistency provide the children with a secure, safe environment. The children become more and more aware of the positive way they are being treated, and at some point they are able to talk about these qualities.

These experiences that the children are incarnating are directly related to the way the adults behave in all situations in this little

community. The more thought and care that the adults put into their daily interactions with the children, the more the children will benefit on every level. Socially, we are providing the foundations for a cohesive society. Maria Montessori wrote about this development in *Education for a New World*:

So we get an insight into the natural course of social embryology. It is usual to regard society as based on government and laws; the children reveal that there must first be individuals of developed will, and then a call which brings them together preceding organisation. First strength of will is needed, then cohesion by sentiment and last cohesion by will. (92)

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COHESION

Maria Montessori was very interested in the development of the community in the Children's House. It was one of the aspects of the children's development that she did not expect and encouraged her to focus on the implications of this development. Through her observations of the Children's House, she saw that the children participated joyfully in the group and were aware of their own individual needs as well as the needs of the group. These children responded to housekeeping needs without prompting and settled disputes between themselves in a thoughtful and just way. It became clear to her that through the development of each individual, the group came to a point where individual needs could be set aside for the benefit of the larger community.

There are several elements of the Children's House that set the stage for social cohesion to develop. First, there is the mixed age group. This makes the little community more family-like as there are various ages of children in the group. Each age has slightly different developmental characteristics, which means that they all do not need the same things at the same time. This also allows for the younger ones to look up to the older ones as models and the older ones have the opportunity to support the younger ones on a regular basis.

Another factor is that the environment is specifically and scientifically prepared for this age group. It contains everything that is necessary and sufficient for this group of children. Immediately



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it becomes clear that this element alone eliminates many obstacles to the children's development. If we consider the fulfillment of the sensitive periods and the freedom within limits that this environment offers, we can see how it is a unique experience for the children.

Taking the sensitive periods into account, we offer grace and courtesy presentations to the children at this level. Because of their interest in understanding how the world functions and wanting to participate in that world, these experiences are interesting to them. When we add the language that is associated with grace and courtesy, we can see how a very young child would be eager to learn these skills. When the younger children join the group, the older children are already living the grace and courtesy guidelines, so they see it in the models of the older children and learn how to behave in the same way.

These children are offered independence and freedom of choice. In offering independence, we are also presenting skills that will enhance their ability to be independent. The freedom of choice within limits offers the children the opportunity to choose what interests them at the moment and continue working with that material as

long as desired. This allows the children to immerse themselves in work that is truly meaningful.

Because of their absorbent minds, the children incarnate everything about the prepared environment, including the intent of the adults. That means they will absorb and begin to understand the benevolence with which the adults carry out their work with the children. We know that children of this age readily accept adult guidance, which makes the adult's role even more important. Over time, the children become aware of the faith the adults have in their development, and they realize that this means that the adults trust them. This is a powerful element in developing social cohesion.

We can see how the Children's House becomes a model of a cohesive society. This experience remains with the children because of their absorbent minds and their sensitive periods. This society of children cannot be created or organized by adults; it is the result of the children following their natural path of development in an environment that meets their needs. The importance of this time in the child's life is more obvious when we consider the attributes that the children acquire in the prepared environment. As these children mature and join new levels of Montessori education, they will be following their natural path of development, and transferring from the "new children" Dr. Montessori observed to the "new adults" in society. She envisioned these enlightened adults as the people who could take on the task of making education a priority and influencing peoples from all parts of the world to seek out common goals for mankind. If this were to happen, nations would have a common goal of educating the children following their natural tendencies. These new adults would be interested in resolving the social problems that lead nations into conflict. Once these problems were addressed and solved, nations could exist in peace, having learned to be tolerant and resolve issues without violence. In *Education and Peace* she wrote,

We are convinced that the child can do a great deal for us, more than we can do for him. . . We do not see him as almost everyone else does, as a helpless little creature lying with folded arms and outstretched body, in his weakness. We see the figure of the child who stands before us with his arms held open, beckoning humanity to follow. (183)

It is important to understand that Dr. Montessori did not advocate that we teach the children about peace in the world. She directed us to create environments where the children could experience the values that would prepare them for adulthood in a way that would make them open to others' needs, values, and circumstances. Giving the children the skills to interact with others in a respectful manner as well as the freedom and independence to develop following the laws of nature is the first step. In order for this to be possible, the educational system in the whole world needs to be re-evaluated and changed so that all children have these opportunities. Dr. Montessori saw the child as "both the hope and promise for mankind" (*Education and Peace* 58).

#### REFERENCES

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- . *Education and Peace*. 1949. Chicago:Henry Regnery Co, 1972.
- . *Education for a New World*. 1946. Madras, India: Kalakshetra, 1991.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

- Maria Montessori. *Education and Peace*.
- Maria Montessori. *Education for a New World*, chapters 12, 13.
- Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, chapters 19, 22, 23, 26, 27.
- Maria Montessori. *The Child, Society, and the World*.

