

MORAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM COSMIC EDUCATION TO ADOLESCENT ACTION

by Elizabeth Henke

“The most essential component to offering the children an education for peace is the emphasis on that which unites us.” With this focus, Elizabeth Henke presents a picture of how Montessori students progressively develop a sense of moral, civic, and social responsibility. The foundation is set during the elementary years when children gain an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life and the commonalities between all people through Cosmic Education. The morality developed in elementary is refined during adolescence and is aided by coursework that is focused on current ethical issues and opportunities to participate in their school, local, and global communities. As they begin to place themselves into the world by thinking of themselves as citizens of their community and components of culture, their work for the betterment of that world gains relevance.

In a buzzing upper elementary classroom, all of a sudden a cheer broke out, “The citizen! The citizen! The common citizen! He seems to have no power, but he makes it all possible!” I was struck speechless. It’s moments like these when I am awed by Dr. Montessori’s consistent interweaving of the dignity of the common citizen. I had just given an introduction to the bead cabinet likening it to a

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“kingdom of powers.” Taking a unit bead, a seven bar, a seven square, and the seven cube, the students helped name positions within a kingdom: the common citizen, the knights, the princess, and the king. I showed the unit as 7^0 , the seven bar as 7^1 , the seven square as 7^2 , and the seven cube as 7^3 . The lesson could have ended there; but as I learned in my elementary training, I illustrated how the unit is the foundation of all the other powers. I was unprepared for the student’s reaction. They immediately understood the implications for the wider society:

While it can seem the common citizen is just one person with little power, it is the citizen that allows society to function. All of this from one math lesson!

Approaching ethics from a variety of angles, students develop a moral maturity that supports them when facing moral problems. Too often we see apathetic or unengaged adults in our society. During the elementary years, we show children the positive constructive work of humanity, so that when they are faced with the uglier and unjust realities as adolescents and adults, they are equipped to act, instead of shying away.

As Montessori educators, we all aim “to construct an environment that will allow the child and the adolescent to live an independent, individual life in order to fulfill the goal that all of us are pursuing—the development of personality, the formation of a supernatural order, and the creation of a better society” (*Education and Peace* 106). In elementary we have a well-articulated and well-formulated approach to doing so, namely Cosmic Education. For adolescent practitioners, it is less defined, thus requires serious thought, trial, reflection, and adaptation. My goal is to share the incredible foundation that the children are receiving in Montessori elementary and to offer some thoughts on key touch points for developing moral civic and social responsibility in adolescents.

In my mind, the most essential component to offering the children an education for peace is the emphasis on that which unites us. Montessori wrote, “Man must be inspired to seek universality until the day he dies. Man thus prepared, conscious of his mission in the cosmos, will be capable of building the new world of peace”

(*Education and Peace* 70). There are many powerful materials in the elementary environment that are emblematic of Cosmic Education: the cosmic fables, the chart of Fundamental Human Needs, the Timelines of Humans, the Interdependency chart, and the general orientation within all of our lessons, as illustrated in the story above.

Through the cosmic fables, we offer the child the organizing principles of the universe. This framework helps the students feel secure because they have an orientation in the whole of history. It inspires them to want to belong to humanity and to the world. Through Cosmic Education, we say, "We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are a part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity. This idea helps the mind of the child to become fixed, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge. He is satisfied, having found the universal centre of himself with all things" (*To Educate the Human Potential* 6). Each cosmic fable serves as an introduction and opening to a field of study.

The Five Cosmic Fables

1. **God Who Has No Hands:** The aim is to relate a sense of wonder at the organizing principles of the universe.
2. **The Story of Life:** The aim is an introduction to the interdependencies on a large and small scale (between nonliving environment and all life forms) and emphasize that all elements are here to fulfill a specific task.
3. **The Coming of Human Beings:** The aim is to highlight the special role of humans in history and their special gifts (hand, mind, and heart).
4. **Ox and House:** One aim of the story of written language (the alphabet) is to showcase this incredible human invention that connects us.
5. **The Story of Numbers:** One aim of studying different number systems is to build tolerance. Number systems are an artificial construction that are part of daily life for humans.

The Great River is a sixth story that is told. While not considered a cosmic fable, it is an essential offering. It illustrates the harmonious working of the systems of the human body. It is a clear metaphor for how human society functions; the underlying message is one of human solidarity.

Elementary guides are also tasked with writing their own stories. One way the child sees himself as integral in the universe is through exposure to positive human work within the history of humanity. When writing stories, we always emphasize the positive contributions of humankind, with wisdom and inspiration pulled from all corners of the social/economic/political/religious spectrum. Here students can find heroes and champions of the preservation and creation of a better world.

The Fundamental Human Needs chart, while simple in its presentation, opens up an unending opportunity for exploration of “unity in diversity.” All of human history can be explored through the lens of how humans satisfied their fundamental material needs for shelter, food, clothing, transportation, and defense and their fundamental spiritual needs for arts/culture, beauty/vanity, and religion. Children instinctively understand that we are more alike than different. They know that children are children, everywhere. Whether in Washington, DC, Nairobi, or Kabul, if a soccer ball is placed in the middle of a group of kids, chances are they’ll start to play. This understanding extends to how children view adults as well. I remember a vigil for the victims of violence in Latin America, where a ten-year-old asked to lead the memorial. This Montessori child, who was white, wealthy, and had never been to Latin America, cried as he asked us to think of the mothers trying to protect their children, wanting to make sure they all had food to eat and a roof over their heads. He wept as he said, “The parents there are just doing what parents do here. They want a good life for their families.”

This story is a perfect illustration of the elementary child’s inherent moral force. The boy believed it was not right or just that others suffered as they were unable to satisfy their fundamental human needs. Children are born with a moral compass, and as they are brought in contact with human virtues, they develop more and

more complex understandings of right and wrong. As part of the Montessori elementary classroom environment, children experience and resolve interpersonal conflicts along with dilemmas arising from working in the community. Developing a classroom charter is the perfect framework through which to solve problems. In solving issues at community meetings, students become aware of the consequences of their own actions. In upper elementary, we also present real-world, relatable, ethical dilemmas to broaden the child's social and civic understanding. "The amount of light a child has acquired in the moral field, and the lofty ideals he has formed, will be used for purposes of social organization at a later stage" (*To Educate the Human Potential* 4). We are setting the stage for the adolescent sensitive period for justice. Approaching ethics from a variety of angles, students develop a moral maturity that supports them when facing moral problems. Too often we see apathetic or unengaged adults in our society. During the elementary years, we show children the positive constructive work of humanity, so that when they are faced with the uglier and unjust realities as adolescents and adults, they are equipped to act, instead of shying away.

Through this brief refresher on how Cosmic Education and elementary ethics prepare students to become engaged adolescent citizens, it is clear that the Montessori child entering adolescence is primed for action. The sprouting morality of the elementary child enters a deepening and refining period during adolescence.

As we turn our minds to the adolescent, let us begin with what you are already doing. We know that everything you do is grounded in meaningful work. And, there is no work more meaningful than the betterment of humanity and the protection/preservation of our earth. You offer contextual studies that are born out of an integrated community (pedagogy of place) with adults working side by side along with the students. Through the course work, students are exposed to the interdependence of nature and supranature, and from that develop microeconomy projects that take into consideration sustainable development. As in the elementary environment, you aim to offer aspects of reality that uplift the soul and direct the students and adults to a much higher plane than we ever imagined.

Throughout the NAMTA event at the AMI/USA Refresher Course in Austin, I was struck with the recurring differentiation between work with early and late adolescents. It left me wondering if there should be differentiation in the way we approach moral development among the subplanes. When we look at our approach to adolescent work, Montessori said, "It is impossible to fix *a priori* a detailed program for study and work. We can only give the general plan. This is because a program should only be drawn up gradually under the guidance of experience" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 71). This means that everything I propose here, I leave to you, adolescent practitioners, to implement, reflect upon, and adapt (and then please let me know what you discover!)

The adolescent mind is already turned toward society, as they begin to wonder, "Who am I? Who am I in relation to society? What role can I play?" "If young people at a certain point are called upon to take an active part in the life of humanity, they must first feel that they have a great mission to accomplish and prepare themselves for it. They must have the chance to meditate upon it a little" (*Education and Peace* 70). I believe early adolescence is the time of meditation where the students begin to feel the weight and hope of their great task, yet are still trying to find their niche for action. Just as in the shift from Children's House to elementary, where students go from a totally contained environment to slowly engaging with society through structured going-outs, the student moving from elementary to adolescence engages with society to an even greater level.

As with academic work, in developing their moral and social pursuits, we always walk the balance of finding work where the level of challenge perfectly matches their skills. There is a danger of overwhelming students with the enormity of need and destruction in our world. In order to capitalize on their desire to contribute to the whole without becoming disillusioned, the work must be scaffolded to support increasing independence and specialization. Initial emphasis must be placed on concrete actions that expose students to a variety of modes of action (justice in all its forms: environmental, gender, education, poverty, etc.). In the 12-15 model, this happens naturally through the microeconomy, specialists, responding to local issues, etc. Their social work needs to have direct, local application and relevance.

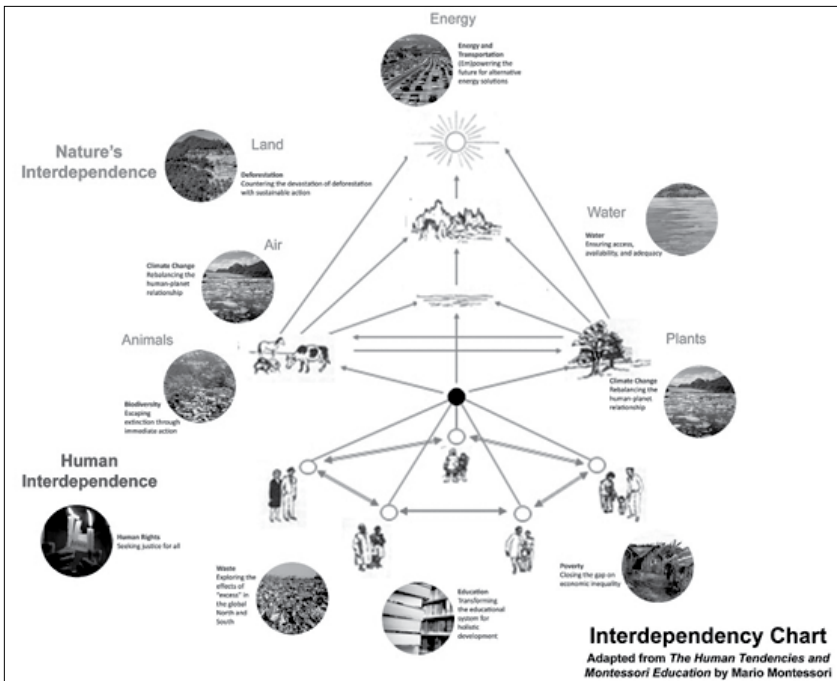
While all of the work for social and moral development has implications locally, with the older adolescent, I believe direct local application is less consequential. In the 15-18 subplane, the student's passion makes the work relevant. The older adolescent sees herself as part of the wider world. There is a shift where the academic content feels more pressing because it is connecting them with the world they are about to enter. So too, any engagement that brings them closer to understanding how society functions and the roles they can play, becomes defining. Thus, I believe it is at this stage, adolescents are fully ready to experience dynamic constructive work, based in social connections, that links them to global environmental and social problems/solutions.

Our goal, at the Montessori Institute for the Science of Peace (MISP), is to provide opportunities for adolescents to connect with one another around issues of global social and environmental importance, built on the foundation of what you are already doing in the classroom. In this globalized world, we can help direct the awesome power of the adolescent by drawing on their inherent social drive and desire to fulfill the ultimate goal of contributing positively to society and the world. As we at MISP developed these experiences, our guiding principle sprung from the knowledge that "an education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live" (*Education and Peace* 30).

Spiritual development occurs when there is integration of mind, body, and spirit. Again, the opportunity for this arises through meaningful work. "When there is an interchange between an object and a man's spirit, something deep inside him is awakened—human dignity" (*Education and Peace* 90). It is through experiences that allow students to work in service of the local/global community where they form the backbone of their moral compass. "[Education] must be viewed first of all from the perspective of the development of human values in the individual, in particular his moral values, and second from the point of view of organizing the individuals possessed of these enhanced values into a society consciously aware of its destiny. A new form of mortality must accompany this new form of civilization" (*Education and Peace* xiii).

This meaningful work for the betterment of humanity must be done collaboratively, for it is the social connection that imbeds joy alongside the deep satisfaction of constructive work. Working collaboratively also allows students to see the strengths in one another and find how their unique gifts meet the needs of the world. "Success in life depends in every case on self-confidence and the knowledge of one's own capacity and many-sided powers of adaption. The consciousness of knowing how to make oneself useful, how to help mankind in many ways, fills the soul with noble confidence, with almost religious dignity" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 64.)

In order to find the many ways in which one can help humanity, adolescents must first understand the times in which they live. "[Education] must aim to reform humanity so as to permit the inner development of human personality and to develop a more conscious vision of the mission of mankind and the present conditions of social life" (*Education and Peace* 24). In my work with older adolescents, it became clear that nothing was more compelling than



deep knowledge of current events and ethical discussions around the social and environmental crises of the day.

Taking these points as our guide, MISP, with the help of eight Montessori adolescent programs around the world, developed a series of adolescent summits, which lead up to the 2017 Montessori Adolescent Congress in Prague, Czech Republic.

These summits are inspired by Mario Montessori's Interdependency chart. The web approach to holding seven summits corresponds to the seven active agents of the Interdependency chart. The summits can be implemented around the world in a unified theme because the web of life organization ties all summits together with regard to connecting interdependency. No summit stands alone because the web is interactive and converges on nature's unity of life on earth, which is fundamental to Montessori's view of modern science. The unified results of the summits will be presented at the Prague Montessori International Congress, 2017. This means that local ecological summits can invite other international schools and then meet with all summit participants in Prague with interfacing and integrated results.

Interdependency Summits

Energy: Energy Summit

Land: Soil Summit

Water: Water Summit

Animals: Animal Summit

Plants: Food Summit or Deforestation Summit

Humans: Human Organization Summit, the human role in building a sustainable world

Air: Air Pollution Summit

Because these summits are independent and interdependent, we wanted to choose a clear framework to unite the discussions that will guide the cumulative work in Prague. The Earth Charter

is the perfect choice (The Earth Charter can be found at <http://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>).

The Earth Charter is an ethical framework for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is a vision of hope and a call to action.

It is a positive document that highlights what we should do in our work for societal and environmental betterment. It is a guide for sustainable living and sustainable development that aligns perfectly with the adolescent's vision to the future. It began as a UN initiative in 1987 and has wide-reaching legitimacy due to its inclusive and participatory process of creation. It is now being seen as a soft law document, similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has been endorsed by over 6000 organizations, many governments and international organizations like UNESCO.

Dr. Montessori had the incredible insight to focus on that which unites us, to show us what new society is possible. The Earth Charter does the same thing by seeking consensus in our common ground: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence, and peace. It has yet to be shown what the exciting outcomes of the convergence of the summits in Prague will be, yet as it is built on the solid foundation of the adolescent social drive matched with their desire to contribute to society, I have high hopes.

The summits and the congress are just one piece of the multifaceted way that we support adolescent moral, social, and civic development. This, in conjunction with direct course content focused on ethics and current events, participation in the life of the school and local community, global exposure like the MISP Peace and Biodiversity experience in Costa Rica, students will be "conscious of [their] mission in the cosmos, [and] will be capable of building the new world of peace" (*Education and Peace* 70).

REFERENCES

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