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Educating for Peace

Nurturing the spirit of the child through transformative philosophy, structure, and curriculum in the early childhood classroom

Over 100 years ago, acclaimed scientist, educator, and medical doctor Maria Montessori proclaimed that there is but one path to a peaceful world, and that path leads directly through the gateway of our educational system. Humanity evolves, she declared, only as the individual is able to realize her potential, become self-actualized and experience harmony and the unity of all living beings.

During the 1930s against the backdrop of an impending world war, Dr. Montessori spoke eloquently throughout Europe, addressing the issue of global peace to her audiences which were made up of educators, philosophers, psychologists, dignitaries, politicians and religious leaders; and she did so with an extraordinary blend of idealism, optimism, and pragmatism. Given the times during which she lectured and the organizations to whom she spoke, one can make a fairly safe assumption that her audiences were mainly men.

In an era when women's roles were sharply delineated and where the concept of war was framed within the context of the inevitable, Montessori stepped up to the podium time and time again to present a compelling case for thinking in new ways, not just about education, not only regarding the burdens of war, but

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of an authentic and enlightened view on what it means to be human. She spoke of a “new organization of mankind” (Montessori, 1949) and with far-reaching insight and bold language she called for an immediate recognition of where she understood the human race to stand at that moment: “We are undergoing a crisis, torn between an old world that is coming to an end and a new world that has already begun and already given proof of all the constructive elements it has to offer” (Montessori, 1949). She compared this “upheaval,” this turning point as she understood it, to “one of those biological or geological epochs in which new, higher, more perfect forms of life appeared as totally new conditions of existence on earth came about” (Montessori, 1949). The change Montessori understood to be necessary for the evolution of humanity called for spiritual awakening, and the origin of this change was to be with the young child.

Imparting her theories and ideas about social reform at every opportunity (of which there were many), she had established a reputation for being an exceptional speaker and visionary social reformist. She spoke with powerful insight, high intelligence, and spiritual brilliance. It was a task that she understood to be taken on not only by educators, but by all of society, in order 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” (Montessori, 1949). Montessori was not championing any specific religion, but rather advocating for an awakening of human consciousness and the realization of individual potential. She proclaimed throughout her life, in her books, speaking engagements around the world, and at her training centres that the secret to transforming society was to transform the child.

Montessori’s vision on educating children was enlightened and holistic, and embraced at its core the idea that education must cultivate not just the mind, but the spirit of the child. She understood that educating for peace was achieved by addressing the needs of the human spirit, which would lead to the evolution of a new way of being and thinking in the world. But while efforts (organizations, campaigns, political endeavors) for peace in the world were then, (and are still today) pointed at adults, Montessori proposed a radically different idea: in order to trans-

form society from a war-based to a peace-based society, the necessary place to begin is with the young child. Minds and hearts must be open to embrace new ideas about the framework, structure and curriculum we expose children to in our schools on a daily basis. The opportunity to reach and teach to the human spirit defines the highest order of teaching, for when the spirit of the child is nourished, personality traits are revealed that hitherto have not been attributed to children.

This is the great task of education: to create an environment for children that is holistic in nature and practice. The current state of the world today is

intimately linked to the current state of an educational system which focuses on the intellect while neglecting the spir-

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it. This is a fragmented approach to education and it creates a human imbalance. If humankind is to evolve into a more kind, loving, compassionate and peaceful society, the human spirit must be nourished. And too, the highest development of the intellect is dependent upon the cultivation of the human spirit.

Nurturing the spirit of the child is fundamental to the full development of the intellect, as well as the spirit, emotions and body, for a weak and oppressed spirit hampers the mind and reasoning faculties, fatigues the body, and distorts emotions. The mind-body-spirit connections have for some time, been explored in science, medicine, and theology. We should now insist that our educational systems acknowledge and act upon the understanding that the child's spirit must be protected and nourished. This is the underpinning of teaching peace in schools.

A peace curriculum framework, developed and implemented by the author, will be examined in this article. It is crucial to point out, however, the components of a learning environment that will free children to realize their innate human potential and grow into peace-loving adults. A peace curriculum, alone, is not enough. Until we understand, accept and act upon the realization that many schools in their current form employ educational practices which rob the child of joy, self-reliance, inner discipline, and the attainment of potential, the hope of a transformed individual cannot be effectuated.

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What are the oppressive practices and limiting philosophies that need to be removed in early education?

Restraint of movement. The freedom of movement that exists in preschool settings is often withdrawn by first grade when the child is assigned a desk, his home base throughout the school day. But the child needs to be free to move about, not stationed at a desk all day. The desk is a tool with which the child is controlled; he is free to move away from it only with permission from the adult. Holistic education embraces basic human freedoms including the freedom to move about naturally

The blank slate theory. Most adults versed in early childhood practices insist that education has moved beyond blank slate/empty vessel theory of educating children. But the realities of current practices indicate otherwise. The adult is actually the centre of the classroom, in control of dispensing all knowledge and content: what to study (take out your math books), how long to engage in that topic (put your math books away and take out your science books), and how to show what is learned (assignments). If the spirit is to be nurtured, it must be recognized that children can teach themselves, within the realm of a precisely prepared classroom environment. In order for self-education to occur, the child must have some freedoms to choose which activities she will engage with, how long to work on an activity, whether to work alone or with a classmate, where in the classroom to work. Traditional classroom methods deny the child the opportunity to develop what is within himself. When this inborn manifestation is forbidden, a natural part of the human child is oppressed.

Teacher as the centre of the classroom. In a spiritually nurturing learning environment the role of the teacher is no longer dispenser of knowledge or classroom manager. She loses her status as centre of the classroom and becomes instead the creator of a meticulously prepared learning environment and organizer of the overarching curriculum. She brings organization and beauty into the classroom and seeks to model graceful movement, articulate speech, patience and respect for the students and the classroom environment. She is a careful and intent observer of the children at work and engaged in activity, from which she discerns what is needed: a lesson, a suggestion, redirection, encouragement. The teacher understands her role

not as the adult in charge of the classroom, but as a facilitator to the natural unfolding of a child's intellectual and spiritual development. Large group lessons are limited, as the teacher works with an individual or a small group instead. In this environment the spirit of the child is free and this freedom is spiritually liberating.

There is great hope for the realization of human potential when the spirit of the individual during the critical early childhood years is respected, protected and cultivated with care. The child develops inner discipline because she has had opportunities to be in control of her daily activities. She becomes self-reliant because she has been allowed to do for herself, she is at peace, because she has the freedom to move about, develop her natural abilities, and find contentment in mastering her ability to concentrate and focus to the point of having a "flow-like" experience, a natural outcome of engaging in meaningful, absorbing activity. True, lasting peace begins in early childhood, in authentically created, child-centred classrooms that reflect a deeply rooted belief in the potential of the child. Against the backdrop of such a classroom, a peace curriculum is optimally beneficial.

Teaching for peace

What does it mean to teach for peace? How does peace education come alive in our classrooms? What does it look like, and how do we integrate it into our daily work with children? Working with first, second, and third graders in a public, then a non-profit private school, I first began asking these questions. I found a starting point in Aline Wolf's book, *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-Sectarian Classrooms* and Simone Daleo's *Curriculum of Love*. I modified the activities to fit my classroom and expanded my peace emphasis with activities I created myself. After a couple years I actively sought to organize the activities and ideas I had been implementing and found they fell into the following three overlapping categories:

- Inner peace
- Peace in (classroom) community with others
- Universal (global) peace

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Within each of these three components are traits, ways of thinking, and behaviors that can be developed to work towards its accomplishment. Using well-developed ideas and incorporating thoughtful activities, each of these traits can be cultivated, collectively nurturing the full peace loving spirit of the child. While a comprehensive intentional inclusion of a peace curriculum in schools is optimally preferred, any determined, peace-minded teacher will bring pieces of a peace curriculum into his classroom in ways that work for him and his students.

Inner peace

All peace begins with inner peace, a state of calm and stillness which offers refuge from the busyness and stress of everyday living. Young children today are bombarded with a deluge of daily activity, images, and other external stimuli. It is fair to say, of course, that there is a place and a time for some of this activity.

Just as we have provided ample experiences that feed the intellect and physical needs of the child, we must now be cognizant of nurturing the spirit of the child.

But clearly there is something missing — out of balance — and that deficit can be remedied with the integration of down time. Our hustle and bustle, hurry-up-and-get-there pace of life needs desperately to be

balanced with regular periods of quiet, tranquility, and unscheduled opportunities to engage in spontaneous, creative thought and activity.

Children need this as much as adults. Their school days are sliced into fragmented periods of learning, and they are often rushed from one after-school activity to another, spending what could be free unscheduled time at extracurricular classes, day-care, and camp. But just as we have provided ample experiences that feed the intellect and physical needs of the child, we must now be cognizant of nurturing the spirit of the child, and we can do this, in part, by making certain there are times for relaxing in a hammock, gazing out a window at the rain, or sitting by a creek noticing pebbles, twigs, tadpoles or the movement of the water.

Inner peace can be developed by integrating into the classroom experiences and activities that expose children to the benefits of the following:

- stillness and silence
- mindful awareness and presence
- gratitude and appreciation

The intended outcomes, when children are armed with such an inner toolbox of resources, include self-awareness, reduced stress, improved impulse control, increased concentration, and compassion for others. Interior experiences give the child access to his inner self, which he can learn to access as a place of wisdom, authentic power, and creativity.

With the categories defined, activities and practices that foster the development of each component are brought into the school experience. In order to educate holistically, the elementary age child should be aware of and begin to explore the concept of the inner self as a sacred source of strength and wisdom, a place of reflection, rest, renewal, wisdom, and creativity. It is the door to the spirit. The inner self holds the answers to the universal, yet exceptionally personal questions, *why am I here and what is the meaning of my life*. It is the safe harbor of individual potential which when manifested helps us to answer these questions and lead to deep happiness, joy, and contentment.

It is time to talk to children about the inner selves. Begin to help them understand this concept by creating analogies and metaphors which they can relate to and remember. Naming the inner self is the first step in opening up the infinite potential within each child, for naming lends legitimacy to that which has previously been unseen and unacknowledged. Pique their interest by describing the inner self as a place of great power, beauty, and intelligence that will change their lives. The following is an example of an activity I developed to teach young children about this concept:

Elementary lesson: the inner self



Materials needed:

Russian matryoshka (nesting) dolls
 (You will only need the largest, smallest, and one other mid-sized doll.)

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With children gathered around you, hold up the largest doll (with the two smaller dolls nested within) for them to see.

You might say:

This doll represents your physical self, the part of you that others see.

When people see your physical, or external self, they see the pigmentation of your skin, your hair colour, how tall you are, the colour of your eyes, or the way you smile. Many of the physical (external) things about yourself can be changed. Your hair can grow longer, or you can cut it. You can lose your teeth and grow new ones, and your body can get taller and change shape. In some instances there may even be more dramatic changes to your physical self. People who suffer severe burns may always have scar tissue. If the burns are on the face, that individual may no longer look like the same person. Sometimes, due to an accident a person may lose a limb or walk with a limp. But do these changes mean you are a different person?

Your physical self does not stay the same. It is always changing. This is a law of nature.

Some people believe this external self is the whole self. They spend a great deal of time focused on this part of themselves. (You may want to explain that some attention is good, such as healthy eating and exercise habits. Taking care of yourself is important.) But this is not all of you. It is just one part of you.

Remove the large, outer doll, and reveal to the children the middle doll.

You might say:

This doll represents another part of you — that part which is your mind and emotions. This part of yourself is seen by your family and friends and others who know you well. When others know this part of you they know more about you than most people. They might know what subjects you like to study, what you enjoy doing in your spare time, and maybe even what makes you laughs, what frightens you, what makes you happy or sad. There may be a person who knows this part of you especially well. Perhaps it is your mother, your grandfather, a beloved

aunt, or a very, very special friend. This is someone you trust. Not everyone gets to know this part of you, just a few people whom you love deeply and who love you. Think quietly for a minute about someone who knows you in this way. (Pause.)

Reveal the smallest doll. Hold it out for the children to see. Hold it with reverence and awe.

You might say:

My friends, this doll, hidden deep within the other dolls, represents the most important part of who you are, and that is your inner self. There is only one person in the whole world who gets to see this part of you. Do you know who that person is? Why, it is yourself! Adults don't often talk to children about their inner self, but we should, because it is real, and VERY important. Let me tell you why: Your inner self is a place of tremendous power. It is where you will find your true strength. Now, it is common for many people to think that strength is related to your physical or external self. But being physically strong is not even close to the power that is inside you. You may see adults on TV that act as if power is about having lots of money or buying lots of things. Some people mistake power for being a boss or being in charge of something. But the power that is within you is far greater than any of these false powers. When you learn to go into your inner self you will find the strength in life to do many difficult and challenging things.

Your inner self is also a place of wisdom. When you are troubled or trying to figure something out such as a friendship problem or a family situation, your inner self will help you figure out what to do. Many people mistakenly spend their whole lives looking outside of themselves to feel better and to find happiness. But the truth is that happiness and wisdom can only be found inside you.

Stillness and silence

A classroom peace area with a small table and chair provides a place for students to engage in activities that emphasize the beauty of silence and stillness. Such activities may include placing stones and raking paths in a Zen rock garden, listening to the sounds of a tabletop water fountain, observing the tranquil

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movement of a fish swimming in a small tank or fishbowl, reading a short peace book, or simply sitting in quiet and listening to their own breath.

Mindful awareness and presence

Mindfulness is a practice which is becoming more widely understood and is currently being brought into public school classrooms in the U.S. and Canada. Mindfulness is an ancient process, practiced by many in the East for centuries. Today, many describe it as a process of waking up. For the purposes of working with children, think of mindfulness as the process of becoming more fully aware of the surroundings, honing the senses and awakening to each moment in order to experience awe and wonder at the world around us. Mindfulness exercises relieve stress, are calming, and promote attention to detail, focus and concentration. For example, provide each child an apple, and before they eat it, raise questions or statements for them to ponder as they hold the apple in their hands. What colour is your apple? Is it more than one colour? Observe the shape of your apple. How does it feel in your hands? How does it smell? Who do you think planted this seed which became the tree upon which this apple grew?

Gratitude

Gratitude fosters contentment and happiness, which leads to inner peace. Providing opportunities for children to experience life's simple pleasures, articulate them, and reflect upon their value is an important component of teaching for peace. We must model a way of perceiving the world from a grateful heart, give language to this way of being in the world, and encourage thought and discussion that will guide children to grow in the way of deep gratefulness and appreciation. If we move beyond thankfulness as a Thanksgiving theme, to a place where gratitude is integrated wholly into our classrooms and yearlong work with children, then we are teaching in ways that counter cultural commercialism and provide a lens from which children can view their lives as fundamentally abundant. Helping children to understand the value of deliberately attending to what is good and lasting in life cultivates an attitude of gratitude, which produces deep contentment and authentic happiness.

Gratitude baskets provide an opportunity for children to write a simple note of thanksgiving or appreciation as they feel so inclined. Keep a basket or handsome wooden box with a container of small blank slips of paper next to it on which the children can write a note of gratitude (or draw a picture) and drop it in the basket.

Gratitude bouquets are another concrete reminder of the beauty of gratitude. Invite each child to bring a flower in honour of a person for whom they are thankful. Then provide a special ceremony in which everyone has the opportunity to add a flower to the bouquet, offering words of appreciation.

Acknowledge all that is good and sacred by holding special ceremonies that celebrate a grateful heart. Light a candle that is designated as a gratitude candle. During this celebration you might ask children to bring a photo or draw a picture of someone or something for whom they want to express gratitude.

Peace in (classroom) community with others

Our classrooms offer daily opportunities to provide children real-life experiences that nurture loving, compassionate, and trusting relationships. Often, when we think about how to make classrooms or schools more peaceful, conflict resolution and anti-bullying programs come to mind. Anti-bullying curricula play a role, but programs such as these will never be enough to create peaceful communities, because they fail to provide the positive, proactive skills and traits that are at the heart of peaceful communities — compassion, respect, and caring. The emphasis for building peaceful classrooms cannot focus wholly on the behaviors and attitudes we *don't* want, but must tend to the traits and practices that we *do* want human beings to attain.

Creating peace in a classroom or school relies on the development of skills and traits that promote peace within a community. The focus is on the classroom community, promoting life skills that transfer to wherever community forms: neighborhoods, family, work, social organizations, religious affiliations, etc.

Two important ways in which peace in community with others is cultivated are through 1) shared traditions and classroom celebrations, and 2) goodness seeking and affirming others.

Shared traditions and classroom celebration

Traditions and celebrations take many forms, but the value remains the same: shared experiences bring people together. Consider the benefits of a morning ceremony in which the children gather to begin a new day together. With a peace pledge, a song, and a poetry reading, a simple morning ceremony brings children together on a daily basis. A Friday afternoon tradition of ending the school with music and dancing may take only 10 minutes but helps the children conclude the week with togetherness and joy. A tradition on the first day of fall, winter, or spring, reminds children of the cycles of the seasons that we all share. And, rather than focus on rewards (which tend to be individualized and competitive) in the classroom, create opportunities to celebrate shared accomplishments. If the children are working on peaceful recesses, when a week (or day!) has past without major incident, celebrate that success. When there is perfect attendance, celebrate the importance of each child's presence within a community. When feelings of good tidings prevail in the classroom, celebrate!

Goodness seeking and affirmations

There may be no greater relationship and community building activity than teaching children to affirm one another. We can teach the art of affirmation to young children by modeling language and providing time and encouragement for them to affirm each other. Before recess, they might be reminded to "look out for the lonely, to be of service to others, or to be on the lookout for acts of kindness and helpfulness." Using a specially purchased book such as one with hand-made paper or a decorative cover, record the affirmations as shared by the children. For example, Madeline shares, "I was lonely on the playground and Sarah asked me if I wanted to join with her and her friends. It made me feel really good." This is then recorded in the Affirmations book. Occasionally, it is a good idea to go back and read past affirmations. The language a teacher uses while sharing affirmations can contribute to the overall tone of the discussion. "What acts of kindness have you witnessed today?" or "Did you observe anyone being of service to others, any helpfulness, or good deeds?"

An affirmation ceremony is another opportunity for children to affirm each other aloud. Place a battery-operated candle on a

table and encourage students to come up (one at a time) to share his or her affirmation. A child comes to the table and asks the child he is going to affirm to join him. With both children holding onto the candle, the affirmation is shared. In this way we encourage and allow children to be seekers of goodness and help them to grow in an understanding of the importance of affirming others, for authentic affirmations cultivate peaceful feelings in both the giver and receiver.

Universal peace

As it is important that children experience inner peace and peace within a community, it is also crucial that they be given time to think about the world of which they are a part, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. How shall we help children to recognize and appreciate the interconnectedness of human beings? What tools can we bring for them to construct an understanding of the common thread that unites all people? Teaching for global peace offers children possibilities to explore the commonalities of humanity and the unity of all who share this planet. Examining fundamental needs of all humans, universal rights, and shared values provide a framework for teaching for global peace.

Fundamental needs of all people

Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* can be a starting point for teachers to reflect on ways to help children understand how groups of people throughout the world and throughout time have common needs. Provided a historic and global lens, children can see that all human beings express certain material and non-material needs. For example, all humans seek food, shelter, transportation and forms of communication. There are also non-material needs of humans, such as the need to be secure and safe, to develop self-esteem, form friendships and feel loved. The experiences that are offered students in which they learn about and celebrate the *diversity* of art and music made by people in different cultures, for example, are deepened when there is equal emphasis on the *universal desire* to create art and to make music: across time and cultures, people have always found ways to express themselves through art and music.

Universal rights

It may seem daunting to present to young children the idea of universal rights. Yet, the United Nations has developed curriculum resources to help teachers get started. In particular, UNICEF Canada (http://globalclassroom.unicef.ca/en/resources/elementary_lesson_plans.htm) provides online activities that can be easily integrated into the upper elementary classrooms, or with a bit of modification, in lower elementary grades, which is how I used the materials when I was teaching. The United Nations also has created teacher resource books for elementary level classrooms that include stories, activities and reproducible sheets. These activities introduce young students to basic human rights. *The Primary School Kit on the United Nations* (<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/bookstor/kits/english/index.asp>) contains curriculum ideas about fairness, conflict resolution, universal rights, and more. Published by UNICEF, *For Every Child* (2001) is a picture book that incorporates simple text and stunning illustrations by some of the world's most acclaimed artists in order to convey to young children some of the most important human rights. It begins, "Whoever we are, wherever we live, these rights belong to all children under the sun and the moon and the stars." Amnesty International published in 2008, *We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures*, which is also a picture book for teaching young students about Human Rights.

Shared values

Rushworth M. Kidder, President of the Institute for Global Ethics (<http://www.globoethics.org/staff/Rushworth-Kidder/2/>) suggests that there is a set of human values that are universally accepted. These values include compassion, fairness, honesty, respect, and responsibility. It is worthwhile that children are given opportunities to consider and reflect upon these particular values. We can help them by exploring situations in which we might need to call forth these values. By looking at the golden thread of shared values held by people all over the globe, children learn that people are more alike than they are different. Ilene Cooper' book, *The Golden Rule*, is a perfect resource for exposing children to the idea that some version of the Golden Rule is practiced an all major world religions. A wise grandfather

shares six different examples of some form of the Golden Rule with his grandson, and the boy learns that practicing the Golden Rule in every day living promotes compassion, empathy, and kindness.

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

Conclusion

As Maria Montessori maintained, the path to peace leads directly through the early childhood and elementary classroom. Through classroom structures and philosophy that support the unfolding of a child's full potential, individual transformation can be achieved. Integrating a peace education curriculum that cultivates inner peace, peace in community with others, and universal peace can do nothing less than increase intellectual reasoning and problem-solving, for when the spirit is nourished all elements of the human being are enhanced. But more importantly, when the peace-loving spirit of the child is well-tended, a new generation of peace-based citizens will become local and international leaders who are able to work together in peace, and live a more enlightened life grounded in compassion, harmony, unity, and love.

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