As we enter the 21st century, Montessorians worldwide are working with children from increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. From a young Brazilian Montessorian developing an environment in Lisbon for refugee children from the Cape Verde Islands, to indigenous communities throughout the Americas seeking to preserve their ancestral values in Montessori environments for their children, to Costa Rican Montessorians training Colombian teachers in the extreme poverty of Cartagena and Cali--every day we are experiencing ourselves as educators of and for the global village. How does the framework of Cosmic Education address the complex issues of unity and diversity which a multicultural world view encompasses? What are some of the key points of the Montessori philosophy, environment, and educational approach, derived from Cosmic Education, that help us meet these challenges?

Currently, we are living with one of the greatest shifts in human population and human consciousness in history. Of necessity, human beings all over the world are experiencing a great paradigm shift--the task of moving from a monocultural to a multicultural perspective. This process is a form of learning which takes hard thinking and hard work, not unlike the "conversion" required of us as beginning teachers, because it demands a new layer of consciousness. It means recognizing and accepting that we modern humans are increasingly mixtures of different cultures and often different ethnicities. It means recognizing that our world, considered as a whole, is inherently multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual. It means tackling some hard questions: What is culture and how does it act on us? What is my own culture and cultural conditioning? What is the culture and cultural conditioning of the people around me? And as modern Montessorians, it means focusing anew on the dimensions of Cosmic Education that help prepare us--both children and adults--for the "cosmic tasks" of human beings: finding out who each one of us is and making it useful, learning to live peacefully with each other, and learning to take care of our planet.

MONTESSORI FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: SAME AND DIFFERENT

The bases of Montessori education for the 21st century remain the same in their key aspects. Our main goals continue to be to help the child develop as fully as possible, and to help the child adapt to the conditions of his/her own present. The means also remain the same: the dynamic of the child, the adult, and the prepared environment and the balance between freedom and discipline. The intended result remains the same: the self-actualized, self-directed, normalized human being, developing respect, responsibility, and relatedness to self, others, and the environment.
What is different is the new context in which this dynamic is developing. At a time of intense contact between cultures, each component is raised to new levels of awareness: we could say that there is a new child who requires a renewed adult and a renewed prepared environment. The new children in many of our environments are the global children, who are living in more than one language and more than one culture, and learning from an early age how to negotiate them. They come from a variety of cultural situations: immigrant, migrant, refugee, bilingual, bicultural, multiracial, poor or affluent, or temporarily living in a country not their own. Their earliest experiences probably include the visual image (new since the late 60s) of the Earth in space (which appears everywhere from posters to candy wrappers), extremely rapid rates of change, and shifts in family structure. They may also include the losses and conflicts involved in any form of cultural displacement.

Who is the renewed Montessori adult? Just as we often use the term normalizing for the process of becoming aware of our own adult conditioning, we could use the term globalizing for the adult who engages in developing a multicultural perspective. In this process, we ask ourselves:

- Within my own culture, what gives me strength, what limits me?
- What are my unconscious attitudes toward members of other cultures that may lead to labeling, stereotyping, or negative images of some groups?
- Am I so preoccupied with mainstream values that I overlook the strengths of other cultures?
- As a teacher/researcher, can I observe and respond to cultural differences that may impact upon children’s learning or my relationship to their parents and families?

SOME QUESTIONS

In considering the third aspect of the dynamic--the prepared environment, I want to share here some questions put forth in an article written in 1969 by Dr. John I. Goodlad, then at the University of California at Berkeley. The guidelines he developed for evaluating educational environments (for what was then the 20th century!) struck me as so closely related to the principles of Cosmic Education that I continue to discuss them with students, teachers, and parents. As we enter the new century, they seem as appropriate for our time as they were more than 40 years ago:

1. What kinds of human beings do we seek?
2. To what extent is each individual being provided with opportunities to develop his [or her] unique potentialities?
3. To what extent is each individual developing a deep sense of personal worth--the kind of selfhood that is prerequisite to self-transcendence?
4. To what extent are our young people coming into critical possession of their culture?
5. To what extent are our people developing a humankind identity--an identity that transcends all people in all times and in all places? (Goodlad, 1969, p. 82).

Montessorians' reflections on the first question usually refer to the "normalized" human being--developing the self as total individual yet participating fully in a community. They often include the words happy, joyous, and peaceful. There is usually agreement that the purpose of the prepared environment, from infancy on, is to develop the personal potential and sense of personal worth Goodlad
refers to in the next two questions, and that Cosmic Education—and more specifically, the study of the Needs of Humans—addresses the last two.

It’s interesting to recall the origins of Cosmic Education—a series of real experiences with the children of an international group of Montessori students in Kodaikanal, India, asking questions about what they found in their immediate surroundings. From these experiences, a cross-cultural situation, emerged Montessori’s vision of what the child’s mind could encompass and of what education for a new world, a peaceful world, could be. Cosmic Education is not only a curriculum for elementary children. In its broadest sense, it is—like the Montessoris and Miss Lena Wikramaratne walking in the hills with the children collecting leaves, rocks, and feathers—a walk through time, a cumulative series of experiences shared with adults who are themselves in a state of wonder about the universe and transmit it even to the youngest children by their response to whatever the children are interested in. As we take this walk with children, from infancy on, we can be guided by five key principles of Cosmic Education, put forth in Education for a New World (Montessori, 1946) and To Educate the Human Potential (Montessori, 1948).

SOME ANSWERS: KEY PRINCIPLES

1. The unity of all being. Let us give children a vision of the universe. The universe is an imposing reality, and an answer to all questions. We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and all are connected with each other to form one whole unity. (Montessori, 1948, p. 8).

As modern humans, we are learning more and more every day about the interrelatedness of all organic and inorganic things and the interplay of matter and energy. A young child who picks up a stone, feather, shell, or pine cone may be absorbing more of its essence than an adult can fathom. The toddler who repeats to himself, "Tree, tree, tree" as he rubs the smooth place on the trunk where the bark has come off, or the 3-year-old who turns a starfish over and over in her hand singing, "Inside and outside, inside and outside," is engaged in a form study:

The world is acquired psychologically by means of the imagination. Reality is studied in detail, then the whole is imagined. The detail is able to grow in the imagination, and so total knowledge is attained. The act of studying things is, in a way, meditation on detail. This is to say that the qualities of a fragment of nature are deeply impressed upon an individual. (Montessori, 1973, pp. 34-35)

Older children with endless collections which to the adult seem random and pointless are perhaps budding cosmologists, organizing a series of orderly systems, each with its own origin, nature, and development, and its own relationship to everything else.

2. Evolution as a key process in life. Life is a creative force in the world, a form of energy that is constantly changing and evolving. The creation of the universe, the evolution of life on earth, and the evolution of humanity are great stories unfolding in time—a dynamic process of growth and change that has not yet been completed, and in which everything is interconnected.
The human child's intelligence has to take in the present of an evolving life which goes back hundreds of thousands of years in its civilization, and which has stretching before it a future of hundreds of thousands of millions of years; a present that has no limit either in the past or the future, and that is never for a moment the same. (Montessori, 1946, p. 31)

3. Interdependence in nature. In this evolutionary process of interconnected systems, every form of life comes from a previous form and prepares the way for the next. Each organism has a specific function or "cosmic task." Every organism seeks its own self-perfection and in so doing unconsciously serves the whole (Life), including other organisms. Fulfilling its cosmic task is an unconscious form of cooperation (Montessori, 1948).

His intelligence becomes whole and complete because of the vision of the whole that has been presented to him, and his interest spreads to all, for all are linked and have their place in the universe on which his mind is centered. The stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole in relation with each other, and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun. No matter what we touch, an atom or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.... Another--and stronger--factor in evolutionary processes is concerned with the cosmic function of each living being, and even of inanimate natural objects, working in collaboration for the fulfillment of the purpose of life. All creatures work consciously for themselves, but the real purpose of their existence remains unconscious, yet claiming obedience. (Montessori, 1948, pp. 9, 41-42)

4. The Needs of Humans. This is the element of Cosmic Education that perhaps most directly addresses Goodlad's last two questions, as well as the growing urgency of developing multicultural perspectives. The evolution of human life is presented as the story of how humans have sought to satisfy their physical and spiritual needs throughout time: "What is very necessary is that the individual from the earliest years should be placed in relation with humanity" (Montessori, 1948, p. 26)

Two themes run through the story: unity, in that all humans have the same basic needs; and diversity, in that human cultures arise as responses to specific natural environments. It connects children to culture by tracing the history of and developing respect for the work done by human societies in their infinite variety of adaptations to the natural environment. They begin to understand that everything has its place in the continuum of human experience and offers them a way of looking at their own culture (or cultures) as a part of this continuing story.

When modern children begin to look closely at how we satisfy our basic needs, and how we use or misuse our natural environment in the process, they can begin to develop the critical consciousness to which Goodlad refers. When they discuss the function or cosmic task of each living organism in the web of life, they eventually arrive at the question, "What is the cosmic task of humans?" Their answers often lead us into the realms of their genuine concern for other people and for the natural environment. They also bring us to a final key principle of Cosmic Education, which might well have been articulated in the year 2000.

5. The cosmic task of humanity. As for all other living organisms, the first aspect of the task is self-perfection: to be the best I can possibly be. But for humans, because we possess consciousness,
Montessori would have us go beyond the unconscious cooperation with the whole (Life) and become conscious collaborators in the evolution of the universe:

So the child is led...to see that so far humanity has been in an embryonic stage, and that it is just now emerging into true birth, able to consciously realize its true unity and function....[Humans] believe in fighting for self, family, and nation, but have yet to become conscious of their far deeper responsibilities to a cosmic task, their collaboration with others in work for the environment, for the whole universe. (Montessori, 1948, pp. 3, 42)

Maria Montessori sets three tasks for the humans of the new world she envisions: the establishment of human unity, the recognition of the Earth as a living organism, and the unification of human consciousness:

If human unity--which is a fact in nature--is going at last to be organized, it will be done only by an education that will give appreciation of all that has been done by human cooperation, and readiness to shed prejudices in the interests of common work for the cosmic plan [italics added]....We hear much talk, largely ineffective, of world organization but the word that should be used is rather "Organism." When it is recognized that the world is already a living organism [italics added], its vital functions may be less impeded in their operation, and it may consciously enter on its heritage in the day towards which "all creation has been groaning and travelling together".... In the field of thought as in geological eras, the environment has to be prepared by an impending change. When the right preparation of thought is complete, discoveries may take place by the organization of many minds in this suitable mental atmosphere. The crystallization point of hundreds of intellects is in the person of one man, who expresses something strikingly useful or discovers new knowledge. (Montessori, 1948, pp. 74, 81)

In 1948, in the aftermath of World War II, this was a vision of the future. In our time, it is the vision of now--the perspective of deep ecology, in which we are not separate from our environment but one with it. Montessori lore has it that when her students, overwhelmed by the destruction caused by the war, asked her how they could prepare children for a world in which most familiar structures no longer existed, she told them to focus on the universal human tendencies. In our time, when we can just as easily become overwhelmed by the global issues mentioned at the beginning of this article, we can be re-inspired and re-energized by the key principles of Cosmic Education. The "walk" that we take with each child or group will be different, depending on their developmental stage. With the toddler, we may stop to discover the ant, pebble, or drop of water. With the preschooer, we may witness a debate as to whether these things are living or nonliving. With the elementary child, we may weave the objects into a Great Lesson that captures their imagination. With all ages, the point of interest will be the same: where the child is, here and now, in nature and in culture.

Within the past few years, contemporary thinkers like Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, and Riane Eisler have spoken to Montessorians about how far ahead of her time Montessori's concept of Cosmic Education is and how it fits for the citizens of the global village. Montessorians like Phil Gang (2002), developer of the learning kit Our Planet, Our Home and of the recent Great Work virtual conference,
and Aline Wolf (1996), author of Nurturing the Spirit, are also offering us new ways of implementing, expanding, and deepening the vision—not just for today's children, but for all of us.

ADDED MATERIAL

ALICE RENTON is a faculty member at Montessori Education Center of the Rockies and founder of In Other Words, a producer of multiculturally oriented materials.

REFERENCES


