

Collaboration and the Older Child: A Montessori Perspective

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We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Collaboration is a central theme present in both the work and nature of the six- to twelve-year-old child. The child of this age is in the second plane of development described by Maria Montessori. Evidence and the fruit of collaboration can be found in the elementary Montessori classroom as well as in the atria of the second and third level.

In chapter one of *To Educate the Human Potential*, Dr. Montessori identifies three elements of the development of the child in this second plane. "Nature has made this a period for the acquisition of culture, just as the former was for the absorption of the environment. . . . A second side of education at this age concerns the child's exploration of the moral field, discrimination between good and evil. . . . Yet a third interesting fact to be observed in the child of six is the need to associate himself with others, not merely for the sake of company, but in some sort of organized activity."

Collaboration and the Interdependency of Creation

Dr. Montessori called her plan for the elementary child the "Cosmic Curriculum."

"Cosmic" in this context means comprehensive, holistic and purposeful. The goals of cosmic education go beyond skill development and knowledge acquisition to address the development of the whole child—spiritual, physical, moral, social, as well as intellectual. Cosmic education corresponds to the natural development of children at this level, satisfying their need for knowledge fueled by imagination, their need to explore morality, and their desire to participate in communal activities. Cosmic education arouses wonder and admiration for nature as well as love and gratitude for both God and humanity.

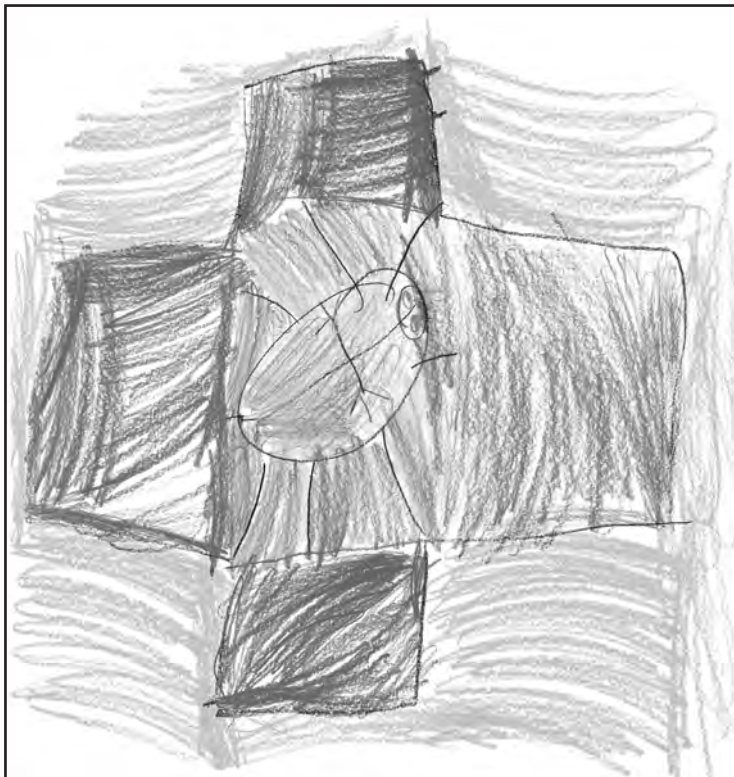
Dr. Montessori and her son, Mario, developed the philosophy and essence of Montessori cosmic education while interned in India, during World War II, as Italian citizens. Montessori saw the world of war, injustice, and economic deprivation as a world deviated from its intended purpose. She felt that the way back to a better world was to follow the clues she had found in child development. This is analogous to how the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd lifts up the religious characteristics of childhood, and how Jesus commanded adults to become as children. Children who were educated in the manner of cosmic



Wisha, age 6

Convent of Jesus and Mary School
Toba Tek, Singh, Pakistan

Erin
Trinity Episcopal Church
Wheaton, Illinois
(When asked about her drawing, Erin said, "That (in the center) is Jesus the light and the cross." She then added the stick figure in the center and said, "See, that's Jesus.")



education would produce a "new adult." Dr. Montessori felt that the child held the "secrets" to a better world; within the child was all hope of world peace.

A sense of interdependence and the gratitude that comes from this cosmic awareness are double threads that run through the work of the elementary child in the Montessori classroom as well as in the atrium. Dr. Montessori saw gratitude as an antidote to aggression and ostracism toward those different from oneself. She did not limit this gratitude only to human beings, but extended it to God and all the elements and forces of nature—plants, animals, rocks, oceans, forests, and even molecular and atomic particles. The child, who sees himself as the beneficiary of such gifts, develops gratitude to those of previous generations who have worked, guided by love and intelligence, so that we might have the benefit of their knowledge. This

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encourages both a sense of importance and humility, as well as a sense of responsibility to one's own work and purpose.

Building on her insights, Dr. Montessori proposed to "present the universe to the child" in the form of an epic, impressionistic story. This narrative is told as a set of five stories—the Great Stories or Great Lessons—that present a holistic vision of knowledge, drawing on material from the various academic disciplines as needed. Montessori takes the children from the whole, to the parts, and back to the whole again, allowing each academic area to emerge naturally from the narrative and connect to the whole. The salvation history timelines and presentations in the atrium are drawn from the great stories and serve a similar role.

Above all, cosmic education does not present the universe as random, as something that just happened. Instead the great stories tell of how each particle, each substance, each species, and each event has a purpose and contribution to make to the development and preservation of all others. The stories tell how the contributions, given by each, work together toward harmony, service, and progress in an interdependent, unconscious exchange. Dr. Montessori believed appreciation and gratitude for this collaboration between God, the natural world, and humans should be the essence of education. In giving the stories of nature and of human history, she stressed the deep spiritual meaning at the heart of the story.

Children's enormous intellectual powers combined with a heightened imagination enable them to see what is beyond their senses, transcending time and space. Dr. Montessori said, "Offer to the powerful intelligence, to the soaring imagination, and to the sensitive feelings of the children, the possibility to incorporate into their psychic structure a clear appreciation of the invisible God and the visible Man. . . . They will arrive then, by themselves, to the realization of the contributions of God and Man, and develop not only appreciation, but gratitude also" (*Communications, a Journal of Association Montessori Internationale*, 1958).

Collaboration and Synthesis: The Work of the Elementary Child

Just as collaboration in and of creation is a thread that runs throughout cosmic education, the manner in which the children receive these gifts from God elicits a collaborative response. There is collaboration in synthesis, which occurs

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Xavier, age 9
 St. Timothy Catholic Academy
 Mesa, Arizona
 (After discussion about our
 blank page and the typology
 study of the Fall, Xavier
 was impressed with the idea
 of choice.)

will lead to more in depth exploration and contemplation. The child's new knowledge is acquired more profoundly because it is not learned as a part of a group of facts but by the synthesis of new knowledge with that which is already known.

With the older

when various presentations and materials allow the child to see and make connections with previously acquired information.

Three- to six-year-old children were eager to learn facts and names as the absorbent mind increased the repertoire of language and concepts at an amazing rate. Children at this age work with their hands and use their senses as doorways to their absorbent mind. The elementary child builds on these experiences. A child in the Level I atrium learned the names of the articles of the Eucharist simultaneously with their shapes, sizes, and purposes. The child in the elementary atrium is interested in the relationship of the articles to the Eucharist and in their biblical/historical context. Collaboration is also evident as the children work together, drawing on the various interests and talents of a group.

The features of the reasoning mind and the power of imagination, which predominate at this age, warrant a new approach. Children now want not only facts and names, they need to see and understand relationships. As catechists, we must present material in a lively way with dramatic flare to fuel their imagination. Salvation history is filled with stories and images that can feed the imagination. Our work is to create excitement that

children, the primary interest is no longer with the names of things. However, their need for mental order is still satisfied by classification and nomenclature. Nomenclature becomes a tool that enables classification and synthesis. Again the nomenclature and prayers of the Eucharist, first presented in Level I, allow classification and synthesis of the whole rite. The geography of Level I, with its rich sensorial experience and nomenclature, enables the older child to connect the geo-graphic locations with the life and work of Christ and his disciples.

The three-period lesson is still used; however, instead of the conclusion to a lesson, it is now a point of departure. We introduce concepts and terms that the children will then use for further exploration. When we present the unity and the vastness of salvation history, we introduce the terms *creation*, *redemption*, and *parousia*. The child can then begin to use the terms when discussing scripture and other events within the plan of God. So the words facilitate further exploration and discovery.

Dr. Montessori described the three-period lesson as follows: the first period is the teacher's gift to the child; the second period is the child's acceptance of that gift; the third period is the child's gift to the teacher (for example, when the child uses

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Nathan, age 13
Christ Church Cathedral
New Orleans, Louisiana

the term she or he has learned). With older children the third period is expanded to using the term during discussion and exploration. Although proper nomenclature is essential, it is no longer a study in itself. Again, with application to the atrium, we introduce the “three great moments” of creation, redemption, and parousia, not just to learn the names, but to give the children a language to discuss and contemplate salvation history, often in the context of collaborative group discussion.

The explorative and collaborative efforts of the children take off from the sensorial and manipulative material. At this point the reasoning mind takes over and further investigations will be done on a more abstract, intellectual, and moral level. For example, in the atrium when an older child is presented with a parable, a material is still offered as a tangible means of connection to the scripture. However, the material is a springboard to further discussion and contemplation, allowing the children to make connections to other parables, the maxims, and salvation history, particularly to their own blank page.

Collaboration in cosmic education is the great plan of the elementary child’s work, leading the children to become functional and responsible members of human society and to find their role in the cosmos. How they are called to write their blank page in salvation history, together with God, is the ultimate collaboration.