

# COSMIC EDUCATION: THE CHILD'S DISCOVERY OF A GLOBAL VISION AND A COSMIC TASK

by Susan Mayclin Stephenson

*Susan Mayclin Stephenson tackles a large subject, Cosmic Education, which Montessori defined as a "unifying global and universal view[s] of the past, present and future." Stephenson takes the reader from birth to the end of the elementary age with examples of how the child grows into an understanding of Cosmic Education through their experiences at home and at school. Central to her thesis is the theme of discovering one's cosmic task, which depends on "fostering...curiosity and compassion toward other beings." Stephenson concludes with examples from around the world and illustrates how children are born with this tendency toward compassion and how it is experienced from birth through age twelve within Montessori environments.*

The word *cosmic* today usually means something very large or having to do with the universe. But the word comes from the Greek *kosmos*, from *kosmos*, meaning order. The term *Cosmic Education* in Montessori lingo refers to a child's gradual discovery of order, a unifying global and universal view of the past, present, and future. It is the coming together of many components of knowledge into a large vision or realization, as in a mosaic, of the interdependence of elements of the solar system, the Earth, plants and animals, and humankind. The character of our time is sometimes referred as the *information age*; today's children are bombarded with facts and information with no way to make sense or bring this information into some kind of order. Cosmic Education helps a child make sense of all the information and is more important today than ever before.

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The term *cosmic task* refers to a way for a human being to find a valuable role in this mosaic of life. A role that fulfills one's own physical, mental, and spiritual needs and at the same time that contributes in some way to the creation of order or balance in the cosmos; to create a personal expression, and responsibility within this beautiful mosaic of life. Simply, this means we want to help a child learn about and make sense of his world and find a way to make it a better place.

These principles of Montessori education are usually discussed in reference to the second plane of development, the years 6–12. But such an idea is not something Dr. Montessori invented for the elementary child as an academic curriculum. As usual, she “followed the child” and the child’s interests. This does not begin at age six.

#### LEARNING ABOUT THE WORLD

In all Montessori environments from the home, the *Nido* (first year), infant communities (age 1–2.5), through high school, curiosity in its variety of expression is fed.

#### Birth to Three

The world at first is the home. From the first days of life, a child is exploring the world around him, through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This curiosity is a strong urge throughout life if protected and nurtured. Since the beginning of the assistants



to infancy program in Rome in 1947, parents have been guided in preparing an environment that supports and feeds this curiosity. It is suggested that the environment of the child not be changed during the first year of life if possible. The child is exploring the order of this environment, his first world, visually from day one, and the drive to move toward objects and explore them in other ways, make sense of them, and there is a strong impetus to learn to crawl, stand, and walk.

When a child is first on his tummy and able to reach out for a toy, the adult can encourage exploration by placing a toy a distance that is not so far as to frustrate the infant, yet not so close as to allow him to grasp it with no effort. This skill at observation and meeting the needs of a child is the very highest level of ability of the adult in life. Today the Montessori assistants to infancy are doing the same thing on all continents, and neuroscientists are discovering the value of knowing the child in these early days and months.

### **Age 3–6**

The child's world at this age moves from the family to the primary class. The world is brought into the class rather than the child taken out into the world at this age. We do not believe in pushing a child toward early intellectual studies, however, if presented correctly, young children show an amazing interest in a wide range of subjects, something that can be hard to believe. I learned this the hard way. One year, in my work as a Montessori assistant to infancy, I was consulting with a mother from South Africa about the care of her newborn. As we talked more and more about the Montessori principles behind what I was sharing with her, she asked if it would be possible for her to observe in a Montessori class. I set up an observation with the local AMI primary class and agreed to meet with her the next morning to discuss what she saw.

I let her talk about all of the things she was amazed to see. She had been raised as a Waldorf child and not introduced to academic subjects until age seven. She was surprised to see children at such young ages teaching each other and doing math, reading, writing, continent puzzle maps, and so on. I could tell that something was bothering her however and asked what it was. Hesitantly she said,

“Well, it was a very nice situation in many ways, but when do the children get to do what they want to do?”

She was very surprised to hear that the children, after entering the classroom and greeting the teacher, are free to choose any piece of material that they understand. She could not believe that they had actually selected work in areas that in traditional schools they might not, such as math, language, science, and geography.

Before age six, the child absorbs—totally, easily, without effort, and with deep love—all the attitudes and impressions in the environment. It becomes a part of him and forms his mind, so parents and teachers as models are the strongest element in these years. If kindness and patience, enjoying reading, having good manners, enjoying math and biology, for example, are in the environment at



this age, these attitudes and actions will be of great value to the child. If they are not part of the early environment, many of these things can be learned later, but they will not make up the basic personality of the child.

Before age six, the lessons and experiences of Cosmic Education are carried out by means of a lot of movement and sensorial experience. But along with the basic and extremely valuable practical life and sensorial lessons, the child begins to learn about the Earth and water, physics, plant and animals, the variety of humans on Earth, art, dance, music, geometry, math, and language.

By the end of this first plane of development, the child has a lively curiosity about and love of all of these areas of study.

Teaching Montessori at this age is guided not by knowing more than the students, but in firing their imagination and their natural curiosity. It requires the ability to watch carefully for the tiny nugget of interest and to offer, but not take over, tools for further discovery.

Maria Montessori understood the child's built-in receptiveness to all these areas of interest and found that the young child could comprehend what was considered far beyond a child's reach, given the right environment, the right equipment, and a teacher who was skilled at putting the child in touch with this environment.

### **Age 6–12 +**

Learning about the world is different at this second stage of development. The environment at this age widens. Rather than bringing the world into the classroom, there are field trips, and the children going out into the world. The more the primary, elementary, and middle/high school teacher knows about the first three years, the more Montessori (as opposed to "traditional") his or her teaching will be. The more secure the teacher of older children is in the fact that curiosity, exploration, work, and effort are natural human traits, the more likely he is to allow the children freedom from an imposed curriculum in order to develop fully and uniquely as a human being. In the second plane, or the 6–12 stage, the child explores more with his mind and on projects requiring teamwork in planning, execution, and presentation.

Social scientists today are well aware of the fact that the standard curriculum valued in traditional school is indeed outdated. We do not even know what professions are going to be of value in ten years, so how can we pretend to know how to prepare children academically for such an unknown future?

There are many lists of “skills for the future” being compiled today. The following skills are found on many of these lists: exploration, putting forth maximum effort, the ability to focus or concentrate, self-control, the mathematical mind, respect of others, the ability to work together, care for the environment. Most of us are going to see immediately that these are skills fostered in a true Montessori environment.

These things are at the center of the Montessori curriculum at all ages and take priority over an academic curriculum. If not, then the outdated standard curriculum can rear its ugly head and turn a school into a very nice school, but not a Montessori school. The teacher and administrator must be extremely knowledgeable of and trusting of Montessori in order to hold back the onslaught of natural parental fear of what will happen if the day is not full of teacher-centered requirements, schedules, textbooks, and homework!

The foundation for academic elements of the elementary Cosmic Education curriculum begins early. The goal of Montessori primary education is to create a global vision within the child. Children naturally take for granted that what they see has always been there and need help in understanding how different life has been over the period of time. At this age, the exploration on the environment, rather than being limited to what can be explored right here and now with the senses, reaches back into the past and out into space through the means of the imagination. A skill that is not part of the first 0–6 stage of development.

In the first two weeks of the year in the 6–12 class, all of the new students are given the great lessons that introduce the creation of the solar system and Earth, the variety and evolution of plants and animals, the stages of human existence, the development of language and math sciences, and the way in which all of these elements of life are connected. The older children almost always choose to attend



these lessons and the six-year-old sees the continued excitement of a twelve-year-old, which makes these lessons even more interesting. Appreciation for the universe itself is based on the knowledge that it was not always there. Children gradually develop an understanding and gratitude for the universe and their part within it.

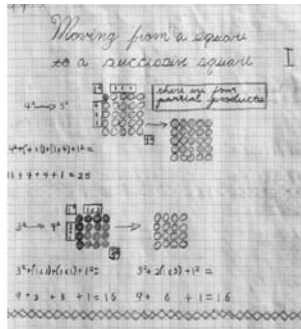
Aside from the very limited state or country requirements for each of the six years, the child is set free to explore and to make his own path through the labyrinth of knowledge on Earth. That is the most exciting part of teaching in the elementary years as the older the child, the less contact with the adult is necessary in a Montessori elementary class. We are there as guides for the child to make contact with experts and sources of knowledge that help further research and creation. We do not hold him back with hours each week of requirements, schedules, and other limitations. But we must be able to explain why to the parents. In the end, it is the work of the child, who with freedom will go far beyond what we could possibly require, that will convince the parent and the world, of the value of this kind of open-ended, out-of-the box, education. And it just might be what will solve the problems of our continually changing world.

Here is an example of the difference in the study of geography. In a traditional school, a teacher might assign each child or a group of children to choose a country of the world and do research on it. Then perhaps the child will write a paper that the teacher will read and assess, or the child may give a presentation to the class. And this was all the adult's choice, not the child's.

In a Montessori class I taught in California, a student came in after a field trip we had taken to research local fauna. This child discovered that a fellow classmate, Sierra Miwok, harvested acorns from the Black Oak tree for food! He wanted to know what other Native Americans ate and then wanted to know more about the differences in the daily life of various groups. I reminded him of the civilization study charts that another child had used to study Ancient Rome. This led to studies by other children of other Native American groups, which led to research on why they settled where they did, which led to a new look at the Bering Straits, and then the ice ages, and then to the reasons for migrations of various civilizations throughout history.

Teaching Montessori at this age is guided not by knowing more than the students, but in firing their imagination and their natural curiosity. It requires the ability to watch carefully for the tiny nugget of interest and to offer, but not take over, tools for further discovery.

Sometimes teachers may back off from this freedom to go as far as one wants to in exploration because of not knowing how to keep track of this learning or being uncertain of how the child will keep track of the work. Well, aside from the short list of local academic require-





ments for each year in the 6–12 class, that are always available to the children, there is no need to limit this kind of exploration by recording everything created. How far do we think Leonardo da Vinci or Einstein would have gotten if they were required to record everything they did? They recorded what they wanted to remember. Children will do the same. They will record meaningful discoveries in journals, with careful drawings, lovely handwriting, and even decorated margins.

This natural curiosity and desire to learn more and more, when supported by the best Montessori environment and teaching, is evident in Montessori schools all over the world.

Speaking at the University of Amsterdam in 1950, Dr. Maria Montessori said,

It should be realized that genuine interest cannot be forced. Therefore all methods of education based on centres of interest which have been chosen by adults are wrong. Moreover, these centres of interest are superfluous, for the child is interested in everything.

A global vision of cosmic events fascinates children, and their interest will soon remain fixed on one particular part as a starting point for more intensive studies.

As all parts are related, they will all be scrutinized sooner or later. Thus, the way leads from the whole, via the parts, back to the whole.

The children will develop a kind of philosophy which teaches them the unity of the Universe.

This is the very thing to organize their intelligence and to give them a better insight into their own place and task in the world, at the same time presenting a chance for the development of their creative energy. (Polk Lillard 75)

#### MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

The discovery of Cosmic Education and one's cosmic task depends on fostering the curiosity of the human being and the natural tendency to feel compassion toward other beings beginning at birth. There is evidence that natural curiosity and feeling responsibility for others, or *compassion* (the sympathetic consciousness of others'

distress together with a desire to alleviate it) begins long before the child enters the elementary class. Wanting to be useful and helpful and caring about the happiness of others is not something that needs to be taught; it is a basic part of the human make-up and can be observed even in the very young.

### **Birth to Three**

As part of my AMI 0–3 training, I observed births in Cristo Re Hospital in Rome, Italy. One of the women I observed was well-trained in the Respiratory Autogenic Training birth preparation method that is still part of some assistants to infancy teacher training courses. Even though it was her first child, this young woman was so well trained to relax between contractions that the birth was almost painless and her child was born far more peacefully than is often the case. It was the practice for a newborn to be wrapped up from head to toe and placed in a warm bed in the nursery for a little time after birth. So, I observed the first baby, who had not even cried, snuggle into the warm bed in the nursery and go back to sleep. Suddenly she started to wail loudly the minute another baby in the nursery started to cry!



Since then I have talked to many people who have observed this phenomenon. I have seen very young babies mirror the faces of their adults: I frown, he frowns; I stick out my tongue, he does the same; I smile or laugh,

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he smiles or laughs. One day I was filming children in an infant community in Denver, Colorado. At one point it was possible to hear a child, far off in the distance outside the classroom, crying. Suddenly the little boy I was filming, who was not much older than two years, got up from his table and chair and announced to whomever would listen, "Somebody needs help!" (This can be seen in the DVD *Wonderful Two's*.)

### **Age 3–6**

In the primary class, some of the first lessons are how to care for each other and the environment, and children love mastering these skills. If he has not learned this in an infant community, the child learns to cook food and then put it in a special place to share with his friends at a meal. He learns how to walk carefully around the space on the floor or at a table where another is working and to not interrupt his friend's concentration. The children learn how to clean and care for these materials, and to put them back on the shelf in perfect condition for the next child which is a first act of social caring.

### **Age 6–12**

The teacher of older children who has seen this natural caring and compassion in the first six years will be grounded in the knowledge and importance of modeling. The teacher will value opportunities for helping and serving each other above the requirements of an outdated curriculum.

At this age, there is a natural interest in fairness and justice in the classroom and in the world. The level at which children can care



for each other and for plants and animals and can go out into the world is much higher. They can clean the beaches and riverbeds, feed the homeless, cook their own meals, and clean the school. When there is a temptation to focus on the academic curriculum at this age these things must be kept alive.

The child who has felt a strong love for his surroundings and for all living creatures, who has discovered joy and enthusiasm in work, gives us reason to hope that humanity can develop in a new direction. Our hope for peace in the future lies not in the formal knowledge the adult can pass on to the child, but in the normal development of the new man.

This is precisely what allows us to believe that a great possibility still lies before us, that there is still one hope for our salvation—a normal development that, fortunately, does not depend on what we attempt to teach the child. What we can do is investigate this phenomenon with the objectivity of the scientist, study the facts that determine it, discover what conditions are necessary to produce it, and keep following the path that leads to normality. What

we can and must do is undertake the construction of an environment that will provide the proper conditions for his normal development.

The child's psychic energy, once awakened, will develop according to its own laws and have an effect on us as well. The mere contact with a human being developing in this way can renew our own energies. The child developing harmoniously and the adult improving himself at his side make a very exciting and attractive picture.

This is the treasure we need today—helping the child become independent of us and make his way by himself and receiving in return his gifts of hope and light.

In this new picture, the adult will appear not only as the builder of the external world, but, even more importantly, as the protector of the moral and spiritual forces that appear anew in every human being born. (*Education and Peace* 58-59)

As we can see in the above words by Dr. Montessori, all of the things we are talking about, such as the desire to learn and care for others, are not something we teach. They are above all the *normal condition of the human*. Through the meeting of their needs according to the stages of development, respecting curiosity and choice, and the modeling and valuing of the non-academic skills, children are led naturally to make sense of the world and to think about their future in terms of a cosmic task. This is true preparation for life in the Montessori way.

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