

Cosmic Plan, Task, and Education

Submitted to:

Michael Dorer

Center for Contemporary Montessori Education

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“Where do I come from? Who am I? Why am I here?” Seeking answers to these three questions about one’s past, present and future respectively are the impetus behind Dr. Montessori’s three primary components of education: the cosmic plan, cosmic education, and cosmic task. These components of education are intended to examine the “underlying conception of man and human development, particularly between six and fourteen years of age, and how to find the appropriate way to help the children of this particular age group develop as they should” (Montessori, Mario, 1976, p. 99). This quote places the undertaking of cosmic education squarely in the second plane of development and extending into the third plane, wherein the child will grow through the sensitive periods of reasoning, imagination and the social exploration of morality and virtue. Dr. Montessori (1948) discusses how to teach to this group of children:

The secret of good teaching is to regard the child’s intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. Our aim therefore is not merely to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorize, but so to touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core (pp. 14-15).

In order to understand cosmic education, we must first understand the concepts of cosmic plan and task, and how they relate to humanity.

The concept of the cosmic plan is to give the child a:

vision of the whole 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 are connected with each other to form one whole unity (Montessori, 1961, p. 8).

The cosmic plan will teach that all life has value, and as Dr. Montessori pointed out, all things are connected to form whole unity. If all life functions as a whole unity, then it is painfully apparent that all life is inherently valuable. This concept of all life being connected as a whole unit suggests a certain cyclical nature to life. The ideas of cosmic selfishness and universal altruism speak to this point.

Cosmic selfishness was described by in lecture by Dorer (2007) through the relationship between wolves and deer. A wolf fills its instinct for survival by removing the weak and the lame from the population of deer within its geographical sphere. The wolf takes the weak and lame to survive, which is in itself a selfish act by the wolf as his goal is only that of survival. However, there are residual effects that benefit the ecosystem that supports the wolf. The deer population is kept strong, as the weak are removed from the herd. If there were no checks on the deer population, what would prevent them from overpopulating, running out of food, and dieing from disease or starvation? Another residual effect is that other levels of organisms will benefit from what the wolf does not use. Decomposers and other scavengers will take what they need, and fill the needs of their niches in the ecosystem. With all the niches of an ecosystem filled, the cycle of the cosmic task may be seen as beginning and ending with each member playing their role, and filling their niches.

Universal altruism suggests the idea of another cyclical concept. The good done by any individual benefits some part of the whole unit, therefore, the undertaking of altruistic endeavors benefits everyone. The beauty in this altruism is that its benefit will cycle through the whole, and benefit the individual that initiated it, simply because the initiator is a member of that whole.

Within this cosmic picture, humanity has a unique role. Other animal species adapt to their environments through time, undergoing the process of life we refer to as evolution. The concept of natural selection is discussed in the *Creative Development of the Child V. II.* (Montessori, 1998, p. 179). Here, natural selection, or “survival of the fittest”, is described as nature’s way of discarding a particular variant of a species, stated thusly; “Basically evolution takes place only when natural selection operates on a population of organisms with diverse inheritable forms”. Humanity also changes through time and evolution, but we actually initiate change within our environment so that it is more suitable to meet our needs. Humanity also has choices within its relationship with nature. Humanity may function as a collaborator with nature, or a destroyer of nature, both of which we are guilty of. This collaboration may be directly translated to the students that rely on capable educators to help them find their own path. The educators may aid the student by facilitating the child’s construct of himself, or, may inhibit the growth of the child by engaging in the practice what may be referred to as ‘pedagogical ineptitude.’ Collaboration with nature will be made possible by educating children within a framework of a sense of awe, wonder, gratitude and humility. The opposite, of course, would be a destructive force, driven by arrogance, ignorance, and apathy.

The cosmic task, then becomes a concept of great importance. The cosmic task is “the service that must be rendered by the individuals of each species to the environment on which they are dependent for their existence to maintain it in such a way that it will support their descendents, generation after generation” (Montessori, Mario, 1976, p. 104). The task undertaken by each individual member of a species is done to fill its needs for survival. A tree takes in Carbon Dioxide, consumes it, and the product of its

photosynthesis is oxygen. That oxygen sustains life of those species that require it, and as a result, those species produce carbon dioxide which is consumed by the trees. What a perfect cycle, parts of a whole fulfilling their tasks with “each being going to where it is called, where a mysterious strength calls it, to perform it’s special task” (Montessori, 1998, p. 287). The symbiosis of the trees and animals in this example is a very small, and incomplete picture cosmic task. The trees have many other tasks, some of which are pulling carbon from the air and placing it into the ground, providing homes and food for countless creatures, and the inhibition of erosion which allows streams and lakes to be inhabitable.

Many of the undertakings of the cosmic task of existence are executed on an unconscious level. The tree surely does not knowingly produce oxygen for us to breathe, yet that is one of its purposes or tasks. Humanity affects the cosmic task on an unconscious and conscious level, the results of which are mixed. When we cut down trees to build our homes, we are fulfilling a need for survival by creating a shelter. The negative effect of that is a tree has been removed from its cosmic tasks. May we believe that it has taken on a new task of providing shelter to the human species that requires it to survive? Mario Montessori discusses the task of man:

Man’s relationship with the environment is different, however. He is an agent of change. He does not have the same fixed correlation with the environment as animals. He has the urge not only to adapt to the environment, but to change it as he goes along and as his needs and his imagination (or lack of it) dictate. This is what Maria Montessori called the cosmic task of man: to continue the work of creation (1976, p.105).

Mario Montessori (1976) also believes that:

Man has the power to create fantastic new possibilities. He may travel to other planets, or totally destroy this one. His power needs guidance. He must program himself through conscious effort. It is obvious today that man desperately needs to change things constructively. This is his only hope, if he is to maintain his self-made environment in a condition that may permit human life to evolve toward a dignified existence for everyone. This can only be achieved with the aid of education (p. 105).

This brings us to cosmic education, the purpose of which is to “offer the young, at the appropriate sensitive period, the stimulation and help they need to develop their minds, their vision, and their creative power, whatever the level or range of their personal contributions may be” (Montessori, Mario, 1976, p. 106). In order to achieve this purpose, many steps must be taken.

The first step takes place developmentally within the early childhood education. The children learn how to show gratitude and appreciation through grace and courtesy lessons. These hopefully be reinforced within the home through the structure of the family. This concept also translates to the child’s relationships with people outside the family unit, to animals, plants, and even the materials in the school and home environments. Learning grace and courtesy are key components of a child’s education, and these practical life skills that will help the child efficiently navigate the expectations of society.

Story telling is another aspect of the young child’s education. These stories should be inspirational in nature, and be non-fictional in nature. Tell about real life

heroes, role models, and their influences on the world. Address factual information, which the absorbent mind will assimilate for later reasoning. Include stories about nature, people, geographical locations, and all combinations of the three.

The young child is also developing his sense of value. Every day, the child receives indirect presentations of morality. The parent or teacher acting with integrity, honesty, and responsibility is a model. Of course, those that model anger, greed, and selfishness are still functioning as models, to the detriment of the children witnessing this behavior. Another way to educate students on moral values is through story telling. A biography of Martin Luther King Jr. will create a format for the exploration of many virtuous characteristics of a man.

The children also receive an education of time. They function within a daily time line, a schedule that creates a comfort zone due to its consistent nature. The children learn how to tell or read time by manipulating a clock, which they will repeat until satisfied. The children also learn about the parts of the day, days of the week, months, and years.

The next step in the cosmic education of a child takes place at the elementary level. Here, activities fall into five major themes: The History of the Universe, Life and Living Things, Humanity-Its History and Accomplishments, Human Communication, and The World of Mathematics. As cited earlier, the purpose here is to “touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core.” These stories are meant to inspire the child, so that he will enthusiastically undertake the building of his education.

There are many cross topic integrative elements to the cosmic education of the child at this level. One element is the holistic approach, which provides the child with an entire vision before all the parts are examined. The Great Lessons, of which there are

five for each of the themes, create a thematic framework from which the child may pursue his education, driven by his imagination. Stories and pictures help to prime the imagination, and that imagination is the predecessor to abstraction. The lessons given in the environment are open to all children that wish to engage in them. No one is excluded. These lessons are presented during the three hour block of time in the morning referred to as the Great Period. This period is utilized in the morning because the child functions at a higher level in the morning, without interruptions. Within these lessons, indirect aims are recognized and purposefully created. These indirect aims are goals for lessons that prepare students for future work, within the work of today. The children learn about cultural integration. The study of history, timelines, and geological evolution are undertaken. Concurrently, art, music and physical education are integrated into the curriculum, mirroring the themes being studied at that time. The children explore the ten fundamental needs of people, study biology, and explore other sciences as well. The children also explore the etymologies of words, learning their origins. This parallels the stories of origins or beginnings of all things. The child will continue on with his development of gratitude and appreciation by extending them to our predecessors or ancestors, all life that coexists in the sphere of the child and in the universe, and possibly the appreciation of a supreme being or god in a religiously oriented school. This development also includes developing a sense of humility, as a small part of a large whole. The children continue to read stories about inspirational characters, as the development of morality is a sensitive period for this stage of development. The children explore the relationships of the earth and humanity to the universe, exploring their place with the cosmos. A positive attitude is cultivated here as well, placing an emphasis on

caring for others and engaging in considerate behavior towards others. This leads into the peace curriculum, which endorses a healthy state of interactions between people.

This large list of elements incorporated into the elementary environment is designed to lead the children to the attainment of the goals and outcomes of cosmic education.

Cosmic education addresses the child as an integrated human being, teaching to the whole of the child, not just his parts. This is where an understanding of Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences travels a parallel path to the Montessori Method.

Gardner recognizes eight types of intelligence, which together form a complete human being. We each possess all of these intelligences, but at different levels of proficiency.

The holistic approach will address and work to refine all aspects of the student. Another goal is to help the child recognize relationships between humanity and the universe.

Mario Montessori (1976) suggests that:

One way to give children the global view of the universe they need is by introducing the ecological principle in education. The interrelation of living and nonliving things can be considered-what plants, for example, need from the earth to be able to grow, what special functions they have with regard to carbon dioxide, oxygen, water, and so on (p. 103).

It is the responsibility, then, of humanity to realize that there is a harmony to the cosmic tasks being completed in the world. This harmony is meant to ensure that all life will thrive, but can easily be disrupted by humanity. These disruptions to the natural equilibrium can have powerful, negative consequences that are sometimes irreversible, unless the human task is to enable extinction of other species. That path towards extinction can only be altered through the conscious efforts of humanity. We have the

power to create, and destroy. Too often, those two abilities seem to have a strong correspondence. Humanity must collaborate with the natural world in order for evolution to run its proper course. The educating of students in personal responsibility, dignity, gratitude, and appreciation of life are key goals of the cosmic education. Participation in the cosmic task of humanity is another essential outcome of education for all people. A sense of task, or purpose in the universe, will lead to health and fulfillment. In order to meet these lofty, yet attainable goals, the adult must play a key role.

The adult must take on many responsibilities in order to facilitate the child's growth. The first role of the adult is that of providing inspiration. This parallels the need to create a sense of awe within the child. Facilitate his acquisition of wonder and respect for the universe, and all entities within it. If the child is bored, or apathetic towards his education, he will fail. If he is without wonder or respect, he will also suffer failure. He will fail in his self-construction, leaving him short of his potential development, which can only be manifested in one way, negatively. The adult must also help the child to establish an understanding of relationships, learning cause and effect. The adult must model appreciation and gratitude, by living it and presenting it everyday at least on an indirect level. Finally, the adult must focus on human development, not just academic achievement. Academics is one part of a whole, and just a building without a proper foundation will not remain standing, a child self-constructed with only a foundation of academics will also fall. Educate the whole child.

In conclusion, Mario Montessori states that:

It is important then, to realize that the real aim of Montessori education is not the imparting of knowledge for the sake of learning itself. Rather, it encourages

learning because learning is a feature of human development, a need that cannot be met without education (1976, p. 105).

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