Maria Montessori's Contribution to Peace Education[*]

Cheryl Duckworth
Teaches at the Northern VA Juvenile Detention Center

Averting war is the work of politicians; establishing peace is the work of educators. ~Maria Montessori

As the field of peace education develops, scholar-practitioners increasingly consider and debate who the founders of this field might be. For a field simultaneously as old as Confucius and as young as the United Nations, this is not a clear cut task. Major spiritual leaders such as Buddha, Muhammad, or Jesus Christ are sometimes considered "peace educators," as their lives and teachings are considered by millions to be examples of ethical and peaceable living. This speaks to the relevance of peace studies and peace education to many other disciplines; indeed peace and conflict resolution programs are inherently multi-disciplinary, and draw on other fields such as sociology, history, anthropology, psychology, and literature to probe the origins of conflicts and what might practically be done about them. This nebulousness can trouble peace scholars and educators when trying to define the field and its foundational figures and theories.

Before exploring a major figure in peace education, Dr. Maria Montessori, I should take a moment to define how I am using 'peace education' in this context. It is a quite broad umbrella, and the phrase has been used to suggest anything from teaching peer mediation or conflict resolution skills to students, to curriculum about diversity, disarmament or environmentalism or advocacy against poverty. Much of this complexity stems from the fact that methods and aspects of peace-building abound. This appropriately reflects the complexity of the causes of conflict. I am personally comfortable with this "big tent". The active furthering of social and economic justice, which is peace-building, entails a world of issues in need of addressing. Peace education prepares students for addressing them.

Maria Montessori is most typically associated with child-led learning. By this, she believed that human beings are natural learners and that if students (often far younger than traditional methods dared) were immersed in environments rich with puzzles and problems to explore, they would learn instinctively.   (See Vygotsky for similar theory as well). In her model, the teacher facilitates the student's learning, but the student's passions and imagination are what lead, as she details in *Education and Peace*. Similar to seminal American educator, John Dewey, her results were astounding; children thought to have significant mental challenges were successful learners (Lewis, n.d.). As most educators know, her methods birthed a movement in education that thrives globally today, with thousands of Montessori Schools throughout North and South America, Europe, and Asia. She is, however, popularly known as a founder of peace education though this is not universally accepted.

Montessori's own writings explicitly make a connection to education for peace. She passionately argued (perhaps most notably before the United Nations) that education was a means—perhaps the only genuine means—of eliminating war once and for all. Without explicit and intentional moral and spiritual education, she believed, mankind would inevitably revert to its habit of war. Values such as global citizenship, personal responsibility, and respect for diversity, she argued, must be both an implicit and explicit part of every child's (and adult's) education. These values in Montessori education are every bit as crucial as the subjects of math, language or science. She wrote in *Education and Peace,* "Peace is a goal that can only be attained through common

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accord, and the means to achieve this unity for peace are twofold: first, an immediate effort to resolve conflicts without recourse to violence—in other words, to prevent war—and second, a long-term effort to establish a lasting peace among men" (Montessori, 1949, p. 27).

Teaching global citizenship is the explicit fostering of both a specific set of knowledge and a particular set of values in students (and teachers, for that matter). The specific curriculum might include addressing the causes of war and poverty, communication and other conflict resolution skills, disarmament or so on; the values would usually include and appreciation for diversity and nonviolence. Montessori's unique methods reinforce this commitment to fostering global citizens who would live out the values of and actively work for peace. This is for several pedagogical reasons. One, the fostering of independent critical thought (at age-appropriate levels, of course), as Montessori's contemporary John Dewey also emphasized, is vital to the survival of a democracy.

Citizens are less likely to be manipulated and mislead into a war not in their interests when they have developed a habit of informed reflection. Ironically, it was the infamous Nazi Goering who, while awaiting the Nuremberg trials in 1946, who also expressed this point: "Why of course the people don't want war. Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece?....Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country" (http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.asp). Consciously developing the habit of critical and independent thought can protect men and women from such propaganda.

Secondly, as another significant figure in peace education, Elise Boulding (1979), often wrote, Montessori's methods explicitly fostered imagination by allowing the student to explore his interests and passions. What does this mean for a more peaceful world? I would argue that, just as the habit of independent and critical thought provides a manner of protection for democracy, prioritizing imagination in education can significantly contribute to solving the common problems we all face. Social entrepreneurs provide just one recent example. In the classroom, this might become student leadership in the community, as in some classrooms where students have undertaken environmental projects, teach other students or participate in local politics.

Yet the above features of imagination and a habit of critical, independent thought, while crucial to fostering students who can contribute to building a more just and peaceful world, can be considered indirect connections between Montessori's methods and peace education. There are numerous explicit connections as well. Montessori deplored the lack of moral and social education that she observed in the typical public school. As Montessori wrote, "Any education that rejects and represses the promptings of the moral self is a crime" (1949, p. xiv). Indeed, as states are the social institutions which commonly wage war, it is worth asking if currently public school systems are capable of authentic peace education. This question underscores Montessori's pedagogical revolution.

Of course, the methods of discipline or classroom management in Montessori education must reinforce what peace scholars refer to as "positive peace". Norwegian peace scholar Johann Galtung (1969) further developed this theory, defining positive peace as the presence such human values as justice, harmony, freedom, and equality. Negative peace—which is not at all a negative thing—is the absence of violence. As Montessori wrote, "The question of peace cannot be discussed properly from a merely negative point of view...in the narrow sense of avoiding war....Inherent in the very meaning of the word *peace* is the positive notion of constructive social reform" (1949, p. xi). Thus, peace-building activities such as peace marches, community building forums such as inter-religious dialogues, or advocacy against poverty such as the fair trade or

debt cancellation movements, become an important feature of peace education. The Montessorian approach to peace can scarcely be called "passivism"; there is nothing passive about it.

For peace education to be effective, the methods teachers and administrators use must be consistent with the values purportedly being taught to students. They must be modeled as well. The implicit curriculum must harmonize with the explicit curriculum. Montessori's methods reflect this as well. The emphasis is on self-discipline, rather than discipline imposed from outside. What might this look like in practical terms? Students would be involved in forming and enforcing the rules of their community, for one. Secondly, when undesired behavior does occur, the manner in which this is handled must honor the humanity of both the student who exhibited the behavior, as well as any victims.

As one may expect, this is the aspect of Montessori's methods most commonly critiqued as idealistic and naïve. Montessori and her followers may well make two replies to this. First, Montessori classrooms by their nature reduce undesirable behavior as students are genuinely engaged in their work. Secondly, one can observe from many public schools, given literacy and drop-out rates, that the "carrot and stick" approach is not working. If students are never given real choices as they grow, it is not realistic to expect them to suddenly acquire this skill upon graduation. Hence developing internal *self*-discipline is a vital outcome of Montessorian and other types of peace education.

Dr. Maria Montessori is a seminal figure in peace education. However, beyond merely producing theory, she developed concrete pedagogy for peace, one that is currently still thriving throughout the globe (Duckworth, 2006). Her methodology focused on the development of the whole child and prized the creative and critical thinking skills, as well as relational skills, which are so critical in men and women who will be both inspired and equipped to build lasting peace.

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