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Our Community of Paradoxes

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

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Montessori principles for the child's self-formation and self-education, based as they are on the universals of human development, are firm and clear, but we mere mortals who practice them veer this way and that. It's not easy! It's far from easy to put into practice something as paradoxical as Montessori's

Education for Peace. And history is all against us! But then evolution and enlightenment always make a break with history. Here are just a few of the seeming internal contradictions of Education for Peace:

- Independence and Interdependence
- Collaboration and Excellence
- Freedom and Responsibility
- Maximum Effort and Following Our Bliss
- Choice and Achievement
- Development of the Will and Cooperation
- Living in the Moment with an Eye on the Future
- Personal Best and Compassion for Others
- Evolution and Tradition
- Serving Our Own Needs and Those of Others

What we seek to avoid are the cheap substitutes which are so highly prized in our society today, as they have been throughout the history of western civilization: superiority, pride, competition, control, praise, rewards and punishment. What Dr. Montessori discovered was that what had always seemed to be necessary to bring out the best in human nature often brings out the opposite. Yet even in our Montessori communities around the world, we struggle moment by moment, day by day to keep those practices out of our schools and our families.

When we are tired, busy, stressed or thrown off balance, we very naturally revert to the standard practices in our society, the tried and true of civilizations past and present, the patterns of our own upbringing. But how do we know we have not thrown out the baby with the bath water, we ask ourselves? And then quickly and urgently we rush to retrieve the baby, but end up bringing back the dirty bath water as well. It is only by living as a community that we can support one another to persevere, to see clearly the damage done by superiority, pride, competition, control, praise, rewards and punishment. Only our Beloved Community can help us live fully within our society, taking the best it has to offer while refusing the rest.



Being "*in the world but not of It*"—Montessori graduates are pretty good at doing just that. They are different because their motives are different; their motives are different because their experience has been different. They achieve because it satisfies, not for rewards or praise. They put out maximum effort because it feels great, not in

order to be better than others. They take pleasure in what they have to offer and how they can serve, more than for personal gain. They collaborate more than they compete. They compete against themselves instead of against others. And our Montessori graduates do all of this despite living fully and richly in their new environments and communities. They participate in their new communities, seeing them clearly for what they are, taking the best but leaving the rest, all the while giving what is precious of themselves without losing who they are. They are able to distinguish and discern the valuable from the popular by measuring it against their Montessori experience, which is their touchstone.

This is not easy. We, their adults, so often regress, not only because of our own childhood and education, but also because of the values in which we are immersed moment by moment in the world in which we live and work. We regress into praising our children, urging them toward rewards, cheering them to best others and robbing them of their most precious sense of self by telling them how proud we are of them. It is not easy for us. It is a daunting challenge to live a life of careful introspection, of self examination. But, as Socrates tells us, the unexamined life is not worth living.



Sometimes we get tired, sometimes we get distracted—off course, and sometimes we are lured by the comfort of old habits. We forget that our whole community and all of our children belong to all of us. We are one and we will better thrive if we struggle to make the best and the most for each of us, for all of us together. Montessori's Education for Peace begins within each of us, in our very own heart, within our own families, within our school. It begins here and it extends to all peoples and all nations—and above and beyond nations to humanity, beyond the globe with its business and politics as usual to the very earth we inhabit as human beings imbedded within our environment of plants and animals.

If all are not included, if all are not embraced, if all are not well, none of us will be—as we are beginning to notice. But our daily and immediate challenge is not with humanity and the earth. Our challenge is with our own communities here at school and in our homes. First we include one and all and *admire* and *appreciate* each and every person, classroom community and child. We do our best for one another because we are *one, as different as can be*, but still one in our inherent worth and our intrinsic value. We promote one another, celebrate one another, encourage one another, admire the best in one another, feel compassion in the needs of one another; instead of *praising*, taking *pride*, and *ranking* one another. We do, quite naturally celebrate our own classroom community and family as uniquely who they are and particularly beloved as our own, but not as better than others. We recognize that our judgments and biases are not reality, and we let them go, redoubling our efforts to see what is admirable, positive and worthy in those we are tempted to judge as not quite as good.

We are a community of paradoxes! And that is both our challenge and our joy.



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