

Where Do I Fit In?

Cosmic Education and the Children's House

By Lila S. Jokanović, MFA



There is a 5-year-old child sitting with me at a rug. She has invited me here for “an important conversation.”

“An important conversation about what?” I ask.

“The whole universe,” she says.

“I need to know some important things about the whole universe.”

It was 2010; the earthquake in Haiti had just happened, and children from the Lower Elementary (6–9) classroom had just come to our room, announcing they would be making jewelry to sell to raise money for Haiti. This particular 5-year-old is fascinated by death—and, according to her parents, always has been. I assume that this conversation is going to be about the earthquake and death. I am only half right.

“Ms. Lila,” she says, “what will

happen to my body when I die?”

I consider a number of responses—everything from the all-too-common nonresponse of, “Oh, that’s not going to happen for a long time!” to the evasive, “I think that would be a great question for your parents when you get home today!”

I start instead with, “Well, different cultures believe different things.”

This child is one of the more precocious students in my classroom. She

says, “In my family, people get buried when they die. What will happen to my body when I get buried?”

So we have a conversation about the things that the human body is comprised of, about the components of soil, and about decomposition. All the while I watch her for signs of fear, horror, or sadness—but instead she listens with interest. Finally, she looks at our picture of Maria Montessori (whom we had discussed earlier that

morning) hanging on the wall, and observes, "So Maria Montessori is just a skeleton right now?" I say that is probably correct. "Is her skeleton in the United States?" No, I tell her, it is in Europe. "Wow! Her skeleton is in EUROPE, and we go to her school HERE! I think that would make her really, really happy!"

A pause, then, "Ms. Lila, why does a woman's water break?"

That's when I pull out the response, "I think that would be a great question for your parents when you get home today!"

Later in the week, this same child hands me something she has been working on in the art area for the better part of the morning. It is titled, "my lif sikl" (My Life Cycle).

There is a somewhat terrifying illustration that she points to first:

"That is my mama's water breaking so I could be born." Then,

"That is [me on] my first birthday."

"That is me today."

"That is me when I am buried."

"That is when you can just see my skeleton."

The beauty of this moment did not escape me. I was and continue to be touched by this child's serious contemplation of the cosmos and where she fits into it.

As a Montessorian and an educator, this interaction motivated me to pursue further reflection and research on educating for life, cosmic tasks, and my own role in all of this. I was born and raised in south India to a family of agriculturists, and cosmic education was a part of our daily conversations—it meant learning about the universe, understanding the interconnectedness of all living and nonliving things, and respecting your part in the cycle of life.

Many years and many miles later, through a series of happy coincidences, I ended up in a classroom in Evanston,

IL, as a student of Montessori. In the first hours of my teacher education, I jotted down this quote: "Cosmic Education is the total interrelated functioning of the whole universe, which allows elementary children to store and organize a great amount of knowledge from among a wide range of different subject matter areas and disciplines" (Montessori, 1948, p. 21).

Now, as a Children's House director, Cosmic Education has come to mean something even more profound to me. At my school, Council Oak Montessori School in Chicago, IL, executive director Patricia O'Donoghue begins preparations for the first Great Lesson in September. While the lesson is presented to the Lower Elementary (6–9), Upper Elementary (9–12) and Middle School (12–15) students help with the setup and presentation of the lesson. On the appointed day, the room used for this lesson is dark, and the Upper Elementary students lead the 6–9-year-olds into the room by flashlight. There is pervasive quiet as the children enter and take their seats. Then, in the darkness, Patti—known as Mrs. O'D to the children—begins to speak. Her voice, loud and crisp, startles some at first, but then they are lulled into the story of the Big Bang. The lesson ends with a large balloon bursting and glittery stars that fall upon upturned awe-inspired faces.

The children and staff at Council Oak Montessori enjoy a unique opportunity to experience Dr. Montessori's theory of Cosmic Education through all of its stages—from the 3-year-old who first comes to us to the 15-year-old who completes our Middle School program. And it makes me think much more actively about how we lay the foundation for this experience in Children's House.

The Children's House, physically and philosophically, reflects Dr. Montessori's belief that children are

better prepared to be independent, confident, and responsible individuals through Cosmic Education. Montessori maintained that children learn best in an environment that encourages freedom of movement and discovery, and a space to develop an early understanding about their place as individuals in the universe. In the Children's House, the prepared environment provides an order that allows for educating the whole child in every aspect, from the use of materials that lead to natural consequences (for example, if there is a spill the responsible person cleans it up) to furniture and works specifically designed for small hands. A natural progression of work from simple to challenging is available in each area of the curriculum.

At the beginning of the school year, a 3-year-old will spend most of her time in Practical Life. She will practice order by consistently returning work to its place ready for the next person. She will practice coordination by carrying trays, and concentration by manipulating works such as sewing, lacing, and tweezing. Independence is woven into the very fabric of Children's House, where children develop the ability to make choices, thus directing their individual activities. For example, children learn to dress themselves by using the dress frames, and prepare and serve their own snacks.

One 3-year-old child started the school year with us, as many do, under the impression that she was unable to function without the aid of an adult. She communicated with a high-pitched whine rather than words and seemed unable to put on her indoor slippers, even after being shown how. One day, during the first week of school, I gave this child a lesson in dry pouring. She watched intently as I carried a tray with two Persian tea tumblers to a table. She observed as I carefully pulled out my

chair, sat before the work, and picked up the tumbler full of pinto beans to pour into the empty tumbler. I then stood up, pushed in my chair, and returned the work to its spot on the shelf. I asked the child if she wanted to try and she nodded. She went to the shelf, got the tray, and carried it to the table. She placed the tray on the table and then stood, staring at me. I nodded at her and said, "You may pull out your chair." She shook her head and said, "No." I smiled and nodded, "You may pull out your chair." Again, she shook her head and said, "No. Emina do it!" Emina was this child's au pair, and evidently the person responsible

Having acquired the necessary sense of order, coordination, concentration, and independence, this 3-year-old is able to successfully navigate other areas of the prepared environment. She is drawn to the Sensorial area and requests lessons.

The Sensorial curriculum is designed in such a way as to encourage a child to experience her world using all of her senses. The trademark Pink Tower, for example, helps a child begin to understand spatial relationships by using 10 carefully measured cubes of varying sizes. The Binomial Cube promotes logical thought through using a specific pattern of shape and color.

man-made world. When I introduced Magnetic and Nonmagnetic work, it attracted much attention. The labels *Plastic*, *Fabric*, and *Metal* accompanied a box of assorted objects and a magnetic wand. Following a lesson on this material with two of my more rambunctious 4-year-olds, I sat back to observe them work. After much discussion of what was plastic, what was metal, and what was fabric, they laid everything out and began their exploration of magnetic and nonmagnetic. Suddenly, one of the boys said, "Hey, look! My zipper is metal—see if it's magnetic." It was. "Let's see if our shoes are magnetic." They were not. "Hey, my dad has

Love for our universe, along with a profound respect for how the cosmos functions, and an understanding of individual responsibility in caring for the cosmos, all begin in the first plane of development.

for chairs! I said, "I will show you how to pull out your chair and then you may do it." I demonstrated pulling out and pushing in a chair to the child. She again shook her head, and this time said, "I can't." I encouraged her to try and said I would help her if she could not do it after first trying. She pulled out her chair and pushed it back in. And pulled out the chair, and pushed it back in. She continued to do this for most of the morning, with all of the chairs in the room, dry pouring long forgotten. In this, she revealed her deepest need to master her independence with the chair.

It is difficult to believe that not too long ago this child struggled so mightily with basic independence. Now, she is like a classroom monitor, always after the older children about pushing in their chairs, putting work back ready for the next person, and most importantly, offering help to others when they struggle to zip up a coat or carry a lap-table.

Math concepts are introduced to the children through a combination of materials that involve skills mastered in the Practical Life and Sensorial areas of the curriculum. Children's understanding of their world expands as they integrate information about numbers and how numbers exist in every part of the human experience.

In the Children's House, language materials make use of all the senses. Sandpaper Letters are a tangible way for a child to feel the shape of a sound. Metal Insets prepare the child's hand for penmanship, and the Moveable Alphabet reinforces logic and order and aids in opening up the world of reading. When a child learns to read, the universe reveals itself to him in a dramatic new way. As one child, who is now reading proficiently, told me, "It's like I know all the secrets now!"

In the cultural area, children learn about the world in which they live—from the solar system to the neighborhood, from the natural world to the

metal in his teeth. Let's see if your teeth are magnetic!" This went on, while they checked to see if their hair, nose, eyes, and ears were magnetic. Finally, the two boys came up to me. "Ms. Lila, you need to make another label that says 'kids.' Kids are not magnetic." In this way, as in almost every interaction with their world, children are asking the questions, "Where do I fit in? What is my role?"

At Line Time, we learn about the Web of Life, enjoy peace-building exercises from Sonnie McFarland's *Honoring the Light of the Child*, and most importantly, we observe silence. Making silence is a beautiful practice in the Children's House. Children begin to understand the essence of true silence, in which "we are silent in order to hear ourselves, not just to listen to something outside of ourselves." (Rambusch, 2010).

Finally, there is the directress/guide, and the preparation of the directress/guide. Dr. Montessori devotes entire

lectures and chapters in her books to this integral part of the whole picture. I remember sitting for my theory exam and actually being moved to tears as I wrote my essay on Cosmic Education because, all of a sudden, everything made all sorts of sense at once. It made sense that only in observing the child can the directress begin to understand and thus gently steer the child toward her individual cosmic task. Dr. Montessori (1965) said, "The training of the teacher who is to help life is something far more than the learning of ideas. It includes the training of character; it is a preparation of the spirit."

The Children's House is more than a fancy preschool, more than a means by which to provide an "academic edge"; it is a space where a child may enjoy the freedom to develop her potential, where a 5-year-old can contemplate the composition of her body and illustrate her cycle of life. It is designed in a way that is fundamental to Dr. Montessori's philosophy on educating for the human potential, allowing the child not only to experience their world, but to *participate* in it in both tangible and abstract ways. This vital fact provides the foundation for a child to absorb the Great Lessons, when presented in the second plane of development. Love for our universe, along with a profound respect for how the cosmos functions, and an understanding of individual responsibility in caring for the cosmos, all begin in the first plane of development.

In Dr. Montessori's words, "The child is mysterious and powerful, [containing] within himself the secret of human nature. . . . Within the child lies the fate of the future" (Montessori, 1966, p. 200). In the Children's House, human beings take their first steps toward fulfilling their cosmic roles and discovering their potential.



Photograph from Mt. Juliette Montessori Academy

Deep concentration in the first plane of development

References

- Montessori, M. (1948). *To educate the human potential*. Oxford, England: ABC-Clio, 21.
- Montessori, M. (1965). *The advanced Montessori method, volume one*. New York: Schocken Books, 131.
- Montessori, M. (1966). *The secret of childhood*. Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers.
- Rambusch, N. (2010). Freedom, order, and the child. *Montessori Life*, 22:1, 38.

LILA S. JOKANOVIC is head directress at Council Oak Montessori School's Children's House in Chicago, IL. Her first introduction to Montessori was growing up in Kodaikanal, India, the town where Maria Montessori lived and taught from 1941 to 1945. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and has taught at Columbia College, Chicago. She is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood). Contact her at lila.jokanovic@gmail.com.