



Montessori Model United Nations

# FROM PEACEMAKER TO PEACEBUILDER

by Judith Cunningham

*Judith Cunningham introduces the Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN) and aligns each of the basic needs of elementary and then middle school students with the ways that participation in MMUN meets those needs. Researching real-world problems, such as contaminated water or the plight of child soldiers, develops students' sense of social justice and a commitment to building peace.*

Montessori students are peacemakers. They learn in peaceful environments that support their full development, guided by leaders who model and teach self-understanding, compassion, and conflict resolution. In such settings, students practice peacemaking as a natural and normal daily activity.

The transition to peacebuilding requires new awareness and skills. Learning about issues that affect all of us and will determine if we continue as a species—such as human rights, social justice, and nuclear proliferation—is a new study. Armed with that knowledge, Montessori students fulfill Montessori's vision as builders of peace: "If one day UNESCO resolved to involve children in building peace, if it chose to call on them, to discuss with them, and to recognize the value of all the revelations they have for us, it would find them of immense help in infusing new life into this society" (fourth session of the General Conference of UNESCO, Florence, 1950, cited in "International Understanding and a Culture of Peace").

---

*Judith Cunningham, founder and executive director of the Montessori Model United Nations, has nearly thirty years of experience as a Montessori teacher and administrator in the US and Canada and has traveled in Europe and Asia on behalf of the Montessori community. She holds an AMI Elementary (6-12) Diploma from Bergamo, Italy, in addition to a master's in counseling psychology and graduate certification in dispute resolution. She is currently head of Oak Farm Montessori School, Avilla, IN. This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Montessori Internationalism and Peace: Unifying History, Geography, and Nature, Portland, OR, March 11-14, 2010.*

## MONTESSORI MODEL UNITED NATIONS PROGRAM

The Montessori Model United Nations seeks to give young students an understanding of the world and global citizenship through research and earnest debate with other Montessori students. During the MMUN students represent different countries with the objective of discussing the policies of each country and then creating the best resolutions to solve various issues. The students first educate themselves about specific international issues, and once they begin to debate, they gain a better understanding of what actual delegates encounter when international relationships and possible conflicts coincide on a world stage.

### MMUN Curriculum Integration

Students who engage in the work related to the MMUN are able to use classroom subjects throughout the project. Their language skills inform the research they must do to gather information about global issues. Writing aims such as persuasion are crucial to developing issue papers and resolutions. Being able to outline main and secondary points while listening to discussion is extremely important during debates and negotiations.

Negotiations and compromise, of course, play an essential role in any political encounter, and students must be ready to engage in lively, sometimes heated, but always interactive, student-led debates.

Important areas of study to prepare for the MMUN are language arts, history, and geography. Students research the histories of their countries and the surrounding regions to understand the problems facing their represented countries. Lessons in geography help the students understand relationships and potential conflicts among various countries. Students also study the development of societies, the political ramifications of economics,

Students who are fully involved will have the important sense of ownership that is a cornerstone of Montessori education. These students will complete their MMUN experience with a better sense of what it means to be a responsible and participatory citizen of the world as well as their own communities.

and the different aspects of each society, such as religious beliefs and governmental controls. Creativity is important in every level of a Montessori education, and MMUN students use drama and role playing when undertaking the important part of a delegate discussing serious issues that affect the world's population. Projects involving art also help the students to display their countries' flags, historical dress, and important historical events.

### **Student Involvement and Empowerment**

The MMUN delegate is involved in every stage of the preparation leading to the actual conference. These students are motivated to find out how the UN functions and to discuss global issues with their peers. The conference itself is managed to maximize student involvement in the entire process, and the students' motivation and commitment are crucial to the success of their own experience. Students are involved from the very beginning. They are the ones who hold the discussions concerning which countries to represent, how to conduct research, the preparations for debates and resolution writing, and the fundraising to attend the conference. Students who are fully involved will have the important sense of ownership that is a cornerstone of Montessori education. These students will complete their MMUN experience with a better sense of what it means to be a responsible and participatory citizen of the world as well as their own communities.

### **MMUN AND THE ELEMENTARY STUDENT**

The Montessori Model United Nations in many ways is structured to meet the following needs of the elementary student:

1. *Elementary students need a curriculum that educates the "whole child."* Taking part in the MMUN engages elementary students in many different ways. Intellectual element, which is so crucial for this age, is present as the students research a country, write an issue paper, and prepare to debate other students on serious global issues. The social need for this age is also fulfilled by the interaction of students from different countries, schools, and cultures. During the debate stage of the MMUN, the students' physical needs are met as they are encouraged to meet in small groups and move around the meeting rooms as they try to align their interests with those of other countries.

2. *Elementary students need exposure to real-world problem solving.* The MMUN allows elementary students to explore the real problems of the world and encourages them to discuss and negotiate possible solutions for issues that people face around the world, such as contaminated water, the plight of the child soldier, and human rights violations.

3. *Elementary students need a curriculum that incorporates the three-period lesson.* The objectives of the MMUN—research, writing, debate, negotiation, and presentation—are specifically constructed to give the students short classroom demonstrations or lessons before allowing them the freedom to research and discuss with their peers the information they have learned. Finally, they use this information in a presentational format before student delegates representing other countries.

4. *Elementary students need to be responsible for their own learning.* Throughout the preparation and even during the conference, the students are responsible for the project. They are the ones who complete the research and decide the best resolution for the issue, and while meeting, they conduct the caucuses, negotiate with other student delegates, and write the resolution for each issue without their teachers' interference.

5. *Elementary students need continued practice in respect and civility.* The MMUN requires students to conduct themselves in a respectful manner toward the other delegates. Students quickly learn through role playing that more success is achieved through civility than through discord when important issues are at stake.

6. *Elementary students need discussion of important topics to formulate thoughts and develop critical thinking skills.* Elementary classrooms are where the bulk of critical thinking skills are developed. The exchange of ideas, the discussion of issues from all different aspects, and the resolution of problems, all of which the MMUN requires, help elementary-age students think carefully about all the issues that surround them.

7. *Elementary students need the continued use of narratives to keep them engaged in their education.* The Great Lessons are still very evi-

dent in Montessori upper elementary classrooms. Students enjoy listening to narratives as new lessons are introduced. While studying the histories of their represented countries, students learn many narratives about different countries and are able to remember and share these and even use historical narratives in their issue papers to support their resolutions.

*8. Elementary students need to be involved with justice from an individual aspect.* Elementary-age students seek justice from an individual standpoint. They instantly view situations as fair or unfair, not necessarily from a social perspective but from an individual one. The MMUN allows students to role-play a citizen from a different culture, which gives them a one-on-one perspective and understanding of any injustices suffered by the citizens of that country. This role playing helps them see how other people endure injustices and what they do to end them.

*9. Elementary students need to be challenged by multi-age groupings.* As in their classrooms, elementary students enjoy and are challenged by multiple ages. The MMUN continues this tradition by having elementary students of different ages working side by side in caucuses, some with experience from which the “rookie” students can learn.

#### MMUN AND THE ADOLESCENT STUDENT

Although middle school students conduct the MMUN project in much the same way as the upper elementary students, the experi-

Montessori saw all of humanity as one nation, an “organic unity.” She considered people as citizens of the cosmos beyond their social or cultural conditioning. She inspired us to put partial identities and false distinctions aside, and work together globally to achieve our “collective mission” of furthering the evolution of consciousness.

ence is different because of their plane of development and how they approach the work. The adolescent is in the “social embryo” stage, meaning he is much more attuned to the problems of society. He has been studying society not so much as to the “what” but as to the “why” and the “how.” He gathers facts no longer

so much for information and intellectual knowledge as for social understanding. On the verge of entering adulthood, the adolescent is much more aware of social justice than is the elementary student. The elementary student is aware of fairness from a personal perspective. The adolescent is becoming aware of fairness from a social perspective, and the MMUN project allows him to research, study, interpret, and eventually role-play that social perspective from the viewpoint of another world citizen, arriving at a better understanding of human society.

1. *Adolescents have a fundamental need to reinvent their own society.* In middle school, the students form their own society. They create a micro-economy based on interest and a civil code of behavior for how their members should conduct themselves. The MMUN project gives them the opportunity to study how another country or a culture within that country has developed its economy and its laws.

2. *Adolescents need real-life experiences.* Although the main component of the MMUN experience involves role playing, the experience involved in finding the means and funds to travel to and navigate New York City is very real. Students become more aware of the economics involved in living in and traveling to a large metropolitan area and what is necessary to survive or prosper in a different component of their own culture.

3. *The adolescent curriculum is the medium used for social understanding.* One of the main components of the adolescent curriculum in humanities is the *dramatis persona*, or role playing. For the MMUN, the students also role-play. They assume the role of an ambassador from another country, and in simulations at their schools and when they arrive at the United Nations, they portray those ambassadors to protect the interests of a country. This allows them the opportunity for understanding and tolerance on an international basis.

4. *The adolescent learns about civilization through its origin in agriculture.* Again, since many developing countries are still encountering the problems of agriculture, the study of these societies further solidifies the students' understanding of how societies begin, struggle, flourish, flounder, succeed, or fail.

5. *Adolescents need to understand that production and exchange began when people settled on land and that these activities continue today.* For the MMUN project students study the economies of other cultures. Since they have already studied how economies began in ancient civilizations, this study of other cultures helps them better understand how their own micro-economy functions and possibly make improvements to their own systems.

6. *The aggregate of human society is based on the division of labor, which the adolescent comes to understand through various business ventures.* Adolescents study the development of the division of labor in humanities classes, and they experience it through their micro-economy. The MMUN project allows them to study the development of other countries through the division of labor. When they study developing countries, their understanding is greater when they see that development still in process. When they study developed countries, they again see how far the division of labor has taken human societies in other social settings.

### ONE NATION, ONE PEOPLE

Montessori saw all of humanity as one nation, an “organic unity.” She considered people as citizens of the cosmos beyond their social or cultural conditioning. She inspired us to put partial identities and false distinctions aside, and work together globally to achieve our “collective mission” of furthering the evolution of consciousness. Our task is to encourage peaceful cooperation “and readiness to shed prejudices in the interests of common work for the cosmic plan, which may also be called the Will of God, actively expressed in the whole of His creation” (*To Educate the Human Potential* 74). For Montessori, peace, social justice, and democracy are based on her belief that human beings all share the task of building a divinely ordered world.

### PEACEBUILDING AND SOCIAL ACTION

With the knowledge gained in the MMUN process, Montessori students naturally develop into peacebuilders. As a student said, “Now that I have a voice, I need to do something.” MMUN students have built a school in Sierra Leone, built homes for the homeless with Habit for Humanity, collected Pennies for Peace, worked in Belize to

enhance a school, collected funds for a Montessori school in Haiti, and worked with an orphanage in the Dominican Republic.

These actions demonstrate Montessori's belief that democracy and justice follow from the unfolding of potential, and social change is not authentic unless it springs from a genuine love of humanity, which is a spiritual, not simply an intellectual, commitment.

#### REFERENCES

"International Understanding and a Culture of Peace."  
UNESCO. May 10, 2010 <<http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/50y/brochure/maintrus/40.htm>>.

Montessori, Maria. *To Educate the Human Potential*. Adyar, Madras, India: Kalakshetra, 1948.

