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ON EDUCATION AND THE DIALOGIC DISCOVERY OF PEACE IN THE WORLD AND WITHIN OURSELVES (MARIA MONTESSORI, JEAN VANIER)

O EDUKACJI I DIALOGICZNYM ODNAJDYWANIU POKOJU W ŚWIECIE I W NAS SAMYCH (MARIA MONTESSORI, JEAN VANIER)

Streszczenie: Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję edukacji na rzecz pokoju w ujęciu Marii Montessori i Jeana Vaniera. Montessori ukazana jest jako wnikliwa obserwatorka życia społecznego, której pisma ukazują wychowanie dzieci jako zadanie wspólnoty ludzkiej. Jej zdaniem redefinicja pokoju – wykraczająca poza rozumienie go jako braku wojny – wymaga zmiany paradygmatu w myśleniu o dziecku i wiąże się ściśle z procesem przebudowy społecznej. Jean Vanier, założyciel wspólnoty L'Arche, ukazany jest jako orędownik pokoju poprzez zmianę postrzegania osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Tekst podejmuje również mniej znany wymiar wspólnot L'Arche jako miejsc pokoju.

Artykuł ukazuje podobieństwa i różnice między Montessori a Vanierem, podkreślając ich wspólny punkt wyjścia: radykalne przemyślenie znaczenia dziecka, osób słabych i ubogich. Te grupy ukazane są jako znaki pokoju, zdolne do inicjowania dialogu i przemiany wewnętrznej – warunków niezbędnych dla edukacji pokojowej. Analiza opiera się na dziełach *Education and Peace* Marii Montessori oraz *Finding Peace* Jeana Vaniera.

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Słowa kluczowe: pokój, edukacja, dziecko, niepełnosprawność intelektualna, wspólnota, dialog

Abstract: This article presents the concept of education for peace as envisioned by Maria Montessori and Jean Vanier. Montessori is portrayed as a keen observer of social life, whose writings reveal that educating children is a task for the human community. She argues that redefining peace beyond the absence of war requires a paradigm shift in thinking about children and is linked to social reconstruction. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community, is shown as an advocate of peace through changing perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities. The text also explores a lesser-known dimension of L'Arche communities as places of peace.

The article highlights differences and similarities between Montessori and Vanier, emphasizing their shared starting point: a radical rethinking of children, the weak, and the poor. These groups are presented as signs of peace, capable of fostering dialogue and inner transformation—conditions essential for peace education. The analysis draws on *Education and Peace* by Maria Montessori and *Finding Peace* by Jean Vanier.

Keywords: peace, education, child, intellectual disability, community, dialogue

Introduction

Maria Montessori believed that education for peace is achievable only through a paradigm shift in the understanding of peace, traditionally seen as the prevention of war. To establish lasting peace in the world, it is necessary to transform the foundations of education and the principles of thinking about children and their role in fostering peace, as outlined in her new approach. Another crucial element in promoting peace globally is social reconstruction. These components are interconnected and form a unified whole. In the preface to the Italian edition of "Education and Peace", the editors emphasize these themes: "Just as her experience with work and the problem of war drove her to passionately seek new truths about humanity. Starting from her unwavering conviction that the child must be our teacher, as well as her own concepts of free, harmonious, and balanced development of individuals, she progressed to reflections on the issues of human and social development, embarking on a crusade in the name of education: ‚The establishment of lasting peace is the work of education; politics can only keep us out of war'" (Montessori 2021, p. X).Thus, we see that Montessori cannot be regarded merely as the creator of a method for working with children or the founder of "Casa dei Bambini". She was also an important thinker who contributed a new perspective on social and political issues. While she addressed these matters in many of her lectures and publications, a coherent critical

concept can be distilled from them – one that challenges traditional approaches to social problems and their resolution.

Montessori based her educational concept on experience and systematically conducted observations of children. It was her critical mind that enabled her to challenge the traditional, established methods of upbringing and education, as emphasized by the editors of the Italian edition of "Education and Peace": "These truths were verified through repeatedly conducted experiments and her work with children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds around the world. She shed dazzling light on her discoveries through intuitive insights bearing the mark of genius. When her theories found strong support in practical experience, she delved further into her pedagogical and philosophical thinking and unveiled new perspectives, which, over time, appear ever broader" (Montessori 2021, p. IX). As is well known, her practical experiences – understood as existential experiences – were deeply personal. They defined her biography and significantly influenced her social and educational theories.

Maria Montessori, as an Italian thinker, was not fully appreciated in her homeland. The educational method she developed for working with children was considered too radical compared to traditional approaches. Due to her political views and critical assessment of the prevailing political system, she was forced to leave Italy. These were turbulent times, culminating in the outbreak of war. Her relocation to India became a highly productive period, marked by the refinement of her educational method. It was also a time for deeper reflection on cultural, religious, and socio-political issues, influenced by her immersion in a different cultural environment. During this period, her ideas about establishing lasting peace in the world gained widespread recognition and brought new hope: "Her ideas, as striking as lightning, cast new light and gave European countries hope. Around Maria Montessori, various political groups and associations gathered, embracing her faith in education and redemption, which she believed children would lead us to. When Maria Montessori used the words peace and war, these concepts became the subject of critique conducted in a new spirit, one that broke away from outdated traditional ways of thinking and brought forth a new kind of truth, better aligned with contemporary thought. Maria Montessori examined this new issue with the same authentic, insightful attention that had always characterized her pursuit of truth" (Montessori 2021, p. X). The shift in understanding and practical application of concepts such as war, peace, and education formed the foundation for defining the role of education in social reconstruction. According to Montessori, social reconstruction and education for peace enable the establishment of lasting peace in the world.

This uniquely conceived philosophy of peace stems from Montessori's way of thinking, her personal biography, and her keen observation of social reality. It is not a theory developed solely from abstract pedagogical or philosophical concepts but rather one grounded in meticulous observation.

Peace education by Montessori

Referring to Montessori's lectures and speeches compiled in the book "Education and Peace", as well as her other publications, it becomes clear that the issue of establishing peace in the world is primarily understood as preventing war. The initiation and cessation of war are confined to political actions. This gives rise to a paradox: the same politicians who initiate wars also establish peace. Treaties and peace agreements provide only temporary solutions. Another paradox is the concept of peacetime, which is understood as merely preparing to prevent the outbreak of the next war. Massive armament efforts are a tangible example of this approach. Montessori critically addresses this flawed understanding: "When using the word peace, one generally means the cessation of war. But this is not an adequate description of authentic peace. Most importantly, if we consider the apparent goal of war, peace understood in this way represents, rather, the ultimate and permanent triumph of war" (Montessori 2021, p. 4).

In this perspective, the politics of shaping social attitudes toward peace is based on a narrow and negative understanding of peace as merely the absence of war. According to Montessori, this happens because issues of peace and civic attitudes are not linked to the idea of social reconstruction. She observed: "Indeed, it is surprising that there is no field of knowledge dedicated to peace, whereas the knowledge of the art of war seems highly advanced, at least in terms of specific topics like armament and strategy. However, even war as a collective human phenomenon remains shrouded in mystery, because all nations on Earth, which declare they want to ban war as the worst plague afflicting humanity, nonetheless contribute to its outbreak and eagerly support armed conflicts" (Montessori 2021, p. 3). Montessori argued that science and research institutions focus primarily on mastering external phenomena. Humanity seems engaged in an unrelenting pursuit of dominance over the world and nature. Although contemporary times provide no definitive judgment on such research efforts, she noted: "[…] when it comes to peace, it has never been the subject of a systematic and prolonged research process called science; on the contrary, a clear concept of peace does not feature among the countless ideas enriching human awareness" (Montessori 2021, p. 4).

Although the Italian thinker formulated her reflections on research into the world and peace nearly 100 years ago, they remain relevant in many aspects. Why is this the case? According to

Montessori, it is because humanity, in its pursuit of dominance over the external world, increasingly neglects what is internal. “The imbalance between the development of the external environment and the internal, spiritual development of humanity is striking. This peculiar phenomenon is fraught with even greater contradictions than the phenomenon of war. People have achieved much and could live in abundance, yet they are poor and unhappy. At this moment, everyone asks how to go on” (Montessori 2021, p. 47). People are isolated, finding no support within themselves or in others. They focus primarily on achieving external goals. By forgetting the inner world, they simultaneously fail to find answers to the question of the true meaning of their lives. Perhaps Montessori’s diagnosis of the contemporary world would be as follows: we live in an era dominated by instrumental reason.

To bring about change, it is essential to begin a process of social and educational reconstruction and to transform how we think about children – a task that is neither simple nor easy. In her “London Lectures”, delivered after World War II, Montessori recalled the saying that the 20th century would be the “century of the child,” a time of peace and human progress. Instead, the 20th century became a century of wars, atrocities, and concentration camps. These events revealed how challenging it is to shift the frameworks of human consciousness: “The last dreadful war showed that we cannot change fully formed adults because their frameworks of consciousness do not allow it. They are selfish and do not understand the world. These poorly developed individuals grew from children whose creative periods were ignored. Nowadays, knowledge is so widespread that we are well-versed in botany, geology, chemistry, and other fields. But what do we know about humanity itself?” (Montessori 2019, p. 57). At the same time, despite such atrocities and wars, interest in the child has grown, and humanitarian ideas continue to develop. This is significant because it allows for a shift in the perception of the role and importance of children in the development of humanity and of the child itself. A child cannot remain a “forgotten citizen.” “The Forgotten Citizen” is a letter written by Montessori in 1947, aiming to remind and sensitize the ruling authorities of the time to the consequences faced by children after the end of World War II (Montessori 2023, p. 179, footnote).

This letter also illustrates the very low level of social awareness regarding children. While stores were filled with piles of toys, there were no items like brooms, chairs, or plates – objects that would allow children to engage meaningfully in social life. This simple example, devoid of any theoretical foundation, highlights the inability of children to fulfill themselves within society. Maria Montessori referenced John Dewey, who also recognized this issue: Professor Dewey reacted to this state of affairs by saying: “Unfortunately, the child has been overlooked in many other ways as well. It is a forgotten citizen, living in a world where everything is for

everyone – except for them. The child wanders aimlessly, constantly fussing and destroying toys, futilely seeking solace for their soul, while adults fail to grasp the child's true essence" (Montessori 2023, p. 179). The child has been "forgotten" in the sense that both adults and policymakers regard them as beings entirely dependent on adults, with no attention given to them in legal systems. As Dr. Montessori emphasized: "We must study the child not as a being dependent on us, but as an independent person, who must be analyzed in their own individual self" (Montessori 2021, p. 13).

The child is an autonomous being and plays a crucial role in education for peace, possessing immense potential and an absorbent mind that should be nurtured while respecting their autonomy and independence. A child is endowed with natural abilities that will develop over time, naturally becoming a peacemaker and an advocate for peace, constructing themselves into an adult human being. This theme, central to the thought of the Italian researcher, is emphasized by Sylwia Camarda in the preface to the Polish edition of "Education and Peace": "Nature supports the child in this great endeavor by giving them the most effective tool possible – the absorbent mind. Using this extraordinary gift, the child discovers the world, enhances their intellectual abilities, and constructs themselves – ultimately, into an adult human. […] Peace, however, begins with how the adult treats the child" (Montessori, 2021, p. XVIII). This is precisely the goal of education in its reimagined form. Maria Montessori was critical of traditional education, believing it to be poorly organized. She argued that traditional education lags behind the demands of contemporary society. In this sense, traditional education seems to exist as though detached from life itself.

Education for peace cannot be confined to school education; it is a task for all of humanity. If we accept the premise that achieving lasting peace is the ultimate goal, it can only be realized through education: "Preventing conflicts is the task of politics; establishing peace is the task of education. We must convince the world of the need for a universal, collective effort to build the foundations of peace" (Montessori 2021, p. 25). In this sense, education for peace is intrinsically linked to the necessity of social change. If the world is to become a world of lasting peace – a collective endeavor of all humanity – children play the most vital role in creating this new world. As Montessori wrote: "Education and peace is a call to care for young minds and to develop the means necessary to rehabilitate the weakest among us. Children are our future; the fate of the entire world will rest in their hands. The world, with unprecedented urgency, demands the fulfillment of the promises made in the conventions and treaties of the 20th century – the century of the child" (Montessori 2021, p. XXVI). In this perspective, children, as seen by Maria Montessori, are symbols of peace.

Places of peace – The L'Arche Community, the weak and the poor

An important complement to Montessori's concept, which emphasizes the role of children, social reconstruction, and education in fostering peace, is the reflection on peace offered by Jean Vanier in his book "Finding Peace". Like the Italian thinker, Vanier asserts that peace cannot be understood solely in terms of external conditions (i.e., reducing peace to the prevention of wars): "Peace does not simply mean the absence of war or living alongside others in a way that ignores their presence; nor does it mean living in indifference toward others or avoiding them. Peace is about mutual understanding, mutual recognition, mutual acknowledgment of each other's worth, and the ability to receive from one another. Peace flows from a communion of hearts, where we truly become brothers and sisters, belonging to the same humanity" (Vanier 2004, pp. 56–57).

According to Vanier, fostering peace in the world and within ourselves is an ongoing process. This process involves transforming our lives and creating so-called *places of peace* in the world, along with an internal transformation of ourselves and others. He views peace as a challenge for all of humanity: "I hope that more and more people will begin to discover that the peace we all long for is not simply the work of those in power but the responsibility of each of us. We can all contribute to bringing about peace. We can each do our part. The future of the world lies in the hands of each of us and depends on our commitment to peace – together with others, according to each person's abilities and responsibilities. Peace is not simply about preventing this or that catastrophe, but about rediscovering a vision, a path of hope for all of humanity" (Vanier 2004, p. 10).

For Vanier, fostering peace is closely tied to a shift in how society perceives individuals with disabilities. In the founder of L'Arche's vision, individuals with disabilities, much like children in Montessori's concept, are "signs of peace." They transform our perspective on the meaning of life and bring about change in us and our world.

The issue remains that this reality is not recognized in contemporary society, as Vanier emphasizes: "Since our Western societies are consumer societies that promote individualism, they are societies of competition. Even in school, children are taught that they must strive to be first, that they must win if they want to be admired, and that only by demonstrating success as young people can they hope to secure a respected, influential, and well-paid position in the future. Practically on every path of life, people try to climb the ladder of success to have more: more money, more influence, more recognition" (Vanier 1996, p. 22). The founder of L'Arche does not dismiss competition outright. He acknowledges that competition can help individuals

develop their talents, contribute to personal growth, and drive human progress. However, he also highlights the darker side of competition: those who lose, who do not achieve success, are marginalized and deemed inferior. They often face contempt and a lack of recognition.

This same mindset has shaped attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Jean Vanier observed such attitudes toward individuals with disabilities during his visits to educational centers, hospitals, and psychiatric institutions: "It would be rash to condemn the staff working in these institutions or the people who created them. They were simply products of a culture that regarded individuals with limited intelligence as pitiful creatures, incapable of truly experiencing suffering. While some institutions cared for their residents and treated them with love, affection, and respect, no one believed that people with intellectual disabilities could develop, become more independent, or offer anything to others" (Vanier 1996, p. 24). Vanier decided to change the perspective on society's weakest and most marginalized individuals. He sought to empower them, to highlight their significance to others, and to show the role they can play in a fractured and self-centered world. He also aimed to demonstrate that these individuals are valuable, full of hidden talents, capable of experiencing both suffering and joy, and, above all, capable of sharing these emotions with one another and with others. As Vanier put it: "Communities that begin their work by serving the poor should gradually come to see the great gifts the poor can offer. They start out motivated by a sense of nobility but should grow in sensitivity. Ultimately, it is not about 'doing great things' for the poor and suffering, but about building relationships with them, accompanying them, helping them regain confidence in themselves, and discovering the gifts they possess" (Vanier 2011, p. 193).

The L'Arche community was founded on these principles, understood as a whole – a community in which all its constituent communities are based on the Gospel-pedagogical premise of living in the spirit of friendship and peace. "If you befriend someone who is lonely or suffering, you will discover something more: that you are the one being healed. The poor will reveal to you your own wounds and the hardness of your heart, as well as how deeply you are loved. Thus, the one you came to heal becomes the source of your healing. If you allow yourself to be shaped in this way by the call of the poor and accept their healing presence, they will guide your steps toward community and introduce you to a new vision of humanity, a new world order: one not ruled by power and fear, but one where the poor and the weak are at the center. […] When people come together in community and live in covenant, they begin to discover what it means to be human and to bring peace to a broken world" (Vanier 2006, p. 95). L'Arche communities are internationally known for their innovative approaches to working with adults with intellectual disabilities. Less commonly acknowledged, however, is their role

as places of peace – an idea that, according to Jean Vanier, became a gradually maturing pillar of their identity: “I wanted to share my life with those who are weak and, together with them, create communities of peace” (Vanier 2004, p. 11). In “Finding Peace”, Vanier describes these communities as spaces of acceptance, where respect for religious and cultural differences coexists with the development of personal agency. They cultivate responsibility, empathy, trust, and friendship, especially toward the weak and the poor. Vanier’s vision, shaped by his experience of L’Arche as a multicultural and interfaith environment, emphasizes that true community life fosters peace through openness and mutual support: “If the members of a community are open to those who are different […] they become a sign and a source of peace” (Vanier 2004, p. 88). Although he recognized that communal life may involve painful tensions, Vanier saw it as the best setting for working through them – provided the community remains inclusive and open.

In this sense, living in a community teaches us that we are called to be people of peace, individuals who bring peace into the world. Jean Vanier approaches the concept of fostering peace on multiple levels. The first level is defined by the weak and the poor: “Bringing peace means reaching out to those who are weak and in need, perhaps simply greeting them with a smile, offering them support, kindness, and tenderness, and opening our hearts to them. It means reaching out to those who are difficult or whom we may not particularly like, those who are different from us culturally, psychologically, or intellectually. This approach to people does not mean standing on a pedestal, solving problems from a position of strength and certainty. Rather, it is about relating to people by listening to them, through understanding, humility, and love” (Vanier 2004, p. 91). The second level consists of the apostles of peace and mediators. For Vanier, apostles of peace include figures such as Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and others. They remain apostles of peace because their entire lives were dedicated to rejecting all forms of violence.

Apostles of peace are, therefore, the weak and the poor. They demonstrate how weakness can be transformed into strength and power. Through them, we discover both the value of others and our own vulnerability: “We become apostles of peace when we discover our own weakness. Here, we touch upon a mystery. Peace does not stem from arrogance or power. It arises from the life force that emanates from the deepest, weakest part of our being – the gentle yet powerful force of life that resides within you and me” (Vanier 2004, p. 91). Apostles of peace are those who dedicate their lives and take concrete actions for the cause of peace. In this sense, being an apostle of peace is closely linked to the role of a mediator. To be a mediator means teaching how to live with others – people with different beliefs, from various cultures, and adhering to

different religions: “To be a mediator is to be a pilgrim sailing toward a new and unknown holy land. It is also to be an explorer who leaves behind what is broken and divided, departing from the familiar world to navigate uncharted, sometimes turbulent seas, in search of new seeds of life and unity, ready to grow and flourish” (Vanier 2004, p. 102). According to Vanier, the hope for the world lies in the example set by the lives of apostles of peace and mediators. His vision calls for L’Arche communities and other communities to embody this way of life. This is the most effective path to fostering peace in the world – a path of inclusive actions: “True peace is rarely imposed from the outside. It must be born within specific communities, emerging between them through encounters and dialogue. Only then can it extend beyond those communities” (Vanier 2004, p. 23).

Dialogical Pedagogies of Peace: A Comparative Synthesis of Montessori and Vanier

Concepts such as encounter, dialogue, friendship, and responsibility are central to the philosophies of both Maria Montessori and Jean Vanier, though their application differs. Both include spiritual and religious themes in their visions of peace – Montessori with restraint, Vanier more personally. A shared feature may stem from Susan Morgan’s influence on “Finding Peace”; she had lived in L’Arche and was trained in the Montessori method (Vanier 2004, p. 109).

Both thinkers emphasize cultural experience as foundational for peace. Montessori’s time in India and global travels, and Vanier’s engagement with multiculturalism in L’Arche, shaped their belief that embracing difference fosters peace. As Vanier states: “We must discover who the other person is and reveal to them who we are” (Vanier 2004, p. 53). Both saw dialogical encounters as the basis of trust and responsibility, rooted in Buber’s “I–Thou” relationship. Vanier explicitly draws on *I and Thou* to argue that authentic relationships, not possessions, form the basis of human connection and peace (Vanier 2004, p. 54).

For Vanier, peace begins with listening and dialogue, grounded in the philosophy of encounter. Montessori, by contrast, critiqued reliance on past theories in educational reform: “That time has passed” (Montessori 2023, p. 5). Instead, she insisted on experience and observation as the foundation of education. This allowed for revealing the child’s potential, long suppressed by tradition. Her idea of the “forgotten citizen” reflects this view.

Despite criticism, Montessori remained committed to a new method: awakening “dormant energies” in each child (Montessori 2019, p. 43). She began her work with children with intellectual disabilities, while Vanier devoted his life to adults. Montessori’s method echoes the Socratic “midwifery” model – nurturing autonomy and the inner teacher. Vanier, in turn,

emphasized the need to learn the language of people with disabilities, to listen beyond words and enter their world (Vanier 2006).

Both approaches implicitly employ dialogical pedagogy in education and care. Their paths meet midway: Vanier starts with theory and moves toward practice; Montessori begins with experience and develops a dialogical model rooted in observation. For both, education for peace and the creation of peace-oriented communities are foundational to transforming humanity.

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