

Normalization and Its Relation to Peace Education Using a Sampling of Montessori Preschools From Around the World

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Abstract

Montessori education is often conceptualized as a form of peace education, with Normalization identified by Montessori as one of the most significant outcomes of her empirical work. Normalization refers to a process through which children, including those with behavioral difficulties, return to a natural path of development. While Montessori described this change as sudden and almost miraculous, the present exploratory study reexamines the timing, processes, and conditions of Normalization and its relationship to peace in the classroom. Using an online survey, data were collected from 48 Montessori preschool teachers across eight countries. The questionnaire focused on teachers' observations of the onset, duration, and outcomes of Normalization, as well as its perceived impact on children's behavior and classroom climate, given the exploratory design and sampling constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses were analyzed descriptively to identify common patterns and trends across contexts. Two key findings emerged. First, teachers consistently identified children's spontaneous choice of work as the primary trigger for Normalization. Second, contrary to Montessori's original claim, Normalization was most often described as a gradual process, typically unfolding over three to four years during the preschool period rather than occurring suddenly. Most respondents (95%) reported improvements in behavioral problems, and 68% indicated that children maintained a permanent or semi-permanent normalized state.

Keywords: Montessori education, peace education, Normalization

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Introduction

Montessori education is frequently described as a form of peace education, grounded in the belief that peace must be cultivated within the individual before it can be realized in society. Following the devastation of World War II, international organizations such as UNESCO emphasized education as a means to prevent future conflict, asserting that peace must be constructed in the minds of human beings (UNESCO, 2021). Within this global movement, peace education has expanded beyond the mere absence of war to include the development of moral awareness, social responsibility, and non-violent ways of relating to others. However, despite its widespread endorsement, a central challenge remains unresolved: how peace can be effectively fostered through everyday educational practice, particularly in early childhood.

Maria Montessori addressed this challenge by focusing on children's inner development rather than external moral instruction. Although she did not create a formal curriculum labeled "peace education," Montessori consistently argued that education itself is the most powerful means of achieving peace (Montessori, 1949). Central to her educational philosophy is the concept of Normalization, which she identified as the most significant outcome of her empirical observations. Normalization refers to a process through which children, including those displaying what Montessori termed "deviated" behaviors, regain their natural developmental trajectory when placed in a carefully prepared environment that allows freedom of choice and sustained concentration.

Montessori described Normalization as a sudden and almost miraculous transformation in children's character, marked by self-discipline, calmness, and social harmony (Montessori, 1966). She further claimed that normalized children naturally prefer orderly, purposeful activity and demonstrate respect and consideration for others. From Montessori's perspective, these characteristics form the psychological foundation of peace, suggesting a direct connection between individual self-regulation and collective peacefulness in the classroom community.

While Montessori's theoretical claims have been influential and widely cited, empirical research examining precise conditions of Normalization remains limited (Frierson, 2021). In particular, there is little systematic investigation into whether Normalization occurs as a sudden transformation, as Montessori suggested, or as a more gradual developmental process. Moreover, the mechanisms through which individual Normalization may contribute to peace education at the classroom or community level have not been sufficiently articulated.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates Normalization as a key component of Montessori education for peace. Drawing on international survey data from Montessori preschool teachers, this research explores when and how Normalization occurs, what conditions trigger it, and how it is perceived to influence children's behavior and classroom peacefulness. By empirically examining Normalization in contemporary Montessori settings, this study seeks to clarify its role as a foundational process linking individual development to peace education.

This study contributes to international discussions on peace education by providing empirically grounded insights into how Montessori-based practices, particularly children's spontaneous choice of work, support the gradual development of peaceful classroom communities across diverse cultural contexts.

Literature Review

Peace Education in the Global Context

Peace education emerged as a distinct field in the aftermath of World War II, shaped by efforts to prevent the recurrence of large-scale violence and to promote international understanding. Influenced by peace research and conflict studies, the field developed primarily in Europe and the United States from the 1950s onward (Murakami, 2009). Scholars gradually broadened the concept of peace beyond the absence of war to include the elimination of structural violence, social injustice, and inequality. As a result, peace education curricula increasingly addressed issues such as human rights, poverty, racism, and environmental sustainability.

International organizations and academic networks have played a central role in advancing peace education research and practice. UNESCO's "culture of peace" framework emphasized the cultivation of values, attitudes, and behaviors that support peaceful coexistence. Similarly, organizations such as the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) and the Peace Education Committee (PEC) promoted interdisciplinary research and the development of educational materials aimed at fostering peace at local and global levels. Despite these advances, scholars have noted that peace education is deeply shaped by historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts, resulting in diverse interpretations and implementations across countries (Wintersteiner, 2004).

Peace Education in Japan

In Japan, peace education has been strongly influenced by the nation's experience of World War II, including the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Early peace education efforts focused primarily on transmitting historical knowledge and fostering anti-war sentiments through remembrance of past atrocities (Murakami, 2009). While this approach played an important role in shaping collective memory, critics have argued that it often emphasized factual knowledge at the expense of developing critical thinking and proactive peacemaking skills (Langager, 2009).

More recent scholarship has documented a gradual shift in Japanese peace education toward a more future-oriented and comprehensive approach. This emerging model incorporates themes such as human rights, social responsibility, and global citizenship, aligning more closely with international perspectives on peace education. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised about the potential psychological impact of exposing young children to traumatic historical content without sufficient consideration of developmental readiness, highlighting the need for age-appropriate approaches to peace education (Muramoto, 2014).

Deviation and Normalization in Montessori Theory

Within this broader context, Montessori education offers a distinctive perspective on peace education by focusing on children's developmental conditions. Montessori introduced the concept of deviation to describe behaviors resulting from obstacles to normal development, emphasizing that such behaviors are not inherent flaws but responses to inadequate environments. According to Montessori, children who experience deviation are unable to learn effectively and may carry maladaptive patterns into later life.

Normalization, in contrast, represents a healing process through which children return to their natural developmental path (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). Montessori argued that Normalization occurs when children are provided with a carefully prepared environment that supports freedom of choice, purposeful activity, and sustained concentration. Through repeated engagement in meaningful work, children develop self-discipline, independence, and inner calm. Contemporary researchers have suggested that this process closely corresponds to the modern psychological concept of self-regulation.

Normalization as Education for Peace

Montessori maintained that Normalization forms the foundation of education for peace, as normalized children naturally exhibit social harmony, cooperation, and respect for others (Montessori, 1949, 1966). Rather than teaching peace as an external moral concept, Montessori education aims to cultivate inner peace through developmental processes, a view further articulated in contemporary Montessori scholarship (Lillard, 2005, 2017). Empirical studies across diverse cultural contexts have reported positive social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes associated with Montessori education, suggesting its relevance to peace education (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

Although a growing body of research has documented positive outcomes associated with Montessori education, empirical investigation of the *process* of Normalization itself remains limited (Lillard, 2019). Existing studies have largely relied on qualitative descriptions, case studies, or long-term outcome measures, providing limited insight into when and how Normalization unfolds in everyday classroom practice. Moreover, relatively few studies have examined Normalization from the perspective of practicing Montessori teachers or employed cross-cultural data (Duckworth, 2006; Murray & Peyton, 2008). To address these gaps, the present study offers an exploratory international analysis of teachers' observations of Normalization and examines how this process may link individual developmental change to the emergence of peaceful classroom communities.

Despite extensive theoretical discussion of Normalization within Montessori scholarship, empirical research examining its developmental processes, particularly from teachers' perspectives, remains limited. Moreover, few studies have investigated Normalization in relation to peace education using cross-cultural data. This study addresses these gaps by offering an exploratory international analysis of how Normalization unfolds in practice and how it contributes to individual and collective peacefulness in early childhood educational settings.

Taken together, the existing literature highlights a clear need for empirical research that examines Normalization not only as a theoretical construct but as a lived developmental process in contemporary Montessori classrooms. In response to this gap, the present study focuses on how and when Normalization occurs in Montessori preschools serving children from three to six years of age, drawing on survey data from practicing teachers across multiple countries. Specifically, this study investigates the *timing, steps, and circumstances* through which Normalization is observed to unfold. In addition, it examines whether and how this process contributes to the emergence of peaceful conditions within classroom communities. By addressing these questions, the study aims to clarify the role of Normalization as a potential mechanism linking individual developmental change to broader goals of peace education.

Methodology

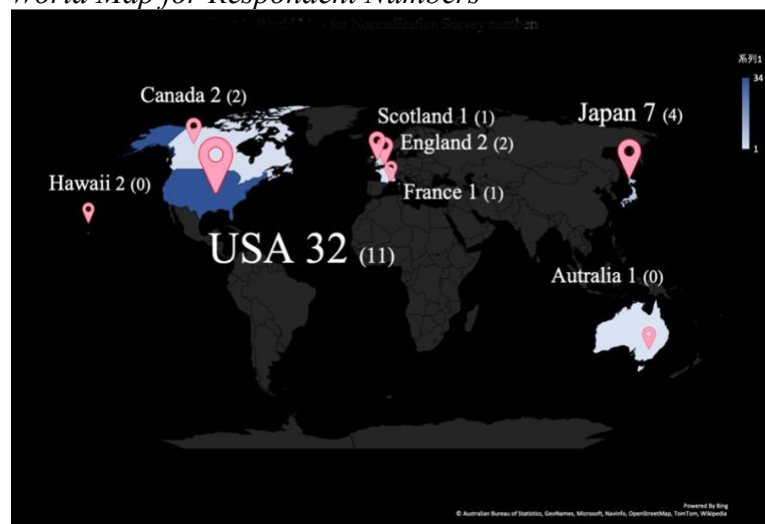
This study was conducted as action research employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected through an online survey administered via Qualtrics, consisting of 21 questions (Appendix). The survey included both closed-ended items and open-ended questions designed to capture Montessori teachers' observations of the process of Normalization and its relation to classroom peacefulness.

The survey was initially distributed in Japanese within Japan, the researcher's home country, and subsequently administered in English to participants in other countries (Figure 1). Answers in French and Japanese were translated into English for analysis. Target participants were Montessori Infant/Toddler and Early Childhood teachers, as Normalization is theorized to occur primarily between the ages of three and six (Montessori, 2007). Survey invitations were sent by email in mid-February 2022 to Montessori preschools across Europe, Asia, the United States, Canada, and Australia, based on school listings from the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) website and supplementary Google searches.

A total of 55 responses were received between mid-February and mid-March 2022. After excluding seven incomplete responses in which participants discontinued after providing consent, 48 surveys were retained for analysis. All 48 responses were analyzed for the quantitative items (Question# 1–7). For the qualitative section (Question# 8–13), 21 surveys contained written responses and were included in the qualitative analysis. All but one of these respondents held Montessori teaching credentials. Participants were anonymized and assigned identification numbers from 1 to 48. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants prior to participation, ensuring voluntary involvement, and anonymizing all responses to protect participants' identities.

Figure 1

World Map for Respondent Numbers



Note. Numbers with complete written answers in the parenthesis.

This study aims to identify common patterns in the occurrence and conditions of Normalization across diverse international contexts, rather than to compare countries. Accordingly, descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses. The majority of the participants were located in the United States, followed by Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Australia.

This study has several methodological limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, partly due to recruitment and data collection constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, issues of wording in the survey may have led to conceptual ambiguity, for some researchers, as Normalization is understood as a phenomenon rather than a situational behavioral change, which may have contributed to participant confusion and incomplete responses. The high proportion of open-ended questions may also have increased response burden, particularly for participants completing the survey on mobile devices. In addition, language limitations may have affected response completion, as the survey was administered in Japanese and English only. Finally, the study focused on observing children aged three to six, consistent with Montessori theory, but Normalization may occur beyond this age range. These limitations suggest directions for future research, including refined survey design, multilingual instruments, larger samples, and examination of Normalization across broader developmental stages.

Results and Discussions

Drawing on survey data from Montessori teachers in multiple countries, the findings provide empirical insight into the developmental process of Normalization and its broader implications for peace education. The following analysis focuses on teachers' observations of children's behavioral and social changes following Normalization. All participants reported familiarity with the Montessori concept of Normalization, with 90% indicating that they were either extremely or moderately familiar with the concept. Among these respondents, 83% were credentialed Montessori teachers, suggesting a high level of professional understanding, while a small number of non-credentialed participants also reported high familiarity.

Finding 1: Normalization as a Global but Gradual Developmental Process

The results indicate that Normalization is a widely observed phenomenon across diverse Montessori contexts, supporting Montessori's claim that it reflects a universal developmental tendency rather than a culturally specific practice. Teachers from different countries reported remarkably similar observations regarding the conditions under which Normalization occurs and the behavioral changes that follow. Overall, approximately 95% of the participants indicated that behavioral difficulties were addressed through Normalization, suggesting a strong and consistent perception among teachers of its positive impact on children's behavior.

However, the findings challenge Montessori's original description of Normalization as primarily sudden and miraculous. While a small number of cases closely resembled the dramatic transformations documented by Montessori, the majority of respondents described Normalization as a gradual process that unfolds over time. For most children, Normalization first appeared as an initial catalytic event and then gradually stabilized over a period of three to four years within the Children's House (pre-school).

Only approximately 10% of written responses described an immediate and permanent transformation closely aligned with Montessori's early case narratives. In contrast, most teachers reported that children experienced repeated episodes of Normalization that increased in frequency and stability over time. This finding suggests that while sudden Normalization is possible, it is not the dominant developmental pathway in contemporary Montessori classrooms.

Trigger of Normalization: Spontaneous Choice of Work

Across the dataset, one factor emerged with particular consistency: Normalization was most often triggered when children spontaneously chose their own work. Whether the activity was independently selected or introduced by a teacher and then accepted by the child, the defining feature was the child's voluntary engagement.

Teachers emphasized that Normalization did not occur when work was imposed externally. Rather, it emerged when the activity aligned with the child's intrinsic interest and developmental readiness. This finding empirically supports Montessori's emphasis on freedom of choice within a prepared environment and underscores the importance of respecting children's internal motivations.

Practical Life activities were especially prominent in the data, likely due to their direct connection to everyday experiences and their capacity to support sustained concentration. These results reinforce the pedagogical implication that teacher observation and sensitive introduction of materials play a crucial role in facilitating, but not forcing, Normalization.

Time and Consistency of Normalization

A prominent feature of Normalization was heightened concentration, noted in 12 of the 21 qualitative responses, with children demonstrating sustained focus for extended periods. Regarding duration, the most common length of the first Normalization episode was 15 minutes, followed by 30 minutes, although 5 children exhibited markedly longer episodes of 1 to 2 hours (Figure 2). With respect to frequency after the initial occurrence, Normalization was most often reported as "frequently" (nine children), while four reported it infrequently, and none reported it as never occurring again (Figure 3). Overall, these findings indicate that once Normalization first emerges, children tend to re-enter this state repeatedly over time, though with considerable individual variation in duration and frequency.

Figure 2

The Length of the First Normalization (Question 6–4 see Appendix)

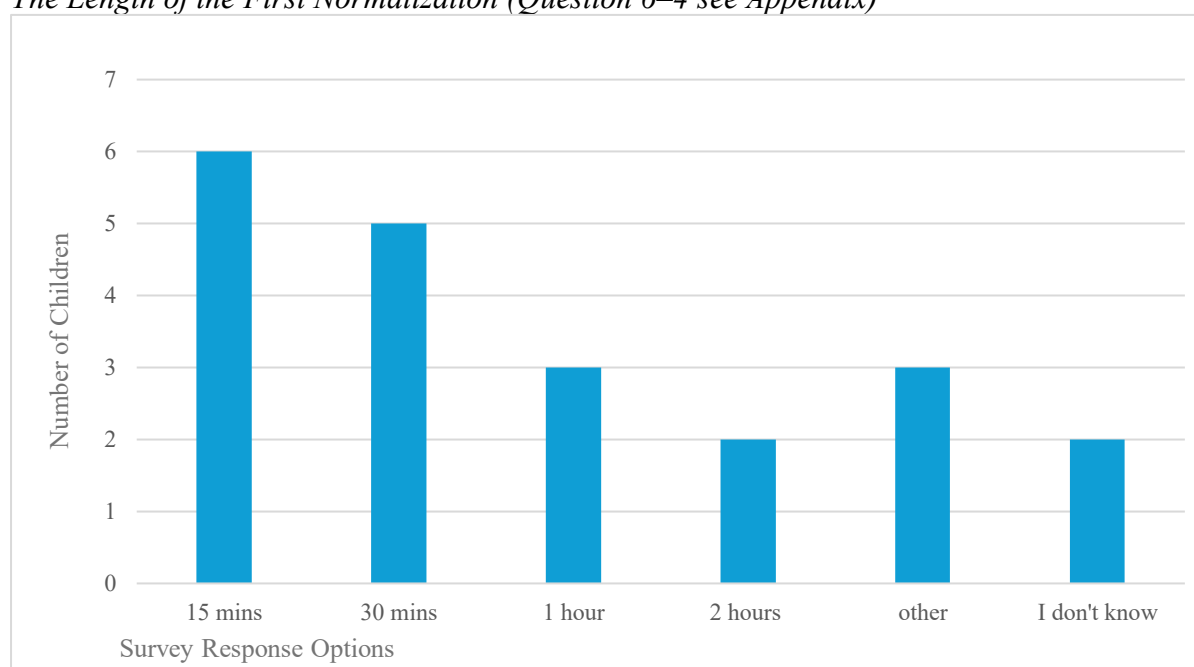
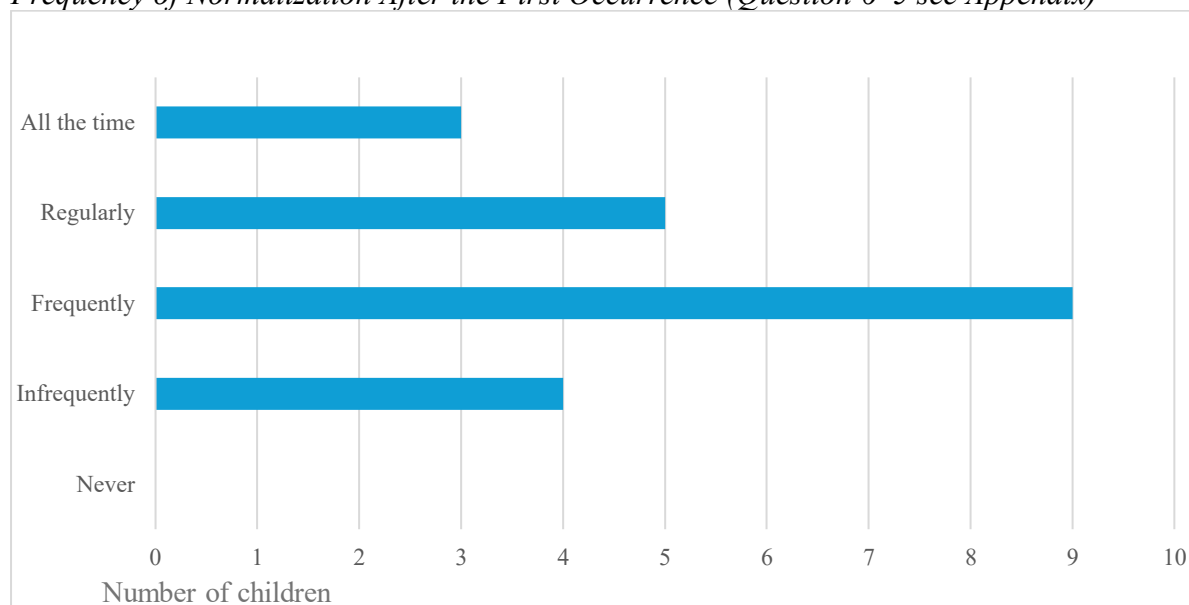


Figure 3*Frequency of Normalization After the First Occurrence (Question 6–5 see Appendix)*

The Developmental Steps of Normalization

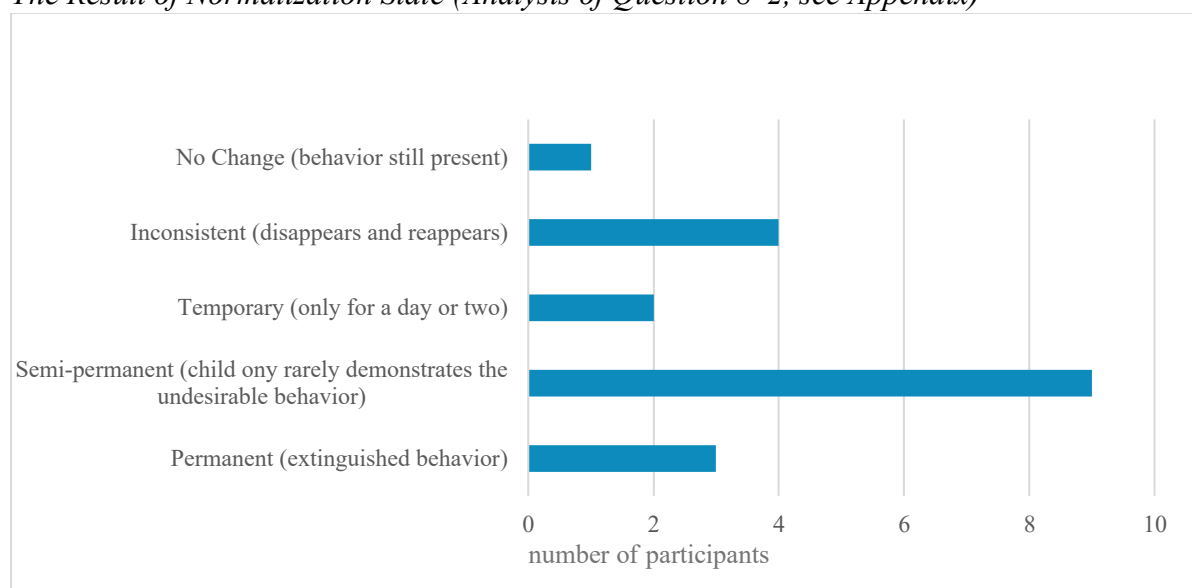
Based on teachers' observations, the process of Normalization followed a relatively consistent sequence across cases:

1. The child freely chooses an activity of genuine interest.
2. The child demonstrates unusually deep and sustained concentration.
3. Feelings of joy, satisfaction, calmness, and inner order emerge.
4. These experiences recur with increasing frequency.
5. The child enters a semi-permanent or permanent normalized state.

This sequence closely mirrors Montessori's original descriptions while providing greater empirical specificity regarding frequency and duration. The data suggest that Normalization is not a single event but a developmental trajectory, marked by repeated experiences of concentrated engagement.

Stability of Normalization: Semi-permanent and Permanent States

Another significant finding concerns the durability of Normalization. The majority of teachers reported that once Normalization occurred, 68% of children remained in a normalized state either semi-permanently or permanently. Behavior problems were largely reduced or eliminated, particularly those related to impulsivity, aggression, and lack of self-regulation.

Figure 4*The Result of Normalization State (Analysis of Question 8–2, see Appendix)*

Although some children initially exhibited inconsistent or temporary changes, these cases were often described as being in an early or incomplete phase of the Normalization process. Overall, the findings suggest that Normalization, once established through repeated experiences, has a lasting stabilizing effect on children’s behavior and emotional regulation.

This observation addresses a gap in Montessori’s original writings, which emphasized the occurrence of Normalization but offered limited discussion of its long-term stability. The present findings provide empirical support for the claim that Normalization can function as a durable developmental outcome rather than a transient state.

Finding 2: From Individual Normalization to Classroom Peacefulness

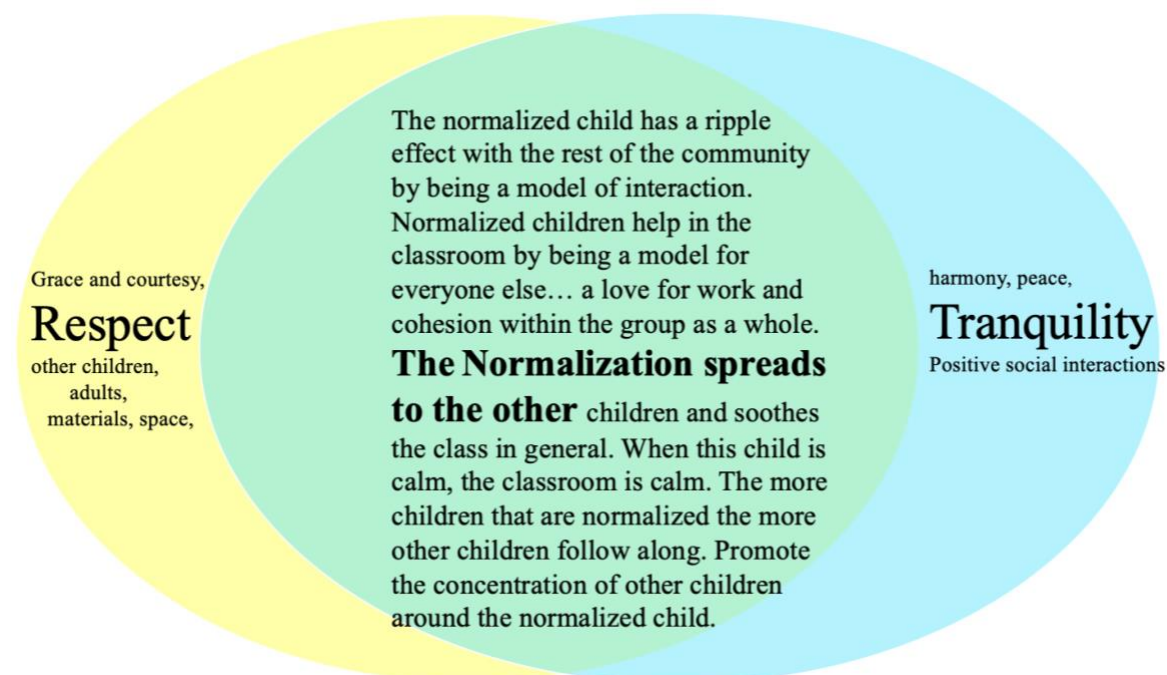
The second major finding concerns the relationship between Normalization and peace education. Teachers predominantly described peacefulness as a direct outcome of Normalization, both at the individual and classroom levels. Normalized children were characterized as calm, respectful, socially engaged, and considerate of others.

Importantly, many respondents emphasized that the effects of Normalization were not confined to individual children. Instead, they described a clear ripple effect in which normalized children influenced their peers and contributed to a more harmonious classroom atmosphere (Figure 5). This process occurred through modeling behavior, respecting shared norms, and supporting peers, rather than through explicit instruction.

The classroom was frequently described as a “small society,” suggesting that the peacefulness cultivated within the Montessori environment serves as a microcosm of broader social relations. This finding empirically supports Montessori’s assertion that peace education begins with individual inner order and extends outward to the community.

Figure 5

The Effect of Normalization in the Classroom (Analysis of Question 9, see Appendix)



Note. This Venn Diagram captures 14 qualitative responses out of 15 for question nine.

Reproduction of Peace Beyond the Classroom

Most participants (95%) expressed confidence that the peacefulness observed in Montessori classrooms could be reproduced in broader social contexts, including schools and communities beyond early childhood settings. While some acknowledged that societal environments are less controlled than classrooms, many emphasized that children who are normalized carry internalized self-regulation and ethical orientation into new contexts.

Several teachers provided examples of Montessori graduates maintaining prosocial behavior even when entering non-Montessori educational systems. Although these children may represent a minority, their actions—such as supporting peers and resisting aggressive norms—were described as meaningful contributions to social harmony.

These observations suggest that Normalization may function as a foundational mechanism linking early childhood education to long-term peace education outcomes.

Explicit Answers to the Research Questions

In response to the first research question, the findings demonstrate that Normalization occurs internationally under similar conditions, is most reliably triggered by children's spontaneous choice of work, and typically develops gradually over several years rather than instantaneously.

Regarding the second research question, the data provide strong evidence that Normalization contributes to peace at both the individual and community levels, with normalized children fostering peaceful classroom environments through sustained self-regulation and social responsibility.

Summary

In summary, this study examined the occurrence and characteristics of Normalization in early childhood Montessori settings based on teachers' observations across multiple cultural contexts. The findings indicate that Normalization is closely associated with heightened and sustained concentration and tends to recur over time, although with considerable individual variation in duration and frequency. These results suggest that Normalization functions as a meaningful developmental process with implications extending beyond individual behavior management to peace education more broadly. Together, the findings underscore the relevance of Normalization for understanding how peaceful classroom environments are fostered, providing a foundation for the recommendations presented in the following section.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this exploratory international study, several recommendations can be made for educational practice, teacher education, and future research in the field of peace education.

First, for educational practice, the results suggest that peace education in early childhood should prioritize developmental conditions rather than explicit moral instruction. Teachers are encouraged to focus on creating and maintaining a prepared environment that allows children sustained freedom of choice and opportunities for deep concentration. The finding that Normalization is most often triggered by children's spontaneous choice of work indicates that peaceful classroom communities emerge gradually through daily practice, patience, and careful observation, rather than through externally imposed behavioral interventions.

Second, for teacher education and professional development, training programs should emphasize Normalization as an observable developmental process rather than an abstract theoretical concept. Helping teachers recognize early signs of concentration, self-discipline, and social harmony may strengthen their ability to support Normalization and foster peaceful classroom dynamics across diverse cultural contexts.

Finally, the findings indicate that Normalization is a powerful developmental process whose implications extend beyond individual behavior management to peace education more broadly. To further clarify this relationship, future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs, incorporating classroom observations, child-centered data, and larger samples across diverse cultural contexts. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how Normalization can be consistently and sustainably supported, as well as identify factors that may interrupt or delay the process, thereby refining Montessori's original claims in light of contemporary educational practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how and when Normalization occurs in Montessori settings for children from birth to six years old and whether it contributes to peace within a community. The findings demonstrate that Normalization is most effectively triggered when children freely choose activities aligned with their intrinsic interests, leading to deep concentration. Contrary to Montessori's early descriptions of sudden and miraculous transformation, the results indicate that Normalization more commonly emerges gradually through repeated experiences of concentrated work. Once initiated, Normalization tended to become semi-permanent or

permanent for most children, and approximately 95% of participants reported that behavioral challenges were addressed through this process. Importantly, the study provides empirical support for the ripple effect of Normalization: the inner calm and self-regulation of one child positively influenced peers, fostering a peaceful classroom community that teachers believed could extend into broader society. These findings reaffirm Normalization as the core mechanism through which Montessori education functions as peace education, supporting Montessori's assertion that "Normalization is the single most important result of our work" (Montessori, 1949, p. 204).

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Grammarly was used only for proofreading and language refinement. No AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the content or findings of this study.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. In which city and country is your school?
2. Are you a credentialed Montessori teacher? (Yes/ No) If no, please skip to question 4. If yes, please answer question 3.
3. Select which level(s) you hold a credential: 0-3, 3-6
4. From where did you earn your credential? (AMI, AMS, Other → write in)
5. Are you familiar with the Montessori concept of Normalization?
6-1. How was the child deviated/ or what was the deviation?
6-2. Where was the child; what were they doing when Normalization happened?
6-3. When the child demonstrated Normalization, how long did it continue?
6-4. How often did you see the child exhibit Normalization subsequent to the first time?
6-5. If you were to compare the deviated (unnormalized) child to the normalized child, how would you characterize the results of Normalization?
7. In a class of 25-30 students, how many children on average undergo a Normalization process in your experience?
8. Have you witnessed behavior problems being addressed through Normalization?
8-1. If so, what was / were the behavior(s)? How were the behavior problems improved?
8-2. What was the result of the Normalization on the behavior?
9. How would you characterize the effect of a Normalized child/ children on a classroom community? (Consider classroom atmosphere before and after such as peacefulness, respect, engagement, social interactions, etc.)
10. What is the relation between Normalization and peacefulness in the classroom?
11. Do you think that peacefulness exhibited in a classroom could be reproduced in society?
11-1. Please expand on your response.
12. Do you think Normalization can happen in a regular household?
12-1. Please expand on your response.
13. Please feel free to share any further comments, stories, or experiences about Normalization.